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Bolsheviks Crush the Best of the Russian Revolution

R. Relievo

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For three-quarters of a century, anarchists and other opponents of the 1917 Bolshevik putsch and subsequent counterrevolution have cited the uprising of the mutinous Baltic Fleet sailors and garrison soldiers at Kronstadt as one of the final social eruptions of the Russian Revolution.

The March 1921 events at the naval base on Kotlin Island, situated in the Gulf of Finland twenty miles west of St. Petersburg, are one of the landmark occurrences in the history of revolutionary resistance to the authoritarian state. In the wake of Kronstadt's suppression, Lenin and his cabal were left in uncontested command of the solidified "dictatorship of the proletariat."

Kronstadt joined the list of murderous communist perfidy that included the April 1918 round ups of Moscow anarchists, the Bolshevik 1919-20 "alliances," then betrayal of the libertarian Mahknovist peasant forces in Ukraine (and subsequent suppression of the movement), and the generalized 1920-1921 repression of anarchists throughout the emerging Soviet Union.

This past January, the Kronstadt tragedy again became news when Russian President and tank commander Boris Yeltsin invoked

the battle in an effort to discredit Leninist parliamentary opposition in the Duma (this ironically was also the name of the doomed legislative body created by a tsarist reform intended to defuse the 1905 Russian Revolution).

Part of the commemoration proposed by tsar wannabe Boris included placing a monument to the Kronstadt rebels on Kotlin Island, a disgusting act of hypocrisy. Yeltsin is quite familiar with using military terror on political opponents; Lenin would have applauded his October 1993 decision to subdue rivals for power with tank cannon. Had they been available to the Bolsheviks, and not too heavy to ride over the frozen gulf, tanks rather than Red Army soldiers would certainly have been used against Kronstadt. Instead, two bloody infantry assaults, the second by 50,000 specially selected troops, were necessary to crush the rebellion. A lethal terror then raged throughout the city as Cheka secret police exacted revenge for disloyalty to the state.

The March mutiny was a spontaneous response to strikes in nearby St. Petersburg (then Petrograd) resulting from conditions of starvation in the city. The militant Baltic sailors, especially those stationed at Kronstadt, had been at the forefront of anti-tsarist insurgency dating back to 1905. After the monarchy's dissolution in February 1917, the garrison's militancy continued during the revolution. Its men had participated in Petrograd street fighting during the abortive revolt against the Provisional Government in July 1917, and had led the assault on the Winter Palace that October.

In following years, casualties decimated the city's population as the long civil war consumed thousands of Kronstadt volunteers at various battlefronts.

Many replacement naval conscripts came from the war-torn Ukraine. There, in the eastern provinces, a popular social movement forced into continuous military activity to remain autonomous (bearing the name of its military commander, N. Mahkno) survived under continual attack by both communist and "White" armies (this was the label for bourgeois counterrevolu-

***Workers (sic) Vanguard (sick)*, Jan. 1982**

After writing our diatribe against trotskyism ("Hail Red Army Nerve Gas: Trotskyism as Pyschopathology," FE #307, November 19, 1981) using the Spartacist League (SL) as an example of the article's subtitle, we hardly expected such a direct confirmation of our contentions in their response, "See You at Kronstadt: Detroit's Fifth Estate Smear."

Our characterization of them as bloodthirsty totalitarians dreaming of the day they can eliminate their rivals and anyone else who disagrees with them is no more evident than in their headline. Just as the SL members chant "Hail Red Army in Afghanistan," so do they hail earlier mass murder perpetrated by the same apparatus—the Soviet Government—then at the isolated fortress of Kronstadt.

The story of the heroic resistance by the revolutionary workers and sailors in opposition to the Bolshevik counterrevolution has been told many times, and Trotsky's lie, concocted to justify their extermination, is believed only by the party faithful.

There is the element of pathology so close to the surface in increasing doses within the SL that they have become the paradigm of the leftist political gang: tough, swaggering, declassed sons and daughters of the middle class, working at being workers, seeming to all the world more like Trotsky's description of fascists—"the crazed hordes of the petty bourgeoisie"—than their alternative.

Throughout their article come threats of violence….Perhaps it is a natural consequence of years of party life where membership remains excruciatingly and obviously small, with a faster turnover than a McDonald's….

Perhaps our only mistake was to single out the SL for special criticism,for we don't have anything better to say about any of the rest of the leftist alphabet soup drooling to take up the reins of power under their party. Any number of them put on a more congenial and democratic front, but perhaps we owe it to the SL for the honesty the others lack. The SL, at least proclaims its program openly—the police shall rule….

tionary forces during the Civil War of 1918-21). Ukraine proved to be fertile soil for the social revolution. The people also experienced Bolshevik tyranny in the countryside personally, so her sons far from home found decentralized notions of power favored by the Baltic sailors easy to understand.

Murray Bookchin wrote in the introduction to Ida Mett's pamphlet, *The Kronstadt Uprising*, "The Kronstadt sailors were no ordinary military body. They were the famous 'Red Sailors' of 1905, 1917, and the Civil War. By common consent (until the Bolsheviks began to revise history after the uprising) the Kronstadt sailors were regarded as the most reliable and politicized military elements of the newly established Soviet regime. Trotsky's feeble attempts in later years to debase their reputation by alluding to 'new' social strata (presumably peasants) that had replaced the 'original' Red Sailors (presumably workers) in Kronstadt during the Civil War is beneath contempt. Whether peasants or workers—and both existed in varying numbers in the naval base—Kronstadt had long been the furnace of the revolution. Its living traditions and its close contact with 'Red Petrograd' served to anneal men of nearly all social strata into revolutionaries."

More interesting than Yeltsin's current polit-bureaucratic maneuvers to retain his shaky grasp on power are revelations from KGB files confirming scholarship done over the decades that chronicled communist lies and cynicism in ordering Kronstadt's liquidation. The cover story at the time, dutifully parroted by Leninist and trotskyist hacks down through the years, was that the insurrection was a White plot.

A former tsarist artillery general, Kozlovsky, who had been posted at the base by the communists, was said to be the leader of the rebellion. The sailors' traditional mistrust of officers was so intense, however, that they assigned a monitor to watch Kozlovsky during the uprising, and did not even follow his good advice to use their heavy guns to blast a moat in the gulf surrounding the island to prevent ground troops from being able to reach them.

They also resisted the suggestions of other "military specialists" (Lenin's euphemism to describe ex-imperial officers now serving by the tens of thousands in the Red Army) to take the initiative and send mutineers to Oranienbaum a few short miles south across the ice to the mainland. Such a gambit may have spread the mutiny into communist units concentrated near Petrograd, but many insurgent sailors believed such tactics unnecessary. They depended on the fortress's heavy naval guns to repel any Bolshevik attempt at taking the Kotlin sanctuary, and felt that Petrograd workers would respond to armed assault on Kronstadt by rebelling against the commissars' government.

Here are some excerpts from anarchist sources describing the story.

Voline [V.M. Eikhenbaum], *The Unknown Revolution 1917-1921* (Black and Red, Detroit 1974):

"From February, 1917, for the whole duration of the Revolution, and nearly everywhere, the men of Kronstadt were in the thick of the struggle. They did not confine themselves to their local activity, energetic though it was. Full of revolutionary enthusiasm and combative ardor, well endowed with strength and audacity, conscious of their role, they unfalteringly gave the revolution all that it asked of them—their fire and their faith, their awareness and their vigor. They became devoted militants, ready 'extraordinary martial law' [Cheka terror]. The strikers were overawed, and the labor unrest crushed with an iron hand."

Voline: "On February 28, the crew of the battleship Petropavlovsk, who had been for several days in a state of agitation over Petrograd, adopted a resolution [for the autonomy of Kronstadt and its soviet] which quickly gained the support of another warship, the Sebastopol. The movement extended rapidly to the whole fleet and won over the Red regiments of the garrison.

"On March 1, a public meeting took place in Anchor Square. On that same day, [Bolshevik officials] Kalinin and Kuzmin arrived at Kronstadt. 16,000 sailors, Red soldiers, and workers attended the

in blood. So too the Kronstadt commune believed its island fastness would provide safety, and depended on the justness of its cause rather than offensive military strategy. Yet the Bolsheviks' ruthless determination to give the city a political cleansing meant that only by touching off a larger insurrection (perhaps the "third revolution" Russian anarchists advocated) could the mutineers have avoided communist suppression and massacre.

Voline:

"Kronstadt was an attempt of the people to liberate themselves from all yokes and achieve the Social Revolution, an attempt made directly, resolutely, and boldly by the working masses themselves without political shepherds, without leaders or tutors….

" Kronstadt fell. But it had accomplished a task that was important; in the complex and shadowy labyrinth which opens out to people in revolt, Kronstadt is a bright beacon that lights up the right road. It matters little that the fog is still thick and hides the beacon and the way it lights. Once lit, that light will never go out. And the day is coming—perhaps it is not far off—when millions of human beings will see it shine."

Sidebar: We Saw You At Kronstadt, Comrades

From time to time readers (see letter this issue) question why we are so hostile to the Left in our pages. It is not just our philosophical and theoretical differences with socialists and communists, but that when their ideas are translated into reality—such as at Kronstadt—they are murderous. Each leninoid sectlet adulates some mass murderer—Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, Stalin, etc. who built state capitalism and a dictatorship on the bones of millions of workers. We have no desire to share political activity with people who adhere to this heritage.

The adjoining article on the Bolshevik suppression of the Kronstadt garrison reminded us of the response we received from the trotskyoid cultlet, the Sparticist League, regarding a 1981 article about the quirky nature of the ideology they advocate. The following is reprinted from the June 19, 1982 Fifth Estate.

of the endlessly reinforced Bolsheviks, the lack of food, the long, cold nights, all contributed to diminish the vitality of Kronstadt. Bolshevik soldiers surrendered by the thousands, others drowned by the hundreds under ice which had been weakened and filled with cracks and holes owing to the thaw, or had been broken by shellfire.

"But these losses did not diminish in the least the intensity of the attacks; fresh reinforcements were constantly arriving. All day March 10, the communist artillery incessantly shelled the whole island from south to north. On the night of March 12 through 13, the communists attacked from the south, again wearing white smocks. In the following days, the fight became increasingly uneven. The defenders were exhausted by fatigue and privations. They were now fighting on the immediate outskirts of the city. The communiqués on the fighting, published daily by the Revolutionary Committee, became more and more tragic."

Berkman:

"On March 16, the Bolsheviks made a concentrated attack from three sides at once with overwhelming numbers. By the morning of March 17, a number of forts had been taken. Through the weakest spot of Kronstadt—the Petrograd Gates—the Bolsheviks broke into the city, and there began the most brutal slaughter. The city now ran red with the blood of Kronstadt men, women, and even children. Dybenko,"appointed Commissar of Kronstadt, was vested with absolute powers to 'clean the mutinous city.' An orgy of revenge followed, with the Cheka claiming numerous victims for its nightly wholesale razstel (shooting).

"On March 18, the Communist Party celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Commune of 1871. Trotsky and Zinoviev denounced Thiers and Gallifet for the slaughter of the Paris rebels."

The 1871 communards had relied on their barricades and chose not to march on the disorganized French government at Versailles. Allowed to reconsolidate, it returned six weeks later to drench Paris

meeting. The chair was taken by the head of the Kronstadt Soviet, the communist Vassiliev. Kalinin and Kuzmin were present. The delegates who had been sent to Petrograd made their reports.

"Highly indignant, the meeting expressed its disapproval of the methods employed by the communists in putting down the legitimate aspirations of the Petrograd workers. The resolution adopted the previous day by the Petropavlovsk was then brought before the assembly. During the discussion, commissars Kalinin and Kuzmin attacked the resolution, the Petrograd strikes, and the Kronstadt sailors with extreme violence. But their speeches had no effect. The resolution of the Petropavlovsk was, as Kuzmin reported to his superiors, 'adopted by the overwhelming majority of the Kronstadt garrison. It was brought up at the general meeting of the city on March 1, in the presence of nearly 16,000 citizens, and unanimously adopted.'"

Kronstadt thus became a "free city". The communards' military situation, however, was not good.

Ida Mett, *The Kronstadt Uprising* (Solidarity, London, no date):

"By 1921, the Kronstadt garrison had been markedly reduced. Gaps between infantrymen defending the perimeter were wide; stocks of shells and ammunition were also limited. When 'military specialists' proposed an assault in the direction of Oranienbaum (where there were food stocks) the Provisional Revolutionary Committee refused. It was not putting its faith in the military capacity of the sailors; but in the moral support of the whole of proletarian Russia.

"Until the first shot had been fired, the people of Kronstadt refused to believe the government would militarily attack them. This is no doubt why the defenders had not set out to prevent the approach of the Red Army by breaking the ice around the foot of the fortress."

On March 6, Trotsky, who during the July Days of 1917 had called Kronstadt sailors "the pride and glory of the Revolution," now addressed a radio threat to the besieged base: "The Workers'

and Peasants' Government has decided to reassert its authority without delay, both over Kronstadt and the mutinous battleships, and put them at the disposal of the Soviet Republic.

"I am giving orders that everything be prepared to smash the revolt and the rebels by force of arms. The responsibility for the disasters which will affect the civilian population must fall squarely on the heads of the White Guard insurgents, This warning is final."

Berkman:

"The situation looked ominous. Great military forces continued to flow into Petrograd and its environs. Trotsky's ultimatum was followed by a prikaz which contained the historic threat, 'I'll shoot you like pheasants.' Kronstadt lived in deep faith that the proletariat of Petrograd would come to its aid. But the workers there were terrorized, and Kronstadt effectively blockaded and Isolated, so that in reality, no assistance could be expected from anywhere."

Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* (Princeton University Press 1970):

"Military operations began on March 7. In Petrograd, Alexander Berkman was crossing the Nevsky Prospekt when he heard the distant rumble of gunfire rolling towards him. Kronstadt was under attack! The sounds had a shattering effect on the anarchist, destroying the last remnants of his faith in the Bolshevik regime. 'Days of anguish and cannonading,' he recorded in his diary. 'My heart is numb with despair; something has died within me. The people on the street look bowed with grief, bewildered. No one trusts himself to speak. The thunder of heavy guns rents the air."

"In keeping with [Bolshevik commander and former tsarist officer] Tukhachevsky's plan, the artillery bombardment was followed by an attempt to take the fortress by storm. The attack came the next morning before dawn. In a blinding snowstorm, Tukhachevsky's troops started across the ice, shrouded in white coveralls to blend in with the snow covering the Finnish Gulf. Out in front were detachments of military cadets, followed by picked Red Army units, with Cheka machine gunners bringing up the rear to discourage any would-be deserters.

"The defenders were ready and waiting. As the troops approached, they were met with a murderous barrage of artillery and machine gun fire from the forts and batteries around the island. Some of the exploding shells cracked open the ice, plunging scores of attackers into a watery grave.

"After the gulf had swallowed its first victims, Red soldiers began to defect to the insurgents. Others refused to advance, in spite of threats from the machine gunners at the rear. The commissar of the northern group reported that his troops wanted to send a delegation to Kronstadt to find out about the insurgents' demands. The night before, it appears, Bolshevik soldiers had already gone across in small numbers to exchange literature with the defenders.

"In the end, only a fraction of the assault troops succeeded in reaching the outermost forts, but even they were compelled to withdraw under a thick blanket of fire. By dawn, the snowstorm had subsided, revealing a broad expanse of ice littered with corpses on every side.

"The fighting on March 8 had scarcely begun when the Petrograd Soviet triumphantly announced that the rebels were already 'in full rout.' The same day, Lenin, addressing the Tenth Party Congress in Moscow, was equally confident of the outcome. 'I do not yet have the latest news from Kronstadt,' he said, 'but I have no doubt that this uprising, behind which looms the familiar figure of the White Guard general, will be liquidated within the next few days, if not hours.' These declarations, it turned out, were premature."

The mutineers had repulsed government forces sent to destroy them, but only temporarily. Once the vastly superior numbers of the Red Army were brought to bear, it would be merely a matter of time. Without popular support by other revolutionary elements on the mainland, Kotlin Island would fall.

Voline:

"The Kronstadt garrison was composed of some 14,000 men, of whom about 10,000 were sailors. This garrison had to defend many forts and batteries, scattered about the Gulf. The continual attacks