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Workers Solidarity Movement
In defence of the Truth
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We have been insisting on the need for the far left to re-appraise the tradition of the Russian revolution and in particular the role the Bolsheviks played in destroying that revolution. One of the most detailed responses to the anarchists critique of Bolshevism was published in the winter issue of International Socialism the journal of the Socialist Workers Party (the largest Leninist group in England).

Unfortunately the article fails to seriously address the criticisms of Lenin, preferring instead to repeat more sophisticated versions of old slanders and distortions. Due to space considerations we cannot cover the entire article (80 pages) here, however in looking at John Rees (the author) treatment of the Kronstadt rising of 1921 a useful impression of the flaws in his approach can be gleaned.

The Kronstadt rising of 1921 represented the last major upsurge of working class resistance to the by then consolidated Bolshevik dictatorship. Kronstadt itself was a naval town on an island off the coast of Petrograd (St Petersburg). In 1917 it

had been the heart of the Russian Revolution, although it had never been under Bolshevik party control.

Because of Kronstadt's leading role in the 1917 Revolutions Leninists have always insisted that the revolutionaries in Kronstadt in 1921 were not the same ones that had been there in 1917. The revolutionaries had been replaced at this stage with "Coarse peasants". The evidence Rees musters for this point is a useful indication of the general Leninist method when it comes to the Russian revolution. The quote below is in Rees article on page 61.

> "In September and October 1920 the writer and the Bolshevik party lecturer Ieronymus Yasinksky went to Kronstadt to lecture 400 naval recruits. They were 'straight from the plough'. And he was shocked to find that many, 'including a few party members, were politically illiterate,worlds removed from the highly politicised veteran Kronstadt sailors who had deeply impressed him'. Yasinsky worried that those steeled in the revolutionary fire' would be replaced by 'inexperienced freshly mobilised young sailors'.

This quote is referenced to a book called Kronstadt 1917-21 by Israel Getzler, an academic but useful look at Kronstadt throughout this period. Rees account is a fair version of the first half of Yasinskys report. The quote however continues exactly as reproduced below.

> "Yasinsky was apprehensive about the future when, 'sooner or later, Kronstadt's veteran sailors, who were steeled in revolutionary fire and had acquired a clear revolutionary world-view would be replaced by inexperanced, freshly mobilised young sailors'. Still he comforted himself with the

> hope that Kronstadt's sailors would gradually infuse them with their 'noble spirit of revolutionary self-dedication' to which Soviet Russia owed so much. As for the present he felt reassured that 'in Kronstadt the red sailor still predominates".[1]

Rees handy 'editing' of this quote transforms it from one showing that three months before the rising that Kronstadt had retained its revolutionary spirt to one implying the garrison had indeed been replaced. Rees then goes on to contradict himself about the composition of the Bolshevik party at the time. On page 61 he says "The same figures for the Bolshevik party as a whole in 1921 are 28.7% peasants, 41% workers and 30.8% white collar and others". On page 66 however he says the figures at the end of the civil war (also 1921) were 10% factory workers, 25% army and 60% in "the government or party machine". A note at the back says even of those classed as factory workers "most were in administration".

Rees also attempts blame the decline in the number of Bolshevik party members in Kronstadt to the Civil war but in fact the fall in numbers in 1920 was due to purges and resignations from the party. The attitude of the remaining party members is demonstrated by the fact that during the rising three veteran Kronstadt Bolsheviks formed a Preparatory Committee of the Russian Communist party which called upon local communists not to sabotage the efforts of the Revolutionary committee. A further 497 members of the party resigned from the party[2].

Getzler also demonstrates that the crew of the battleships Petropavlovsk and Sevastopol which formed the core of the rising, were recruited into the navy before 1917, only 6.9% having been recruited between 1918 and 1921. These figures are on the same page as the earlier quotes Rees uses but are ignored by him. The remainder of the section on Kronstadt relies

[1] Kronstadt 1917-21, Israel Getzler, p. 207.

[2] Ibid, p218-219.

on more traditional smear tactics. Much is placed on the fact that the whites thought they might be able to gain from the rebellion. The fact that Petrochenko an ex-Bolshevik and chair of the Revolutionary committee was later to join the whites and attempted to contact them at the time of the rising is mentioned, the fact that the Revolutionary Committee itself constantly warned against any idea of an alliance with the whites is not.

Any real examination of what happened at Kronstadt has look at what the real balance of forces were at the time and what the actual demands of Kronstadt were. The work of academics like Israel Getzler in uncovering Soviet records of the period have demonstrated that of those serving in the Baltic fleet at the time at least 75.5% were recruited before the 1917 revolution. The majority of the revolutionary committee were veterans of the Kronstadt Soviet and the October revolution.

So why did these revolutionaries who were the backbone of the 1917 revolution rise against the Bolsheviks in 1921. At the time Lenin said "White general, you all know played a great part in this. This is fully proved"[3]. Later day Leninists are more subtle and try to place the root of the rising at discontent with the economic policies of the day. As far as I am aware no Leninist publication has ever reproduced the Kronstadt programme. This is probably because only 3 of the 15 demands are economic the rest are political demands designed to replace Bolshevik dictatorship over the working class with the direct rule of the working class[4].

In any case the New Economic Plan introduced by the Bolsheviks in 1921 went far beyond the granting of the economic demands of Kronstadt. The crushing of Kronstadt was followed by what the SWP has referred to as "unilateral killings"[5] ie

[3] Lenin, report to 10th congress of the RCP, 1921. Selected works, Vol IX, p98.

[4] Ida Mett, The Kronstadt uprising, p37-38.

[5] Abbie Bakan, Socialist Worker Review, Issue 136, page 58.

executions of many revolutionaries and the expelling of over 15,000 sailors from the fleet. Thousands more were sent to the Black sea, the Caspian and Siberia. Even the Kronstadt soviet was never re-established. This demonstrates that even after the rising the Bolsheviks feared the political demands that had been raised in its course.

The real danger of Kronstadt was not a military one, it was a political one. Kronstadt had to be brutally suppressed in case its call for a third revolution had succeeded in mobilising the workers of Russia. The Bolshevik party by 1921 was a counter revolutionary one composed even by their own figures of more bureaucrats than workers. Leninism was not the sole cause of the defeat of the October revolution, the whites played a major part as well. Whether or not Kronstadt could have led to a successful revolution is one of the 'What if's' of history. It did however represent the last hope of setting the revolution back on course.

It is unfortunate that the SWP has chosen to continue the Leninist tradition of lying, even to their own members about the Bolsheviks role in defeating the Russian revolution. Rather then learning from a critical look at the mistakes of the Bolsheviks they have chosen to do a crude plastering job and are hoping no-body examines it too closely. Similar methods aided the western communist parties to build a castle, but the events of the last couple of years demonstrate what happens when you build on sand.