

# An Anarchist FAQ

## What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?

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# What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?

The Kronstadt rebellion took place in the first weeks of March 1921. Proclaimed by Trotsky himself as being the *"pride and glory of the Russian Revolution,"* its sailors were renowned for their revolutionary ideas and activities and had turned the naval base and city into a de facto soviet republic soon after the February revolution. However, in 1921 Red Kronstadt had turned against the Communist dictatorship and raised the slogan of the 1917 revolution *"All Power to the Soviets,"* to which it added *"and not to parties."* The rebels called this revolt the *"Third Revolution"* and saw it as completing the work began in the first two Russian Revolutions in 1917 by instituting a true toilers republic based on freely elected, self-managed, soviets. As the Russian Anarchist Voline put it, while *"Kronstadt fell and State Socialism triumphed"* it *"exposed . . . the real character of the Communist dictatorship"* and *"[i]n the complex and shadowy labyrinth which opens out to the masses in revolt, Kronstadt is a bright beacon that lights up the right road."* [**The Unknown Revolution**, p. 537-8]

Given this, it is important to know and understand this revolt, what it says of Bolshevik ideology and practice and to refute the many slanders Leninists have hurled against it. These issues are addressed in the various sections below. First, though, it is necessary to summarise the events of the revolt itself.

Kronstadt was (and is) a naval fortress on an island in the Gulf of Finland. Traditionally, it has served as the base of the Russian Baltic Fleet and to guard the approaches to the city of St. Petersburg (which during the first world war was re-named Petrograd, then later Leningrad, and is now St. Petersburg again) thirty kilometres away. As noted, the Kronstadt sailors had been in the vanguard of the revolutionary events of 1905 and 1917 and far-left influence was high: Left-SRs, Maximalist-SRs, Bolsheviks and anarchists all had significant influence (in roughly that order, as discussed in [section 9](#) below, Kronstadt was never a Bolshevik stronghold in 1917). The inhabitants of Kronstadt had been early supporters and practitioners of soviet democracy, forming a free commune in 1917 which was independent of the Provisional Government. In the words of Israel Getzler, an expert on Kronstadt, *"it was in its commune-like self-government that Red Kronstadt really came into its own, realising the radical, democratic and egalitarian aspirations of its garrison and working people, their insatiable appetite for social recognition, political activity and public debate, their pent up yearning for education, integration and community. Almost overnight, the ship's crews, the naval and military units and the workers created and practised a direct democracy of base assemblies and committees."* In the centre of the fortress an enormous public square served as a popular forum holding as many as 30,000 people. The Kronstadters *"proved convincingly the capacity of ordinary people to use their 'heads, too' in governing themselves, and managing Russia's largest naval base and fortress."* [**Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 248 and p. 250]

The Russian Civil War had ended in Western Russia in November 1920 with the defeat of General Wrangel in the Crimea. All across Russia popular protests were erupting in the countryside and in the towns and cities. Peasant uprisings were occurring against the Communist Party policy of grain requisitioning (a policy the Bolsheviks and their supporters argue had been thrust upon them by the circumstances but which involved extensive, barbaric and counter-productive repression). In urban areas, a wave of spontaneous strikes occurred in protest against the militarisation of labour, lack of food, Bolshevik dictatorship and a host of other issues. So, *"[b]y the beginning of 1921 a revolutionary situation with workers in the*

*vanguard had emerged in Soviet Russia" with "the simultaneous outbreak of strikes in Petrograd and Moscow and in other industrial regions." "General strikes, or very widespread unrest" took place in all but one major industrial region and strikes were combined with "factory occupations, 'Italian strikes', demonstrations, mass meetings, the beating up of communists and so on." [Jonathan Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, p. 3, p. 109, and p. 112] The rebel workers and peasants raised both economic and political demands.*

In late February a general strike broke out in Petrograd along which immediately saw Bolshevik repression against it. On February 26th, in response to these events, the crews of the battleships *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol* held an emergency meeting and agreed to send a delegation to the city to investigate and report back on events. On their turn two days later, the delegates informed their fellow sailors of the strikes and the government repression directed against them at another mass meeting on the *Petropavlovsk* which then approved a resolution which raised 15 demands which were primarily political (including free elections to the soviets, freedom of speech, press, assembly and organisation to workers, peasants, anarchists and left-socialists) along with a few economic ones (equal rations for all workers, the end of roadblock detachments restricting travel and the ability of workers to bring food into the city as well as "full freedom of action" for all peasants and artisans who did not hire labour) -- see [section 3](#) for full details. These demands, it must be stressed, reflected those many of those first raised by the striking Petrograd workers.

Unknown to the sailors, the Bolshevik leader in Petrograd (Zinoviev) sent a telegram to Lenin at 11pm that day: "*Kronstadt: The two biggest ships, **Sevastopol'** and **Petropavlovsk**, have adopted SR/Black Hundreds' resolutions and presented an ultimatum to be answered in 24 hours. Among the workers in Petrograd the disposition is as before unsteady. Large plants do not work. We expect that the SRs are going to speed up events*" (SR stood for "Social Revolutionaries", a party with a traditional peasant base and whose right-wing had fought against the Bolsheviks in the name of the Constituent Assembly and were complicit with White reactionary forces while the "Black Hundreds" were a reactionary, indeed proto-fascist, force dating back to before the revolution which attacked Jews, labour militants, radicals and so on). [quoted by Vladimir N. Brovkin, **Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War**, p. 394]

A mass meeting of fifteen to sixteen thousand people was held in Anchor Square on March 1st and what has become known as the *Petropavlovsk* resolution was passed with only two Bolshevik officials voting against it. At this meeting it was decided to send another delegation to Petrograd to explain to the strikers and the city garrison the demands of Kronstadt and to request that non-partisan delegates be sent by the Petrograd workers to Kronstadt to learn first-hand what was happening there. This delegation of thirty members was arrested by the Bolshevik government.

As the term of office of the Kronstadt soviet was about to expire, the mass meeting also decided to call a Conference of Delegates for March 2nd to discuss the manner in which the new soviet elections would be held (Kronstadt had not had a freely elected soviet since the Bolsheviks "*dissolving [of] the Kronstadt Soviet and establishing a puppet committee in its place*" in July 1918 [Alexander Rabinowitch, **The Bolsheviks in Power**, p. 302]). This conference consisted of two delegates from the ship's crews, army units, the docks, workshops, trade unions and Soviet institutions. This meeting of 303 delegates endorsed the *Petropavlovsk* resolution and elected a five-person Provisional Revolutionary Committee (this was enlarged to 15 members two days later by another conference of delegates). This

committee was charged with organising the defence of Kronstadt, a move decided upon in part by the threats of the Bolshevik officials there and the rumour that the Bolsheviks had dispatched forces to attack the meeting.

The Communist Government issued an ultimatum on March 2nd which built upon Zinoviev's telegram of the 28th and asserted that the revolt had "*expected by, and undoubtedly been prepared by, French counterintelligence*" and that the **Petropavlovsk** resolution was a "*SR-Black Hundred resolution*". The Bolsheviks claimed that the revolt had been organised by an ex-Tsarist officers led by "*former general Kozlovsky and three of his officers*" and so "*[b]ehind the SRs again stands a tsarist general.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 65-6] This was the official line throughout the revolt and any awkward facts (such as Kozlovsky, ironically, being placed in the fortress as a military specialist by Trotsky) ignored.

Basing himself on documents from the Soviet Archives, historian Israel Getzler states that "*[b]y 5 March, if not earlier, the Soviet leaders had decided to crush Kronstadt. Thus, in a cable to . . . [a] member of the Council of Labour and Defence, on that day, Trotsky insisted that 'only the seizure of Kronstadt will put an end to the political crisis in Petrograd.'* On the same day, acting as chairman of the RVSR [*the Revolutionary Military Council of the Army and Navy*], he ordered the reformation and mobilisation of the Seventh Army '*to suppress the uprising in Kronstadt,*' and appointed General Mikhail Tukhachevskii as its commander changed with suppressing the uprising in Kronstadt '*in the shortest possible time.*'" ["*The Communist Leaders' Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents*", **Revolutionary Russia**, pp. 24-44, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 32]

As the Bolshevik regime sought to mobilise forces to crush the rebels, Kronstadt started to re-organise itself from the bottom up. The trade union committees were re-elected and a Council of Trade Unions formed. The Conference of Delegates met to discuss issues relating to the interests of Kronstadt and the struggle against the Bolshevik government. Around 300 Communists were arrested and treated humanely in prison while many more (at least 780) left the party, expressing support for the revolt and its aim of "*all power to the soviets and not to parties*", in protest of the actions the party was taking against Kronstadt or its general role in the revolution). Significantly, up to one-third of the delegates elected to Kronstadt's rebel conference of March 2nd were Communist Party members. [Avrich, **Kronstadt 1921**, pp. 184-7 and p. 81] While "*[t]here can be no doubt that the [arrested] Kronstadt Communists were frightened and expected to be treated in the same way as their own Cheka treated its prisoners . . . The fact is no Communists were shot, none were court-martialled, and the Provisional Revolutionary Committee showed no vindictiveness.*" [George Katkov, "*The Kronstadt Rising*", **St. Anthony's Papers**, No. 6, p. 44]

The Kronstadt revolt was a non-violent one, but from the start the attitude of the authorities was not one of serious negotiation but rather one of delivering an ultimatum on March 5th: either come to your senses and surrender or suffer the consequences. A leaflet issued by the Petrograd Defence Committee threatened that they would shoot the rebels "*like partridges*" while any of their families in Petrograd were taken hostage. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 144-6] While there was at least three to four weeks before the ice was due to melt after the March 2nd Conference of Delegates meeting which marked the real start of the revolt, the Bolsheviks started military operations at 6.45pm on March 7th.

There were possible means for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. On March 5th, two days before the bombardment of Kronstadt began, anarchists led by Emma Goldman and

Alexander Berkman offered themselves as intermediates to facilitate negotiations between the rebels and the government (anarchist influence had been strong in Kronstadt in 1917). [Emma Goldman, **Living My Life**, vol. 2, pp. 882-3] This was ignored by the Bolsheviks. Years later, the Bolshevik Victor Serge (and eye-witness to the events) acknowledged that "*[e]ven when the fighting had started, it would have been easy to avoid the worst: it was only necessary to accept the mediation offered by the anarchists (notably Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman) who had contact with the insurgents. For reasons of prestige and through an excess of authoritarianism, the Central Committee refused this course.*" [**The Serge-Trotsky Papers**, p. 164] Trotsky, it should be noted, in 1937 proclaimed that the "*anarchist and Menshevik elements . . . did their best to lead things to an uprising. They succeeded. So nothing remained but armed struggle.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 82] Sadly, he never explained how this was achieved -- particularly given that many of the leading Mensheviks were already in prison before Kronstadt rebelled and soon joined by others.

Another possible solution, namely the Petrograd Soviet suggestion of March 6th that a delegation of party and non-party members of the Soviet visit Kronstadt was not pursued by the government. The rebels, unsurprisingly enough, had reservations about the **real** status of the non-party delegates and made the very reasonable request that the elections to the delegation take place within factories with observers from Kronstadt present. Nothing came of this (unsurprisingly, as such a delegation would have reported the truth that Kronstadt was a popular revolt of working people so exposing Bolshevik lies and making the planned armed attack more difficult). A delegation "*sent by Kronstadt to explain the issues to the Petrograd Soviet and people was in the prisons of the Cheka*" and so "*right from the first moment, at a time when it was easy to mitigate the conflict, the Bolshevik leaders had no intention of using anything but forcible methods.*" [Victor Serge, **Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 127] As Alexander Berkman noted, the Communist government would "*make no concessions to the proletariat, while at the same time they were offering to compromise with the capitalists of Europe and America.*" ["**The Kronstadt Rebellion**", **The Russian Tragedy**, p. 62]

The Communist government started to attack Kronstadt on March 7th and the first assault was a failure: "*After the Gulf had swallowed its first victims, some of the Red soldiers, including a body of Peterhof **kursanty**, began to defect to the insurgents. Others refused to advance, in spite of threats from the machine gunners at the rear who had orders to shoot any wavers. The commissar of the northern group reported that his troops wanted to send a delegation to Kronstadt to find out the insurgents' demands.*" The revolt was isolated and received no external support. The Petrograd workers were under martial law and could little or no action to support Kronstadt (assuming they refused to believe the Bolshevik lies about the uprising). The attacks continued, with Trotsky at one stage sanctioning the use of chemical warfare against the rebels [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 153-4, p. 146 and pp. 211-2] However, this poison gas attack was not needed in the end for Kronstadt was taken by the Red Army on March 17th -- yet even in the final assault occurred the Bolsheviks had to force their troops to fight, for on the night of 16-17 March "*the extraordinary **troika** of Aleksei Nikolaev had arrested over 100 so-called instigators, 74 of whom he had publicly shot.*" [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 35] The Red Army troops has also seen their ranks swell with Communist Party members -- many from the Tenth Party Congress -- who were happy to shoot any who hesitated or expressed sympathy for the rebels while behind them were machine guns ready to open fire at the slightest sign of dissent or retreat. Once the Bolshevik forces finally entered the city of Kronstadt "*the attacking troops took revenge for their fallen comrades in an orgy of bloodletting.*" [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 211] Eight thousand sailors,

soldiers and civilians escaped over the ice to Finland. The crews of the *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol* fought to the bitter end, as did the cadets of the mechanics school, the torpedo detachment and the communications unit.

The next day, as an irony of history, the Bolsheviks celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Paris Commune:

*"On March 17th the Communist Government completed its 'victory' over the Kronstadt proletariat and on the 18th of March it commemorated the martyrs of the Paris Commune. It was apparent to all who were mute witnesses to the outrage committed by the Bolsheviks that the crime against Kronstadt was far more enormous than the slaughter of the Communards in 1871, for it was done in the name of the Social Revolution, in the name of the Socialist Republic."* [Emma Goldman, **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 199]

The repression did not end there. According to Serge, the *"defeated sailors belonged body and soul to the Revolution; they had voiced the suffering and the will of the Russian people"* yet *"[h]undreds of prisoners were taken away to Petrograd; months later they were still being shot in small batches, a senseless and criminal agony"* (particularly as they were *"prisoners of war . . . and the Government had for a long time promised an amnesty to its opponents on condition that they offered their support"*). *"This protracted massacre was either supervised or permitted by Dzerzhinsky"* (the head of the Cheka). The *"responsibilities of the Bolshevik Central Committee had been simply enormous"* and *"the subsequent repression . . . needlessly barbarous."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 131 and p. 348]

There are no reliable figures of casualties on either side. According to official Soviet figures, around 700 were killed and 2,500 wounded or shell-shocked on the government side. Others suggest over 10,000 killed, wounded or missing as a result of storming Kronstadt. One report puts the rebel deaths at 600 and more than 1,000 wounded. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 211] There are also no reliable figures on how many rebels were later shot by the Cheka or sent to prison camps. The figures that exist are fragmentary. For example, *"4,836 Kronstadt sailors were arrested and deported to the Crimea and the Caucasus. But when Lenin learned of this on the 19 April, he expressed 'great misgivings regarding the location of these sailors' [in these areas]. As a result these . . . were eventually . . . sent to forced labour camps in the Archangelsk, Vologda and Murmansk regions."* The families of the rebels were also deported, with one Bolshevik official *"pointed at Siberia as 'undoubtedly the only suitable region' for these people."* [Gelzter, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 35-6 and p. 37] Many other rebels were executed:

*"[One] 20 April report on 'The Results of the Reprisals Against the Mutineers in the Period of 20 March to 15 April' contains the following data: out of 3,000 active participants in the mutiny, 40 per cent (1,200) were sentenced to death, 25 per cent to five years of forced labour, and 35 per cent were released. [It] complained that in carrying out their work, the **troika** had had to rely exclusively on information provided by the Special Section of the **Vecheka** : 'neither commissars nor local Communists provided any material'.*

*"The statistical communique of the Special Section of the Extraordinary **Troikas** of 1 May has the following data: 6,528 were arrested, of whom 2,168 had been shot, 1,955 had been sentenced to forced labour (of whom 1,486 received a five year sentence), and 1,272 were released. In a statistical review of the mutiny made in 1935-36, the*

*figure of those arrested is given as 10,026, but the review also says, 'It has not been possible to establish accurately the number of the repressed'.* [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 36]

After the revolt had been put down, the Bolshevik government reorganised the fortress. While it had attacked the revolt in the name of defending "Soviet Power" Kronstadt's newly appointed military commander "*abolish[ed] the [Kronstadt] soviet altogether*" and ran the fortress "*with the assistance of a revolutionary troika*" (i.e. an appointed three man committee). [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 244] Kronstadt's newspaper was renamed ***Krasnyi Kronshtadt*** (from *Izvestiia*) and stated in an editorial that the "*fundamental features*" of Kronstadt's restored "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" during its "*initial phases*" were "*[r]estrictions on political liberty, terror, military centralism and discipline and the direction of all means and resources towards the creation of an offensive and defensive state apparatus.*" [quoted by Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 245] The victors quickly started to eliminate all traces of the revolt. Anchor square became Revolutionary Square and the rebel battleships ***Petropavlovsk*** and ***Sevastopol*** were renamed the ***Marat*** and the ***Paris Commune***, respectively.

In terms of wider changes, the revolt and the mass strike waves saw the Bolshevik dictatorship change some of its policies during the revolt and after it had been crushed. While none of the political demands were granted, the economic ones were to a certain degree by means of the New Economic Policy (or NEP). That Lenin did this does not stop Leninists then or now denouncing these economic demands as expressing the Kronstadt's revolt's allegedly counter-revolutionary "petty-bourgeois" nature.

That, in summary, was the Kronstadt revolt. Obviously we cannot cover all the details and we recommend readers to consult the books and articles we list at the end of this section for fuller accounts of the events. Now we must analyse the revolt and indicate why it is so important in evaluating Bolshevism in both practice and as an ideology.

In the sections which follow, we indicate why the revolt is so important ([section 1](#)) and place it in historical context ([section 2](#)). We then present and discuss the Kronstadt demands, indicating their sources in working class rebellion and radicalism (see sections [3](#) and [4](#)). We indicate the lies the Bolsheviks said about the rebellion at the time ([section 5](#)), whether it was, in fact, a White plot ([section 6](#)) and indicate the revolts real relationship to the Whites ([section 7](#)). We also disprove Trotskyist assertions that the sailors in 1921 were different from those in 1917 ([section 8](#)) or that their political perspectives had fundamentally changed ([section 9](#)). We indicate that state coercion and repression explains why the Kronstadt revolt did not spread to the Petrograd workers ([section 10](#)). Then we discuss the possibility of White intervention during and after the revolt ([section 11](#)). We follow this with a discussion of Leninist arguments that the country was too exhausted to allow soviet democracy ([section 12](#)) or that soviet democracy would have resulted in the defeat of the revolution ([section 13](#)). We will also show the depths to which more recent supporters of Leninism will sink to defend their heroes ([section 14](#)). Lastly, we discuss what the Kronstadt revolt tells us about Leninism ([section 15](#)).

As we will prove, Kronstadt was a popular uprising from below by many of the same sailors, soldiers and workers who made the 1917 October revolution, seeking to restore the liberties and rights they had seized and practiced then. While, undoubtedly, the Bolshevik repression of the revolt **can** be justified in terms of defending the state power of the Bolsheviks over the

Russian working class, it **cannot** be defended as socialist. Indeed, it indicates that Bolshevism is a flawed political theory which cannot create a socialist society but only a state capitalist regime based on party dictatorship. This is what Kronstadt shows above all else: given a choice between workers' power and party power, Bolshevism will destroy the former to ensure the latter. In this, Kronstadt is no isolated event (see [section H.6](#) for more details).

There are many essential resources on the revolt available. The best in depth studies are by historians Paul Avrich (**Kronstadt 1921**) and Israel Getzler (**Kronstadt 1917-1921**). Anarchist works include Ida Mett's **The Kronstadt Uprising** (included in the anthology **Bloodstained: One Hundred Years of Leninist Counterrevolution** as **The Kronstadt Commune**), Alexander Berkman's **The Kronstadt Rebellion** (included in the collection of Berkman's pamphlets entitled **The Russian Tragedy**), Voline's **The Unknown Revolution** has a good chapter on Kronstadt (and quotes extensively from the Kronstadters' paper *Izvestiia*) while Anton Ciliga's **Kronstadt Revolt** is also a good introduction to the issues relating to the uprising from a libertarian socialist perspective. Eye-witness accounts include chapters in Berkman's **The Bolshevik Myth** as well as Emma Goldman's **My Disillusionment in Russia** and Chapter LII of her autobiography **Living My Life**. Daniel Guerin's anthology **No Gods, No Masters** has an excellent section on the rebellion which includes a lengthy extract from Goldman's **Living my Life** as well as extracts from the Kronstadters' paper.

For the Leninist account, the anthology **Kronstadt** contains Lenin and Trotsky's articles on the revolt plus supplementary essays trying to refute the anarchist analysis of the revolt. This work is recommended for those seeking the official Trotskyist version of events as it contains all the relevant documents by the Bolshevik leaders as well the articles relating to the debate on Kronstadt which arose in the late 1930s. Victor Serge, an individualist-anarchist turned Bolshevik, was another eye-witness to the Kronstadt revolt and his **Memoirs of a Revolutionary** is worth consulting to discover why he supported what the Bolsheviks did, albeit reluctantly (in private at least). Finally, it must be noted that Emma Goldman's **Trotsky Protests too Much** is a lively reply to Trotsky's, Serge's and Wright's (one of Trotsky's American followers) attempts to defend the Bolshevik repression of the revolt.

## 1 Why is the Kronstadt rebellion important?

The Kronstadt rebellion is important because, as Voline put it, it was *"the first entirely independent attempt of the people to liberate itself 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. It was the first step towards the third and social revolution."* [**The Unknown Revolution**, pp. 537-8] Moreover, the Bolshevik response to the revolt *"sounded the death knell Bolshevism with its Party dictatorship, mad centralization, Tcheka terrorism and bureaucratic castes. It struck into the very heart of Communist autocracy. At the same time it shocked the intelligent and honest minds of Europe and America into a critical examination of Bolshevik theories and practices. It exploded the Bolshevik myth of the Communist State being the 'Workers' and Peasants' Government'. It proved that the Communist Party dictatorship and the Russian Revolution are opposites, contradictory and mutually exclusive. It demonstrated that the Bolshevik regime is unmitigated tyranny and reaction, and that the Communist State is itself the most potent and dangerous counter-revolution."* [Alexander Berkman, *"The Kronstadt Rebellion"*, **The Russian Tragedy**, p. 91]

The Kronstadt sailors, soldiers and workers in 1917 had been the one of the first groups to support the slogan "*All power to the Soviets*" as well as one of the first towns to put it into practice. The focal point of the 1921 revolt -- the sailors of the warships ***Petropavlovsk*** and ***Sevastopol*** -- had, in 1917, been well-known revolutionaries who had actively supported attempts to create a soviet system. They had been considered, until those fateful days in 1921, the pride and glory of the revolution, considered by all -- including the Bolsheviks themselves -- to be thoroughly revolutionary in spirit and action. They were the staunchest supporters of the Soviet system but, as the revolt showed, they were opposed to the dictatorship of any political party.

The Kronstadt revolt was a popular movement from below aiming at restoring soviet democracy, to create a genuine soviet power in the sense of soviets themselves running society rather than being a fig leaf for party rule. As Alexander Berkman notes, the "*spirit of the Conference [of delegates which elected the Provisional Revolutionary Committee] was thoroughly Sovietist: Kronstadt demanded Soviets free from interference by any political party; it wanted non-partisan Soviets that should truly reflect the needs and express the will of the workers and peasants. The attitude of the delegates was antagonistic to the arbitrary rule of bureaucratic commissars, but friendly to the Communist Party as such. They were staunch adherents of the Soviet **system** and they were earnestly seeking to find, by means friendly and peaceful, a solution of the pressing problems*" facing the revolution. ["*The Kronstadt Rebellion*", **Op. Cit.**, p. 67] The attitude of the Bolsheviks indicated that, for them, soviet power was only useful in so far as it ensured their party's power and if the two came into conflict then the latter must survive over the corpse of the former:

*"But the 'triumph' of the Bolsheviks over Kronstadt held within itself the defeat of Bolshevism. It exposes the true character of the Communist dictatorship. The Communists proved themselves willing to sacrifice Communism, to make almost any compromise with international capitalism, yet refused the just demands of their own people -- demands that voiced the October slogans of the Bolsheviks themselves: Soviets elected by direct and secret ballot, according to the Constitution of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic; and freedom of speech and press for the revolutionary parties."* [Berkman, "*The Kronstadt Rebellion*", **Op. Cit.**, p. 90]

Occurring as it did after the end of the civil war, Kronstadt played a key role in opening the eyes of anarchists like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman to the real role of Bolshevism in the revolution. Until then, they (like many others) supported the Bolsheviks, rationalising their dictatorship as a temporary measure necessitated by the civil war. Kronstadt smashed that illusion, "*broke the last thread that held me to the Bolsheviks. The wanton slaughter they had instigated spoke more eloquently against them than aught else. Whatever the pretences of the past, the Bolsheviks now proved themselves the most pernicious enemies of the Revolution. I would have nothing further to do with them.*" [Emma Goldman, **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 200]

Therefore Kronstadt is important in evaluating the honesty of Leninist claims to be in favour of soviet democracy and power. The civil war was effectively over, yet the regime showed no signs of changing and, as before, the Bolsheviks were repressing strikes and protests in the name of "*the political power of the proletariat*" (see [section H.6.3](#) for an account of labour struggles and their repression under Lenin from early 1918 onwards). In the countryside, they continued their futile and counterproductive policies against the peasants (ignoring the facts that their government was meant to be at the head of a workers **and** peasants' state and that

peasants made up the vast majority of the population). They proclaimed themselves to be defending "soviet power" while also placing the necessity of party dictatorship into the heart of their ideology and practice. In short, it goes to the heart of what socialism is as Maurice Brinton suggests:

*"Attitudes to the Kronstadt events, expressed . . . after the event often provide deep insight into the political thinking of contemporary revolutionaries. They may in fact provide a deeper insight into their conscious or unconscious aims than many a learned discussion about economics, or philosophy, or about other episodes of revolutionary history.*

*"It is a question of one's basic attitude as to what socialism is all about. What are epitomised in the Kronstadt events are some of the most difficult problems of revolutionary strategy and revolutionary ethics: the problems of ends and means, of the relations between Party and masses, in fact of whether a Party is necessary at all. Can the working class by itself only develop a trade union consciousness [as Lenin claimed]. Should it even be allowed, at all times, to go that far?*

*"Or can the working class develop a deeper consciousness and understanding of its interests than can any organization allegedly acting on its behalf? When the Stalinists or Trotskyists speak of Kronstadt as 'an essential action against the class enemy', when more 'sophisticated' revolutionaries refer to it as a 'tragic necessity', one is entitled to pause for a moment. One is entitled to ask how seriously they accept Marx's dictum that 'the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself. Do they take this seriously or do they pay mere lip-service to the words? Do they identify socialism with the autonomy (organizational and ideological) of the working class? Or do they see themselves, with their wisdom as to the 'historical interests' of others, and with their judgments as to what should be 'permitted', as the leadership around which the future elite will crystallise and develop? One is entitled not only to ask . . . but also to suggest the answer!" ["Preface to Ida Mett's 'The Kronstadt Commune"', **Bloodstained: One Hundred Years of Leninist Counterrevolution**, pp. 137-8]*

The events at Kronstadt cannot be looked at in isolation, but rather as part of a general struggle of the Russian working people against "their" government. Indeed, as we indicate in the [next section](#), this repression **after** the end of the Civil War followed the same pattern as that started **before** it. Just as the Bolsheviks had repressed soviet democracy in Kronstadt in 1921 in favour of party dictatorship, they had done so regularly elsewhere from early 1918. Investigating the Kronstadt revolt forces revolutionaries into a critical examination of Bolshevik ideology and practice, it forces them to consider what their socialism stands for -- as we argue in [section 15](#), the logic of Bolshevik rationales for crushing Kronstadt simply mean that modern day Leninists will, if in the same position, destroy soviet democracy to defend "soviet power" (i.e. the power of their party). In short, Kronstadt was the clash between the reality of Leninism and its rhetoric. Yet while it raises many important issues as regards Bolshevism, it is wider than that. *"The Kronstadt experience,"* as Berkman argues, *"proves once more that government, the State -- whatever its name or form -- is ever the mortal enemy of liberty and popular self-determination. The state has no soul, no principles. It has but one aim -- to secure power and hold it, at any cost. That is the political lesson of Kronstadt."* ["*The Kronstadt Rebellion*", **Op. Cit.**, p. 89]

As noted, the Leninist justifications for their power and actions at Kronstadt have direct implications for current activity and future revolutions. Not least, because the Russian Revolution as a whole confirmed anarchist analysis and predictions with regards to State Socialism. Echoing the warnings of the likes of Bakunin and Kropotkin, Russian anarchists in 1917 predicted that *"if the 'transfer of power to the soviets' comes in fact to signify the seizure of political authority by a new political party with the aim of guiding reconstruction from above, 'from the centre'"* then *"there is no doubt that this 'new power' can in no way satisfy even the most immediate needs and demands of the people, much less begin the task of 'socialist reconstruction' . . . Then, after a more or less prolonged interruption, the struggle will inevitably be renewed. Then will begin a third and last stage of the Great Revolution. There will begin a struggle between the living forces arising from the creative impulse of the popular masses on the spot, on the one hand, namely the local workers' and peasants' organisations acting directly . . . and the centralist Social Democratic [i.e., Marxist] power defending its existence, on the other; a struggle between authority and freedom."* [quoted by Paul Avrich, **Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, p. 94] Thus Kronstadt is a symbol of the fact that state power cannot be utilised by the working class and always becomes a force for minority rule (in this case of former workers and revolutionaries, as Bakunin predicted -- see [section H.1.1](#)).

There is another reason why the study of Kronstadt is important. Since the suppression of the revolt, Leninist and Trotskyist groups have continually **justified** the acts of the Bolsheviks. Moreover, they have followed Lenin and Trotsky in slandering the revolt and, indeed, have continually lied about it. When Trotskyist John Wright states -- in the ironically entitled *"The Truth About Kronstadt"* -- that the supporters of Kronstadt have *"distort[ed] historical facts, monstrously exaggerat[ed] every subsidiary issue or question . . . and throw[n] a veil . . . over the real program and aims of the mutiny"* he is, in fact, describing his and his fellow Trotskyists. [*"The Truth about Kronstadt"*, Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 102] As we will prove, anarchist accounts have been validated by later research while Trotskyist assertions have been exploded time and time again.

Similarly, when Trotsky argues that anarchists like Goldman and Berkman *"do not have the slightest understanding of the criteria and methods of scientific research"* and just *"quote the proclamations of the insurgents like pious preachers quoting Holy Scriptures"* he is, in fact, just describing himself and his followers (as we shall see, the latter just repeat his and Lenin's assertions regardless of how silly or refuted they are). Ironically, he states that *"Marx has said that it is impossible to judge either parties or peoples by what they say about themselves"* while he himself justifies his actions by his claim that he and Lenin represented the "proletarian" revolution and the real class interests of workers. [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 88] In reality, Kronstadt shows what the Bolsheviks said about their regime was the opposite of what it really was as show by its actions: *"How pathetic that he does not realise how much this applies to him!"* [Emma Goldman, *"Trotsky Protests Too Much"*, **Writings of Emma Goldman**, p. 257]

Then there is the bad faith of most Trotskyist accounts (Victor Serge's belated account in his **Memoirs of a Revolutionary** is noteworthy in being an exception to this). What becomes clear from our discussion is the way Trotskyists have selectively quoted the academic accounts to fit their ideological account of the uprising. Likewise, they regularly change the demands of the revolt -- often simply inventing demands (like "Soviets without Bolsheviks") -- and ignore the ideological context (so ignoring how party dictatorship was a core Leninist principle before, during and after the rebellion). The reason for this should be obvious -- the

supporters of Bolshevism cannot help lie about the Kronstadt revolt as it so clearly exposes the **real** nature of Bolshevik ideology and the regime it created. Hence the repetition of the slanders, inventions and self-serving justifications the Bolsheviks made at the time, with varying degrees of sophistication (the most superficially convincing usually utilise Serge's defence of the Bolsheviks' actions).

These defences of the Bolshevism are a classic expression of Leninist double-think (the ability to know two contradictory facts and maintain both are true). Yet this can be explained for once it is understood that "*workers' power*" and "*soviet power*" actually mean **party power** then the contradictions disappear. Party power had to be maintained at all costs, including the destruction of those who desired real soviet and workers' power (and so soviet democracy). It is, surely, an utter absurdity to claim that a state apparatus which divests the workers of any control over society -- or even itself -- can be regarded as a "workers' state"? Apparently not.

So, for example, Trotsky argued that in 1921 "*the proletariat had to hold political power in its hands*" yet later Trotskyists argue that the proletariat was too exhausted, atomised and decimated to do so. [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 81] Similarly, the Trotskyist Pierre Frank states that for the Bolsheviks, "*the dilemma was posed in these terms: either keep the workers' state under their leadership, or see the counterrevolution begin, in one or other political disguise, ending in a counterrevolutionary reign of terror that would leave not the slightest room for democracy.*" [Op. Cit., p. 15] Of course the fact that there was "*not the slightest room for democracy*" under Lenin is not mentioned, nor is the fact that the "*dictatorship of the party*" had been a fundamental aspect of Bolshevik ideology since early 1919 and practice since mid-1918 (by the latest). Nor does Frank consider it important to note that a "*counterrevolutionary reign of terror*" did develop under Stalin from the counterrevolutionary terror, repression and dictatorship practised in 1921 (and before) by Lenin and Trotsky -- but, then, he also fails to mention that Trotsky's Left Opposition was only in favour of democracy within the party. (see [section 3](#) of the appendix "[Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?](#)")

A more trivial example can be seen with the dismissal of Kronstadt's economic demands as being impossible to agree to, as they reflected the "peasant counter-revolution" while the Bolsheviks in Petrograd announced the withdrawal of all road-blocks and demobilised the Red Army soldiers assigned to labour duties in Petrograd on 1st March and introduced the New Economic Policy afterwards. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 48-9] Likewise, Leninist Chris Harman argued against the Stalinists that "*people who seriously believe that workers at the height of revolution need a police guard to stop them handing their factories over to capitalists certainly have no real faith in the possibilities of a socialist future.*" [**Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**, p. 144] Yet this did not stop him asserting that "*Kronstadt in 1921 was not Kronstadt of 1917. The class composition of its sailors had changed. The best socialist elements had long ago gone off to fight in the army in the front line. They were replaced in the main by peasants whose devotion to the revolution was that of their class. This was reflected in the demands of the uprising: Soviets without Bolsheviks and a free market in agriculture. The Bolshevik leaders could not accede to such demands. It would have meant liquidation of the socialist aims of the revolution without struggle.*" [Chris Harman, "*How the Revolution was Lost*," Binns, Cliff and Harman, **Russia from Workers' State to State Capitalism**, p. 20] Yet as we discuss in this appendix, the ship crews were remarkably consistent over the period in question and, as such, his claims are as factual as his account of their demands -- the Kronstadt rebels **never** raised the call for Soviets with

Bolsheviks (they called for soviet democracy) and the Bolsheviks **did**, in the shape of the New Economic Policy announced just after the revolt was crushed "*accede*" to the demand for a free market in agriculture (although, it must be stressed, this allowed wage-labour which the rebels, as socialists, explicitly rejected). Nor should we forget that this Kronstadt demand -- like so many others -- simply repeated those of "*the [striking] workers [in Petrograd who] wanted the special squads of armed Bolsheviks, who carried out a purely police function, withdrawn from the factories.*" [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 42]

Leninists generally argue that the suppression of the rebellion was essential to defend the "gains of the revolution." These are usually left unspecified, for good reason. What exactly were these gains? Not soviet democracy, freedom of speech, assembly and press, trade union freedom and workers' control for the Kronstaders were crushed for demanding these. No, apparently the "gains" of the revolution were a Bolshevik government and state ownership and control of property. Never mind the obvious fact this was a state-capitalist dictatorship with an already strong and privileged bureaucratic machine: that Lenin and Trotsky were in power is enough for their followers to justify the repression of Kronstadt and subscribe to the notion of a "workers' state" which excludes workers from power. As such, the Kronstaders and Petrograd strikers "*struggled for the socialism which the bureaucracy were already in the process of liquidating. That is the fundamental point of the whole problem.*" [Anton Ciliga, "*The Kronstadt Revolt*", **The Raven**, No. 8, p. 334]

Thus the double-think of Bolshevism is clearly seen from the Kronstadt events. The Bolsheviks and their supporters argue that Kronstadt was suppressed to defend soviet power yet argue that the Kronstadt demand for free soviet elections was "*counter-revolutionary*", "*backward*", "*petty-bourgeois*" and so on. How soviet power could mean anything without free elections is never explained. Similarly, they argue that it was necessary to defend the "workers state" by slaughtering those who called for workers to have some kind of say in how that state operated. It appears that the role of workers in a workers' state was simply that of following orders without question. This explains why Trotsky was able to argue in the 1930s that the Russian working class was still the ruling class under Stalin: "*So long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class.*" ["*The Class Nature of the Soviet State*", **Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34**, p. 125] To be fair to Trotsky, the workers were in the same position in the social hierarchy and had the same say under Stalin as they had when he ruled the roost (i.e., less than in most democratic capitalist states) and he considered them to the ruling class then.

How can the Bolshevik repression be justified in terms of defending workers power when the workers were powerless? How can it be defended in terms of soviet power when the soviets were rubber stamps of a party dictatorship? Simply put, the logic of the Bolsheviks and their latter-day apologists and supporters is the same character as that of the U.S. Officer during the Vietnam War who explained that in order to save the village, they had to destroy it.

One last point, while the Kronstadt revolt is a key event in the Russian Revolution, one that signified its end, we must not forget that it is just one in a long series of Bolshevik attacks on the working class. As we indicate in the [next section](#), the Bolshevik state had proven itself to be anti-revolutionary continually since October 1917. Yet Kronstadt is important simply because it so clearly pitted soviet democracy against "soviet power" and occurred **after** the end of the civil war. As it brought the Russian Revolution to an end and all the conditions for Stalinism were prepared by its defeat and the repression of the mass strike wave which

produced it, it deserves to be remembered, analysed and discussed by all revolutionaries who seek to learn from, rather than repeat, history.

## 2 What was the context of the Kronstadt revolt?

The Kronstadt revolt cannot be understood in isolation. Indeed, to do so misses the real reason why Kronstadt is so important. The actions of the Bolsheviks in 1921 and their ideological justifications for their actions (justifications, of course, when they got beyond lying about the revolt -- see [section 5](#)) merely reproduced in concentrated form what had been occurring ever since they had seized power in 1917.

Therefore it is necessary to present a short summary of Bolshevik activities before the events of Kronstadt (see [section H.6](#) for fuller details). In addition, we have to sketch the developing social stratification under Lenin and the events immediate before the revolt which sparked it off (namely the strike wave across Russia which reached Petrograd in late February 1921). Once this has been done, we will soon see that Kronstadt was not an isolated event but rather an act of solidarity with the oppressed workers of Russia and an attempt to save the Russian Revolution from Communist dictatorship and its bureaucracy.

Alexander Berkman provides an excellent overview of what had happened in Russia after the October Revolution:

*"The elective system was abolished, first in the army and navy, then in the industries. The Soviets of peasants and workers were castrated and turned into obedient Communist Committees, with the dreaded sword of the Cheka [political para-military police] ever hanging over them. The labour unions governmentalised, their proper activities suppressed, they were turned into mere transmitters of the orders of the State. Universal military service, coupled with the death penalty for conscientious objectors; enforced labour, with a vast officialdom for the apprehension and punishment of 'deserters'; agrarian and industrial conscription of the peasantry; military Communism in the cities and the system of requisitioning in the country . . . ; the suppression of workers' protests by the military; the crushing of peasant dissatisfaction with an iron hand. . ." ["The Russian Tragedy", **The Russian Tragedy**, p. 27]*

Here we will simply indicate that the Bolsheviks had systematically undermined the effective power of the soviets. Both locally and nationally, post-October power was centralised into the hands of the soviet executives rather than the general assemblies. At the top, power was concentrated even further with the creation of a Bolshevik government **above** the Central Executive Council elected by the (then) quarterly soviet congress. This is not all. Faced with growing opposition to their policies, the Bolsheviks responded in two ways. Either the soviet was packaged and gerrymandered to make the workplace soviet elections irrelevant (as in, say, Petrograd) or they simply disbanded any soviet elected with a non-Bolshevik majority (as in **all** provincial soviets for which records exist). So Bolshevik opposition to the soviet democracy demanded by the Kronstadt revolt had a long pedigree. It had started a few months after the Bolsheviks seizure of power in the name of the soviets, during the spring of 1918 (i.e. in March, April and May) and so **before** the Czech rising and the onset of full scale civil war which occurred in late May. Given this, any attempt to blame the Civil War for the elimination of soviet power and democracy seems woefully weak. Likewise, the reduction of

soviet influence cannot be fully understood without factoring in the Bolshevik prejudice in favour of centralisation and party power which could not help but ensure the marginalisation of the soviets as did its vanguardism (see [section H.5](#)).

It must be remembered that the Bolshevik aim was always party power and their turn to the soviets in 1917 was made precisely because this was considered the most likely means to achieve this long-standing aim (see [section H.3.11](#)). To be fair, many workers accepted the idea of "workers' government" and a "workers' state," assuming the new power was their own and, of course, initially the Bolsheviks did have popular support (at least in the main urban areas, they could count on passive support due to the Bolshevik appropriation of the SR's land reform policy). Yet, this soon changed -- which, incidentally, answers Brian Bambery's rhetorical question of *"why would the most militant working class in the world, within which there was a powerful cocktail of revolutionary ideas, and which had already made two revolutions (in 1905 and in February 1917), allow a handful of people to seize power behind its back in October 1917?"* ["*Leninism in the 21st Century*", **Socialist Review**, no. 248, January 2001] Once the Russian workers realised that a handful of people **had** seized power they **did** protest the usurpation of their power and rights by the Bolsheviks -- and the Bolsheviks repressed them. With the start of the Civil War, the Bolsheviks played their trump card -- essentially, "Us or the Whites" -- and this helped ensure their power as the workers had few choices but to agree. This, however, did not stop mass resistance and strikes breaking out periodically during the civil war when workers and peasants could no longer put up with Bolshevik policies or the effects of the war (see [section 5](#) of the appendix on "[What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?](#)"). Given this, it comes as no real surprise that while the Bolsheviks repeatedly repressed opposition parties and groups during the civil war, these were finally eliminated (along with factions within the Communist Party itself) only **after** its end: with the Whites gone, the opposition were rising in influence again within dissident workers and the "White card" could no longer be played to get them to begrudgingly support the Bolsheviks as during the war. *"Paradoxical as it may sound,"* Alexander Berkman noted, *"the Communist dictatorship had no better ally, in the sense of strengthening and prolonging its life, than the reactionary forces which fought against it."* [**The Bolshevik Myth**, p. 340]

Moreover, the reality of the new regime confirmed that the "new" centralised structures preferred by the Bolsheviks soon produced the same alienation as previous states along with a bureaucracy which, rather than start to decline, immediately *"grew by leaps and bounds. Control over the new bureaucracy constantly diminished, partly because no genuine opposition existed. The alienation between 'people' and 'officials,' which the soviet system was supposed to remove, was back again. Beginning in 1918, complaints about 'bureaucratic excesses,' lack of contact with voters, and new proletarian bureaucrats grew louder and louder."* [Oskar Anweiler, **The Soviets**, p. 242] Thus the early months of "soviet rule" saw *"the widespread view that trade unions, factory committees, and soviets . . . were no longer representative, democratically run working-class institutions; instead they had been transformed into arbitrary, bureaucratic government agencies. There was ample reason for this concern."* [Alexander Rabinowitch, **The Bolsheviks in Power**, p. 224] In Moscow, in August 1918, state officials represented 30 per cent of the workforce there and by 1920 the general number of office workers *"still represented about a third of those employed in the city"* (200,000 in November, 1920, rising to 228,000 in July, 1921 and, by October 1922, to 243,000). Thus *"red tape and vast administrative offices typified Soviet reality"* as the Bolsheviks *"rapidly created their own [state] apparatus to wage the political and economic offensive against the bourgeoisie and capitalism. As the functions of the state expanded, so*

*did the bureaucracy" and so "following the revolution the process of institutional proliferation reached unprecedented heights . . . a mass of economic organisations [were] created or expanded." Worse, the "prevalence of bureaucracy, of committees and commissions . . . permitted, and indeed encouraged, endless permutations of corrupt practices. These ranged from the style of living of communist functionaries to bribe-taking by officials. With the power of allocation of scarce resources, such as housing, there was an inordinate potential for corruption." [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, pp. 190-3]*

Emma Goldman recounted from experience *"how paralysing was the effect of the bureaucratic red tape which delayed and often frustrated the most earnest and energetic efforts . . . Materials were very scarce and it was most difficult to procure them owing to the unbelievably centralised Bolshevik methods. Thus to get a pound of nails one had to file applications in about ten or fifteen bureaus; to secure some bed linen or ordinary dishes one wasted days." Thus "the newly fledged officialdom was as hard to cope with as the old bureaucracy" while the "bureaucratic officials seemed to take particular delight in countermanding each other's orders." In short, "the terrorism practiced by the Bolsheviks against every revolutionary criticism . . . the new Communist bureaucracy and inefficiency, and the hopelessness of the whole situation . . . was a crushing indictment against the Bolsheviks, their theories and methods." [My **Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 40, p. 45, p. 46 and p. 92] Thus, as anarchists had long warned, a new class -- the state and party bureaucracy -- had been created within the new regime, living like other ruling classes on the labour of others.*

The dynamics of the class struggle under the Bolshevik regime, that is the conflict between the workers and "their" state, played its part in the evolution of Bolshevik ideology. Having lost popular support, the Bolshevik used their control of the state and its forces of coercion to remain in power. Being a **de facto** party dictatorship since it had packed the Fifth All-Russian Congress of soviets in July 1918, the Bolsheviks soon sought to incorporate its practice into its ideology. Thus, we find Victor Serge in the 1930s noting that *"at the start of 1919 I was horrified to read an article by Zinoviev . . . on the monopoly of the party in power."* [**The Serge-Trotsky Papers**, p. 188] Serge, however, kept his horror well-hidden as he was soon publically seeking to convince anarchists in France and elsewhere of the necessity of this monopoly (see [section H.1.2](#)) while Lenin proclaimed in July 1919 that *"it is a dictatorship of one party! This is what we stand for and shall not shift from this position because it is the party that has won, in the course of decades, the position of vanguard of the entire factory and industrial proletariat."* [**Collected Works**, vol. 29, p. 535] This orthodoxy was proclaimed by Trotsky the following year:

*"We have more than once been accused of having substituted for the dictatorship of the Soviets the dictatorship of our party. Yet it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party. It is thanks to the clarity of its theoretical vision and its strong revolutionary organisation that the party has afforded to the Soviets the possibility of becoming transformed from shapeless parliaments of labour into the apparatus of the supremacy of labour. In this 'substitution' of the power of the party for the power of the working class there is nothing accidental, and in reality there is no substitution at all. The Communists express the fundamental interests of the working class. . . . The dictatorship of the proletariat, in its very essence, signifies the immediate supremacy of the revolutionary vanguard, which relies upon the heavy masses, and, where*

*necessary, obliges the backward tail to dress by the head". [Communism and Terrorism, pp. 109-10]*

At the Second Congress of the Communist International in the summer of 1920 the assembled revolutionaries heard leading Bolshevik Zinoviev proclaim that "[t]oday, people like Kautsky come along and say that in Russia you do not have the dictatorship of the working class but the dictatorship of the party. They think this is a reproach against us. Not in the least! We have a dictatorship of the working class and that is precisely why we also have a dictatorship of the Communist Party. The dictatorship of the Communist Party is only a function, an attribute, an expression of the dictatorship of the working class" This meant that "the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party." [**Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920**, vol. 2, pp. 151-2] Unsurprisingly, then, the Kronstadt demand for soviet democracy was rejected by the party for it was incompatible with the party dictatorship predicated by the party ideology. This, of course, did not stop Trotsky proclaiming that Kronstadt had to be crushed as "*the proletariat had to hold political power in its hands with redoubled energy*". [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 81-2]

Economically, the Bolshevik regime imposed a policy later called "*War Communism*" although, as Victor Serge later noted, "*any one who, like myself, went so far as to consider it purely temporary was looked upon with disdain*". [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 115] This regime was marked by extreme hierarchical and dictatorial practices, although it was building upon tendencies well in place before the civil war started (for example, the one-man management advocated by Lenin in April 1918 -- see [section H.3.14](#)). The leading lights of the Communist Party were expressing themselves on the nature of the "socialist" regime they desired with Trotsky, for example, implementing -- and ideologically justifying -- the "*militarisation of labour*" and a corresponding empowerment of the state's power over the working class now that the "*internal civil war is coming to an end*". [**Op. Cit.**, p. 132] These authoritarian policies included:

*"The very principle of compulsory labour service is for the Communist quite unquestionable. . . . But hitherto it has always remained a mere principle. Its application has always had an accidental, impartial, episodic character. Only now, when along the whole line we have reached the question of the economic re-birth of the country, have problems of compulsory labour service arisen before us in the most concrete way possible. The only solution of economic difficulties that is correct from the point of view both of principle and of practice is to treat the population of the whole country as the reservoir of the necessary labour power . . . and to introduce strict order into the work of its registration, mobilisation, and utilisation."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 135]

*"The introduction of compulsory labour service is unthinkable without the application, to a greater or less degree, of the methods of militarisation of labour."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 137]

*"Why do we speak of militarisation? Of course, this is only an analogy -- but an analogy very rich in content. No social organisation except the army has ever considered itself justified in subordinating citizens to itself in such a measure, and to control them by its will on all sides to such a degree, as the State of the proletarian dictatorship considers itself justified in doing, and does."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 141]

*"Both economic and political compulsion are only forms of the expression of the dictatorship of the working class in two closely connected regions . . . under Socialism there will not exist the apparatus of compulsion itself, namely, the State: for it will have melted away entirely into a producing and consuming commune. None the less, the road to Socialism lies through a period of the highest possible intensification of the principle of the State . . . Just as a lamp, before going out, shoots up in a brilliant flame, so the State, before disappearing, assumes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the most ruthless form of State, which embraces the life of the citizens authoritatively in every direction . . . No organisation except the army has ever controlled man with such severe compulsion as does the State organisation of the working class in the most difficult period of transition. It is just for this reason that we speak of the militarisation of labour." [Op. Cit., pp. 169-70]*

*"It would consequently be a most crying error to confuse the question as to the supremacy of the proletariat with the question of boards of workers at the head of factories. The dictatorship of the proletariat is expressed in the abolition of private property in the means of production, in the supremacy over the whole Soviet mechanism of the collective will of the workers [i.e., the party], and not at all in the form in which individual economic enterprises are administered . . . I consider if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest, most independent, most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner and much less painfully." [Op. Cit., pp. 162-3]*

This vision of strict centralisation and top-down economic structures built upon Bolshevik ideology and policies of the first months after the October revolution. The attempts at workers' self-management organised by the factory committees was opposed in favour of a centralised state capitalist system, with Lenin arguing for appointed managers with "dictatorial" powers (see Maurice Brinton's **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control** for full details). These policies ensured that "with unshakeable firmness [the Bolsheviks] wrested the factories from the workers (Communist and non-party) wrenched from them from their essential conquest, the one weapon they could use to take another step towards their emancipation, towards socialism. The Russian proletariat became once more the wage-earning manpower in other people's factories. Of socialism there remained in Russia no more than the word." [Anton Ciliga, **The Russian Enigma**, p. 286] With workers reduced to wage-workers as before the revolution, it comes as no surprise that labour protests and strikes -- and their repression by the State -- were a recurring feature of the Bolshevik regime before, during and after the civil war (see [section H.6.3](#) for examples). Strikers faced the denial of rations, lock-outs, selective rehiring, and imprisonment at best, death at worse, at the hands of the troops and Cheka (the secret police) of the "workers' state." Ironically, those "who had seized power in 1917 in the name of the politically conscious proletariat were in fact weeding out all these conscious workers." [Brovkin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 298]

In the countryside, grain requisitioning resulted in peasant uprisings as food was taken from the peasants by force. While the armed detachments were "instructed to leave the peasants enough for their personal needs, it was common for the requisitioning squads to take at gun-point grain intended for personal consumption or set aside for the next sowing." The villagers predictably used evasive tactics and cut back on the amount of land they tilled as well as practising open resistance. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 9-10] Famine was a constant problem as a result, made even worse by the Bolshevik centralised economic structures

whose "inefficiency . . . saw [the seized food] products lying at side stations and rotting away." [Goldman, **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 96] The lack of food -- and Bolshevik policies which exacerbated the problem -- was a common theme in workers' strikes and protests, including those in Petrograd which directly inspired the Kronstadt revolt.

Thus the ruling party had in practice eliminated the political and economic power of the working class and, moreover, embedded this into its ideology. This was not seen as a temporary policy imposed upon the Bolsheviks by the war but rather, as can be seen, as an expression of principle and justified as such. Indeed, much of Bolshevik practice could be easily related to the demands of the **Communist Manifesto**, including its calls "to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State," for the "[c]entralisation of credit" and "the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State", the "[e]xtension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State" and the "[e]stablishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture". Likewise, its suggestion that "Communists . . . theoretically . . . have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement" contains within it the Bolshevik rationale for its rule over the proletariat in its higher interests (as defined, of course, by the Communist leaders). [**Marx-Engels Collected Works**, vol. 6, p. 504, p. 505 and p. 498]

All this required loyal troops and unsurprisingly the Bolsheviks quickly worked to recreate special bodies of armed men standing apart from the people (see [section H.1.7](#)). A political police force, the Cheka, was created in December 1917 while in the Red Army and Navy, anti-democratic principles were imposed. At the end of March, 1918, Trotsky proclaimed that "the principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree." Soldiers, he disingenuously suggested, did not have to fear this system of top-down appointment as "political power is in the hands of the same working class from whose ranks the Army is recruited" (i.e. in the hands of the Bolshevik party). There could "be no antagonism between the government and the mass of the workers, just as there is no antagonism between the administration of the union and the general assembly of its members, and, therefore, there cannot be any grounds for fearing the **appointment** of members of the commanding staff by the organs of the Soviet Power." ["*Work, Discipline, Order*", **How the Revolution Armed**, vol. 1, p. 47] Of course, as any worker in struggle can tell you, they almost always come into conflict with the union's bureaucracy (as Trotskyists themselves often point out).

In the Navy, a similar process occurred -- much to the disgust and opposition of the sailors. As Paul Avrich notes, "Bolshevik efforts to liquidate the ship committees and impose the authority of the centrally appointed commissars aroused a storm of protest in the Baltic Fleet. For the sailors, whose aversion to external authority was proverbial, any attempt to restore discipline meant a betrayal of the freedoms for which they had struggled in 1917." [**Kronstadt 1921**, p. 66] This process "began in earnest on 14 May 1918 with the **appointment** of Ivan Flerovsky as general commissar of the Baltic Fleet and chairman of its Council of Commissars, a body which replaced the disbanded elective Central Committee of the Baltic Fleet. Flerovsky promptly appointed bridge commissars to whom all ships' committees were subordinated . . . Naval democracy was finally destroyed on 18 January 1919 when Trotsky . . . decreed the abolition of all ships' committees, the appointment of commissars to all ships, and the setting up of revolutionary tribunals to maintain discipline, a function previously vested in elected 'comradely courts.'" [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 191]

Thus Voline:

*"the Bolshevik government evidently understood the slogan 'power to the soviets' in a peculiar way. It applied it in reverse. Instead of giving assistance to the working masses and permitting them to conquer and enlarge their own autonomous activity, it began by taking all 'power' from them and treating them like subjects. It bent the factories to its will and liberated the workers from the right to make their own decisions; it took arbitrary and coercive measures, without even asking the advice of the workers' concerned; it ignored the demands emanating from the workers' organisations. And, in particular, it increasingly curbed, under various pretexts, the freedom of action of the Soviets and of other workers' organisations, everywhere imposing its will arbitrarily and even by violence."* [The Unknown Revolution, pp. 459-60]

From before the start of Civil War, the Russian people had been slowly but surely eliminated from any meaningful say in the progress of the revolution. The Bolsheviks undermined (when not abolishing) workers' democracy, freedom and rights in workplaces, soviets, unions, the army and the navy. Unsurprisingly, the lack of any real control from below heightened the corrupting effects of power. Inequality, privilege and abuses were everywhere in the ruling party and bureaucracy (*"Within the party, favouritism and corruption were rife. The Astoria Hotel, where many high officials lived, was the scene of debauchery, while ordinary citizens went without the bare necessities."* [Paul Avrich, *"Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin: G. T. Miasnikov and the Workers' Group"*, **The Russian Review**, Vol. 43, No. 1, p. 7]).

With the end of the Civil War in November 1920, many expected a change of policy. However, months passed and the same policies were followed. *"The Communist State,"* as Alexander Berkman summarised, *"showed no intention of loosening the yoke. The same policies continued, with labour militarisation still further enslaving the people, embittering them with added oppression and tyranny, and in consequence paralysing every possibility of industrial revival."* [*"The Kronstadt Rebellion"*, **Op. Cit.**, p. 61] As in early 1920, the Bolsheviks took success in the Civil War as meaning success of their policies and sought to continue and widen their application -- workers' opposition was taken as being an example of the "declassing" of the working class and so ignored (given the party reflected their "real" interests, this was a logical position to take if its circular nature is ignored).

Finally, in the middle of February, 1921, *"a rash of spontaneous factory meetings"* began in Moscow. Workers called for the immediate scrapping of War Communism. These meetings were *"succeeded by strikes and demonstrations."* Workers took to the streets demanding *"free trade"*, higher rations and *"the abolition of grain requisitions."* Some demanded the restoration of political rights and civil liberties. Troops had to be called in to restore order. Then a far more serious wave of strikes and protests swept Petrograd. The Kronstadt revolt was sparked off by these protests. Like Moscow, these *"street demonstrations were heralded by a rash of protest meetings in Petrograd's numerous but depleted factories and shops."* Like Moscow, speakers *"called for an end to grain requisitioning, the removal of roadblocks, the abolition of privileged rations, and permission to barter personal possessions for food."* On the 24th of February, the day after a workplace meeting, the Trubochny factory workforce downed tools and walked out. Workers from nearby factories joined in. The crowd of 2,000 was dispersed by armed military cadets. The next day, the Trubochny workers again took to the streets and visited other workplaces, bringing them out on strike too. [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 35-6 and pp. 37-8] The strikers started to organise themselves: *"As in 1918, workers*

*from various plants elected delegates to the Petrograd Assembly of Plenipotentiaries."* [Brovkin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 393] Alexander Berkman noted in his diary the events unfolding before his eyes:

*"Several factories have been closed for lack of fuel, and the employees put on half rations. They called a meeting to consult about the situation, but the authorities did not permit it to take place.*

*"The Trubotchny millworkers have gone on strike. In the distribution of winter clothing, they complain, the Communists received undue advantage over the non-partisans. The Government refuses to consider the grievances till the men return to work.*

*"Crowds of strikers gathered in the street near the mills, and soldiers were sent to disperse them. They were **kursanti**, Communist youths of the military academy. There was no violence.*

*"Now the strikers have been joined by the men from the Admiralty shops and Galernaya docks. There is much resentment against the arrogant attitude of the Government. A street demonstration was attempted, but mounted troops suppressed it . . . The strike situation is growing more serious. The Patronny mills, the Baltiysky and Laferm factories have suspended operations. The authorities have ordered the strikers to resume work. Martial law in the city. The special Committee of Defense (**Komitet Oboroni**) is vested with exceptional powers, Zinoviev at its head.*

*"At the Soviet session last evening a military member of the Defense Committee denounced the strikers as traitors to the Revolution . . . and demanded drastic measures against them. The Soviet passed a resolution locking out the men of the Trubotchny mill. It means deprivation of rations -- actual starvation . . . Strikers' proclamations have appeared on the streets today . . . Some of the circulars protest against the suppression of factory meetings . . . Many arrests are taking place. Groups of strikers surrounded by Tchekists, on their way to prison, are a common sight. Much indignation in the city. I hear that several unions have been liquidated and their active members turned over to the Tcheka. But proclamations continue to appear." [The Bolshevik Myth, pp. 291-3]*

A three-man Defence Committee was formed and Zinoviev "*proclaimed martial law*" on February 24th. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 39] A state of siege was imposed, along with a curfew of 11pm and the banning of all meetings and gatherings (indoor and out) unless approved of by the Defence Committee and "*[a]ll infringements would be dealt with according to military law.*" [quoted by Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 147] The workers "*were ordered to return to the shops on pain of being deprived of their rations. This entirely failed of any effect, whereupon a number of unions were liquidated, their officials and the more recalcitrant strikers placed in prison . . . by armed Chekists and soldiers . . . The strike kept spreading, all extreme measures notwithstanding. Arrests followed upon arrests . . . The workers were determined, but it was apparent that they would soon be starved into submission . . . All avenues of approach to the industrial districts of the city were cut off by massed troops . . . the odds between the dictatorship and the workers were too uneven to permit the strikers to hold out much longer.*" [Emma Goldman, **Living My Life**, vol. 2, p. 875] As part of this process of repression, the Bolshevik government had to rely on the **kursanti** (Communist officer cadets) as the local

garrisons had been caught up the general ferment and could not be relied upon to carry out the government's orders. *"Overnight Petrograd became an armed camp. In every quarter pedestrians were stopped and their documents checked . . . the curfew [was] strictly enforced,"* while the Petrograd Cheka made widespread arrests. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 46-7]

The Bolsheviks also stepped up their propaganda drive. The strikers were warned not to play into the hands of the counterrevolution. As well as their normal press, popular party members were sent to agitate in the streets, factories and barracks. They also made a series of concessions such as providing extra rations. On March 1st the Petrograd soviet announced the withdrawal of all road-blocks and demobilised the Red Army soldiers assigned to labour duties in Petrograd. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 48-9] This, ironically, was one of the "counterrevolutionary" demands raised by Kronstadt which, according to Trotskyists, showed the "peasant" nature of the sailor's revolt.

Thus a combination of force, propaganda and concessions was used to defeat the strike (which had quickly reached a near general strike level). As Paul Arvich notes, *"there is no denying that the application of military force and the widespread arrests, not to speak of the tireless propaganda waged by the authorities had been indispensable in restoring order. Particularly impressive in this regard was the discipline shown by the local party organisation. Setting aside their internal disputes, the Petrograd Bolsheviks swiftly closed ranks and proceeded to carry out the unpleasant task of repression with efficiency and dispatch."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 50]

This indicates the immediate context of the Kronstadt rebellion. Yet Trotskyist J. G. Wright wonders whether the Kronstadt's paper *"lied when in the very first issue . . . it carried a sensational headline: 'General Insurrection in Petrograd'"* and states that people *"spread . . . lies about the insurrection in Petrograd."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 109] Yes, of course a near general strike, accompanied by mass meetings and demonstrations which was being repressed by force and martial law is an everyday occurrence and has nothing in common with an insurrection! If such events occurred in a state not headed by Lenin and Trotsky it is unlikely Mr. Wright would have such difficulty in recognising them for what there were. Historian V. Brovkin states the obvious: *"To anyone who had lived through the events of February 1917, this chain of events appeared strikingly similar. It looked as if a popular insurrection had begun."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 393] Indeed, this was a key concern of the Bolshevik authorities as they sought, unfortunately successfully, to end the possibility of it repeating the events of four years before.

Unsurprisingly, the crew of the battleships *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol* decided to act once *"the news of strikes, lockouts, mass arrests and martial law"* in Petrograd reached them. They *"held a joint emergency meeting in the face of protests and threats of their commissars"* and *"elected a fact-finding delegation of thirty-two sailors which, on 27 February, proceeded to Petrograd and made the round of the factories. . . They found the workers whom they addressed and questioned too frightened to speak up in the presence of the hosts of Communist factory guards, trade union officials, party committee men and Chekists."* [Gelzter, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 212] The delegation returned the next day to Kronstadt and reported its findings to a general meeting of the ship's crews and adopted the resolutions which were to be the basis of the revolt (see [next section](#)). The Kronstadt rebellion had started.

It was these labour protests and their repression which started the events in Kronstadt. While many sailors had undoubtedly read or listened to the complaints of their relatives in the villages and had protested on their behalf to the Soviet authorities, it took the Petrograd strikes to be the catalyst for the revolt (after years of increasingly autocratic and bureaucratic Bolshevik rule) Moreover, they had other political reasons for protesting against the policies of the government: navy democracy had been abolished, the soviets had been turned into fig-leaves of party dictatorship, workers were back to being wages-slaves of new, State-appointed, bosses. They saw the revolution had failed and sought ways to save it, as can be seen when *Izvestiia* (the paper produced during the rebellion by the Provisional Revolutionary Committee) argued that in Kronstadt *"there have been laid the foundations of the Third Revolution, which will break the last chains of the workers and lay open the new highway to socialist construction."* [quoted by Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 508]

### 3 What was the Kronstadt Programme?

It is rare for a Trotskyist to actually list the demands of the Kronstadt revolt in their entirety. A more-or-less (often less) accurate summary of certain points is the best the reader can expect. For example, the standard Trotskyist book on the rebellion could spare no space in its 150 pages for the resolution although a very short summary is provided in its *"Editorial Preface"*:

*"The resolution demanded free elections in the soviets with the participation of anarchists and Left SRs, legalisation of the socialist parties and the anarchists, abolition of the Political Departments [in the fleet] and the Special Purpose Detachments, removal of the **zagraditelnye ottady** [Armed troops used to prevent unauthorised trade], restoration of free trade, and the freeing of political prisoners."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 5-6]

It also asserts in its *"Glossary"* that sailors' *"demanded political and economic changes, many of which were soon realised with the adoption of the NEP"*. Which contradicts Trotsky who claimed that it was an *"illusion"* to think *"it would have been sufficient to inform the sailors of the NEP decrees to pacify them"* and that the *"insurgents did not have a conscious program, and they could not have had one because of the very nature of the petty bourgeoisie. They themselves did not clearly understand that their fathers and brothers needed first of all was free trade."* [Op. Cit., p. 148 and p. 91-2]

So we have an uprising which demanded free trade and did not demand it. It was similar to the NEP but the NEP would not have satisfied it. It produced a platform of political and economic demands but did not, apparently, have a *"conscious program."* The contradictions abound. Why these contradictions exist will become clear after we -- like all the libertarian books and pamphlets on the rebellion -- list the 15 demands:

*"1. Immediate new elections to the Soviets. The present Soviets no longer express the wishes of the workers and peasants. The new elections should be by secret ballot, and should be preceded by free electoral propaganda.*

*2. Freedom of speech and of the press for workers and peasants, for the Anarchists, and for the Left Socialist parties.*

3. *The right of assembly, and freedom for trade union and peasant organisations.*
4. *The organisation, at the latest on 10th March 1921, of a Conference of non-Party workers, soldiers and sailors of Petrograd, Kronstadt and the Petrograd District.*
5. *The liberation of all political prisoners of the Socialist parties, and of all imprisoned workers and peasants, soldiers and sailors belonging to working class and peasant organisations.*
6. *The election of a commission to look into the dossiers of all those detained in prisons and concentration camps.*
7. *The abolition of all political sections in the armed forces. No political party should have privileges for the propagation of its ideas, or receive State subsidies to this end. In the place of the political sections various cultural groups should be set up, deriving resources from the State.*
8. *The immediate abolition of the militia detachments set up between towns and countryside.*
9. *The equalisation of rations for all workers, except those engaged in dangerous or unhealthy jobs.*
10. *The abolition of Party combat detachments in all military groups. The abolition of Party guards in factories and enterprises. If guards are required, they should be nominated, taking into account the views of the workers.*
11. *The granting to the peasants of freedom of action on their own soil, and of the right to own cattle, provided they look after them themselves and do not employ hired labour.*
12. *We request that all military units and officer trainee groups associate themselves with this resolution.*
13. *We demand that the Press give proper publicity to this resolution.*
14. *We demand the institution of mobile workers' control groups.*
15. *We demand that handicraft production be authorised provided it does not utilise wage labour.*" [quoted by Ida Mett, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 147-8]

This is the programme described by the Soviet government as a "*SR-Black Hundreds resolution*"! This is the programme which Trotsky maintains was drawn up by "*a handful of reactionary peasants and soldiers.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 65 and p. 98] As can be seen, it was nothing of the kind. In the words of Paul Avrich, "*[i]n effect, the **Petropavlovsk** resolution was an appeal to the Soviet government to live up to its own constitution, a bold statement of those very rights and freedom which Lenin himself had professed in 1917. In spirit, it was a throwback to October, evoking the old Leninist watchword of 'All power to the soviets.'*" [**Kronstadt 1921**, pp. 75-6] These demands, then, were "*impregnated with the spirit of October; and no calumny in the world can cast a doubt on the intimate connection*

*existing between this resolution and the sentiments which guided the expropriations of 1917."* [Anton Ciliga, *"The Kronstadt Revolt"*, **Op. Cit.**, p. 333]

If the ideas of the Kronstadt revolt are reactionary, then so is the slogan *"all power to the soviets."* Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the programme and the initial Bolshevik response, *"Soviet historians had no choice but to claim that the resolution which was published was an amended version of a 'Black Hundreds' resolution (a copy of which could not be found in 1931 [or later]) and to invent a second meeting of the ships' companies at which the resolution was re-written."* [George Katkov, **Op. Cit.**, p. 23]

While these fifteen demands are central to the revolt, looking at the paper produced during it helps us understand the nature of these demands and place them in a fuller political context. *"The pages of Izvestiia"*, as Voline argued, *"give abundant proof of th[e] general enthusiasm, which re-appeared once the masses felt they had regained, in the free Soviets, the true road to emancipation and the hope of achieving the real revolution."* [**The Unknown Revolution**, p. 495] For example, food rations were equalised, except for the sick and to children, who received a larger one. Left-wing political parties were legalised. The Provisional Revolutionary Committee was elected by a *"Conference of Delegates"* made up of over two hundred delegates from military units and workplaces. This body elected the Provisional Revolutionary Committee on March 2nd and enlarged it (again by election) on March 4th as well as *"decid[ing] that all workers, without exception, should be armed and put in charge of guarding the interior of the city"* and to organise re-elections for *"the administrative commissions of all the unions and also of the Council of Unions"* (which could *"become the principle organ of the workers"*). [*Izvestiia* quoted by Voline, **Op. Cit.**, p. 494]

In the article *"The Goals for Which We Fight,"* *Izvestiia* argued that *"[w]ith the aid of state unions"* the Communists have *"chained the workers to the machines, and transformed work into a new slavery instead of making it pleasant."* To the *"protests of the peasants, which have gone so far as spontaneous revolts, to the demands of the workers, compelled by the very conditions of their life to resort to strikes, they reply with mass shootings and a ferocity that the Tsarist generals might have envied."* An *"inevitable third revolution"* was coming, shown by *"increasing"* workers' strikes, which will be *"achieved by the labouring masses themselves."* This would be based on *"freely elected soviets"* and the reorganisation of *"the state unions into free associations of workers, peasants and intellectuals."* Thus *Izvestiia* saw clearly the real nature of nationalisation. Rather than being the basis of socialism, it simply produced more wage-labour this time to the state: *"From a slave of the capitalist the worker was transformed into a slave of state enterprises"*. [quoted by Voline, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 507-8 and p. 518] They clearly saw the need to replace wage slavery to the state (via nationalised property) with free associations of free workers and peasants. Such a transformation would come from the collective direct action and self-activity of working people, as expressed in the strikes which had so recently swept across the country.

This transformation from the bottom up was stressed elsewhere. The unions, *Izvestiia* argued, would *"fulfil the great and urgent task of educating the masses for an economic and cultural renovation of the country . . . The Soviet Socialist Republic cannot be strong unless its administration be exercised by the working class, with the help of renovated unions."* These should *"become real representatives of the interests of the people."* The current unions did *"nothing"* to promote *"economic activity of a co-operative nature"* or the *"cultural education"* of their members due centralised system imposed by the Communist regime. This would change with *"true union activity by the working class."* A strong syndicalist perspective can

be seen here, urging self-managed unions to be at the forefront of transforming the economy into a free association of producers. They opposed any "socialist" system in which the peasant "*has been transformed into a serf*", the worker "*a simple wage-worker in the State factories*" and those who protest are "*thrown into the jails of the Cheka.*" [quoted by Voline, **Op. Cit.**, p. 510 and p. 512]

The rebels wrote in *Izvestiia* that soviet power cannot exist while a political party dominated the soviets, rightly noting that Russia was just "*State Socialism with Soviets of functionaries who vote docilely what the authorities and their infallible commissars dictate to them.*" Without real working class power, without "*the will of the worker*" expressed in their free soviets, corruption had become rampant ("*Communists . . . live in ease and the commissars get fat.*"). Rather than a "*time of free labour in the fields, factories and workshops,*" where "*power*" was in "*the hands of the workers,*" the "*Communists have brought in the rule of the commissars, with all the despotism of personal power.*" Against this travesty of socialism, the paper proclaimed that "*Revolutionary Kronstadt . . . fights for the true Soviet Republic of the workers in which the producer himself will be owner of the products of his labour and can dispose of them as he wishes.*" This would create "*a life animated by free labour and the free development of the individual*" which could only be based on "*All power to the Soviets and not to the parties*" and "*the power of the free soviets.*" [quoted by Voline, **Op. Cit.**, p. 519, p. 518, p. 511, p. 518 and p. 519]

Finally, we must note that many -- with pro-Bolsheviks at the forefront -- have proclaimed that the Kronstadt revolt raised the slogan "Soviets without Communists" or "Soviets without Bolsheviks". Thus we find Trotsky stating that the "*Kronstadt slogan*" was "*soviets without Communists.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 90] Yet, as Paul Avrich notes in his essential work on the rebellion, "*'Soviets without Communists' was not, as is often maintained by both Soviet and non-Soviet writers, a Kronstadt slogan.*" Nor did they agitate under the banner "soviets without parties", instead they argued for "*all power to the soviets and not to parties.*" Political parties were not to be excluded from the soviets, simply stopped from dominating them and substituting themselves for them. The Kronstadt programme "*did allow a place for the Bolsheviks in the soviets, alongside the other left-wing organisations . . . Communists . . . participated in strength in the elected conference of delegates, which was the closest thing Kronstadt ever had to the free soviets of its dreams.*" [**Kronstadt 1921**, p. 181] Indeed, "*the proportion of Communists among the delegates finally elected to the delegates' meeting was about one third.*" [George Katkov, **Op. Cit.**, p. 30]

As can be seen, while the 15 demands are the essence of the revolt, looking at *Izvestiia* confirms its revolutionary nature. The rebels of 1921, as in 1917, looked forward to a system of free soviets in which working people could transform their society into one based on free associations which would encourage individual freedom and be based on working class power. They looked to a combination of renewed and democratic soviets and unions to transform Russian society into a **real** socialist system rather than the system of state capitalism the Bolsheviks had imposed.

Clearly, Kronstadt's political programme was deeply socialist in nature. It opposed the new wage slavery of the workers to the state and argued for free associations of free producers. It was based on the key slogan of 1917, "*All power to the soviets*" but built upon it by adding the rider "*but not to parties.*" The sailors had learned the lesson of the October revolution, namely that if a party held power the soviets did not. The politics of the revolt were not dissimilar to those of libertarian socialists and, as we show in [section 9](#), identical to the

dominant ideas of Kronstadt in 1917. Yet, according to Trotskyists, these demands and politics represent the interests of the peasantry and it was these which motivated them. For anarchists, it is an expression of the interests of all working people (proletarian, peasant and artisan) against all those who would exploit and govern them (be it private capitalists or state bureaucrats). We discuss this issue in the [next section](#).

## 4 Did the Kronstadt rebellion reflect "*the exasperation of the peasantry*"?

The notion that the Kronstadt rebellion reflected the needs and interests of the peasantry a common argument of Trotskyists. As a typical example, we see John Rees -- who needless to say does not provide a summary of revolt's 15 point programme -- assert that the "*sailors represented the exasperated of the peasantry with the War Communism regime*". ["*In Defence of October*", pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 63] In this he simply repeats Trotsky's comments that the ideas of the rebellion "*were deeply reactionary*" and "*reflected the hostility of the backward peasantry toward the worker, the self-importance of the soldier or sailor in relation to 'civilian' Petrograd, the hatred of the petty bourgeois for revolutionary discipline.*" The revolt "*represented the tendencies of the land-owning peasant, the small speculator, the kulak.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 80 and p. 81]

Before discussing these claims, we must note that the Kronstadt sailors had been smeared before by those less revolutionary than themselves. The ex-Bolshevik turned Menshevik Vladimir Voitinsky, for example, who had visited the base in May 1917 later remembered them as being "*degraded and demoralised*" and "*lack[ing] proletarian class-consciousness. It has the psychology of a Lumpenproletariat, a stratum that is a danger to a revolution rather than its support.*" They were "*material suitable for a rebellion a la Bakunin.*" [quoted by Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 253] Four years later, it was the Bolsheviks denouncing them for being non-proletarian -- this time they were peasants.

How true are such claims? Even the most superficial analysis of the *Petropavlovsk* resolution (see [last section](#)) and the events leading up to the revolt itself can allow the reader to dismiss Trotsky's assertions.

First, according to the definition of "*kulak*" proved by the Trotskyists themselves, we discover that kulak refers to "*well-to-do peasants who owned land and hired poor peasants to work it.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 146] Point 11 of the Kronstadt demands explicitly states their opposition to rural wage labour. How could Kronstadt represent "*the kulak*" when it called for the abolition of hired labour on the land? If it did, then so did the Bolshevik's own land decree of 26 October 1917 which proclaimed that the "*right to use the land shall be accorded to all citizens of the Russian state . . . desiring to cultivate it by their own labour, with the help of their families, or in partnership, but only as long as they are able to cultivate it. The employment of hired labour is not permitted.*" ["*Decree on the Land*", Robert V. Daniels (ed.), **A Documentary History of Communism**, vol. 1, p. 122] Moreover, Trotsky seems to have forgotten that the land decree was inspired by peasant rebellion and this revolutionary movement had transformed the countryside as Lenin admitted in 1921:

*"There are far more middle peasants now than before, the antagonisms have been smoothed out, the land has been distributed for use far more equally, the kulak's position has been undermined and he has been in considerable measure expropriated*

*. . . statistics show quite definitely that there has been a levelling out, an equalisation, in the village, that is, the old sharp division into kulaks and cropless peasants has disappeared. Everything has become more equable, the peasantry in general has acquired the status of the middle peasant."* [Collected Works, vol. 32, p. 216]

Official Bolshevik figures later estimated that the percentage of peasants owning more than ten hectares had fallen from 3.7% in 1917 to 0.5% in 1920 and so the number of well-off peasants had *"become quite negligible"* as *"the circumstances of peasants had levelled out"* [Alexander Skirda, **Nestor Makhno: Anarchy's Cossack**, pp. 173-4] So, as Ida Mett argued, *"[i]n their resolution, the Kronstadt sailors were taking up once again one of the big demands of October. They were supporting those peasant claims demanding the land and the right to own cattle for those peasants who did not exploit the labour of others. In 1921, moreover, there was another aspect to this particular demand. It was an attempt to solve the food question, which was becoming desperate. Under the system of forced requisition, the population of the towns was literally dying of hunger. Why, incidentally, should the satisfaction of these demands be deemed 'tactically correct' when advocated by Lenin, in March 1921, and 'counter-revolutionary' when put forward by the peasants themselves a few weeks earlier?"* [Op. Cit., p. 151]

Secondly, the Kronstadt revolt started after the sailors at Kronstadt sent delegates to investigate the plight of striking workers in Petrograd. Their actions were inspired by solidarity for these workers and civilians. This clearly shows that Trotsky's assertion that the revolt *"reflected the hostility of the backward peasantry toward the worker, the self-importance of the soldier or sailor in relation to 'civilian' Petrograd"* to be utter and total nonsense.

Rather than being *"deeply reactionary,"* the ideas that motivated the revolt clearly were not. They called for soviet democracy, free speech, assembly and organisation for workers and peasants. These express the demands of most, if not all, Marxist parties (including the Bolsheviks in 1917) before they take power. They simply repeat the demands of the revolutionary period of 1917 and reflected the Soviet Constitution.

So did the demands represent the interests of the (non-kulak) peasantry? To determine whether this is the case, we must see whether the demands reflected those of industrial workers or not. If the demands do, in fact, match those of striking workers and other proletarian elements then we can easily dismiss this claim as it is impossible to say that they simply reflected the needs of peasants (of course, Trotskyists will argue that these proletarians were also *"backward"* but, in effect, they are arguing that any worker who did not quietly follow Bolshevik orders was *"backward"* -- hardly a sound definition of the term).

We can quickly note that the demands echoed those raised during the Moscow and Petrograd strikes that preceded the Kronstadt revolt. For example, Paul Avrich records that the demands raised in the February strikes included *"removal of roadblocks, permission to make foraging trips into the countryside and to trade freely with the villagers, [and] elimination of privileged rations for special categories of working men."* The workers also *"wanted the special guards of armed Bolsheviks, who carried out a purely police function, withdrawn from the factories"* and raised *"pleas for the restoration of political and civil rights."* One manifesto which appeared (unsigned but bore signs of Menshevik origin) argued that *"the workers and peasants need freedom. They do not want to live by the decrees of the Bolsheviks. They want to control their own destinies."* It urged the strikers to demand the

liberation of all arrested socialists and non-party workers, abolition of martial law, freedom of speech, press and assembly for all who labour, free elections of factory committees, trade unions, and soviets. [Avrich, **Kronstadt 1921**, pp. 42-3] According to one Bolshevik Commissar) the "*basic demands are everywhere the same: free trade, free labour, freedom of movement, and so on.*" Two key demands raised in these strikes dated back to at least 1920, namely "*for free trade and an end to privilege*", while in March 1919, "*the Rechkin coach-building plant demanded equal rations for all workers*" and that one of the "*most characteristic demands of the striking workers at that time were for the free bringing-in of food.*" [Mary McAuley, **Bread and Justice**, p. 299 and p. 302] The following proclamation appeared on the walls:

*"A complete change is necessary in the policies of the Government . . . First of all, the workers and peasants need freedom. They don't want to live by the decrees of the Bolsheviks; they want to control their own destinies. We demand the liberation of all arrested Socialists and non-partisan workingmen; abolition of martial law; freedom of speech, press, and assembly for all who labor; free election of shop and factory committees, of labor union and Soviet representatives."* [quoted by Alexander Berkman, **The Bolshevik Myth**, p. 292]

As can be seen, these reflect points 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 13 of the revolt. As Paul Avrich summarises, the Kronstadt demands "*echoed the discontents not only of the Baltic Fleet but of the mass of Russians in towns and villages throughout the country. Themselves of plebeian stock, the sailors wanted relief for their peasant and worker kinfolk. Indeed, of the resolution's 15 points, only one -- the abolition of the political departments in the fleet -- applied specifically to their own situation. The remainder . . . was a broadside aimed at the policies of War Communism, the justification of which, in the eyes of the sailors and of the population at large, had long since vanished.*" He argues that many of the sailors had returned home on leave to see the plight of the villagers with their own eyes played a part in framing the resolution (particularly of point 11, the **only** peasant specific demand raised) but "*[b]y the same token, the sailors' inspection tour of Petrograd's factories may account for their inclusion of the workingmen's chief demands -- the abolition of road-blocks, of privileged rations, and of armed factory squads -- in their program.*" [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 74-5] Simply put, the Kronstadt resolution "*merely reiterated long standing workers' demands.*" [V. Brovkin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 395]

Ignoring all this, Rees informs his readers that Kronstadt revolt "*[a]lthough it was preceded by a wave of serious but quickly resolved strikes, the motivation of the Kronstadt rebellion was much closer to that of the peasantry than it was to dissatisfaction among what remained of the urban working class.*" [**Op. Cit.**, 61] In reality, Ida Mett had been correct to argue that the "*Kronstadt revolution had the merit of stating things openly and clearly. But it was breaking no new ground. Its main ideas were being discussed everywhere. For having, in one way or another, put forward precisely such ideas, workers and peasants were already filling the prisons and the recently set up concentration camps.*" Nor can it be claimed that these workers were non-proletarians (as if class is determined by thought rather than social position). Rather than being those workers with the closest relations with the countryside who were protesting, the opposite was the case. By 1921 "*[a]ll who had relatives in the country had rejoined them. The authentic proletariat remained till the end, having the most slender connections with the countryside.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 149 and p. 145] Indeed, "*an analysis of the industrial unrest in 1921 shows that long-standing workers were prominent in protest*" and the "*strongest reason for accepting the idea that it was established workers who were behind*

*the volynka [i.e. the strike wave] is the form and course of protest. Traditions of protest reaching back through the spring of 1918 to 1917 and beyond were an important factor in the organisation of the volynka. . . . There was also a degree of organisation . . . which belies the impression of a spontaneous outburst."* [Jonathan Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, p. 91 and p. 126]

Given that the Russian urban working class were also calling for free trade (and often without the political, anti-capitalist, riders Kronstadt added) it seems dishonest to claim that the sailors purely expressed the interests of the peasantry. Perhaps this explains why point 11 becomes summarised as "*restoration of free trade*" by most Trotskyists. ["*Editorial Preface*", Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 6] Yet, by focusing on the "*free trade*" issue, Leninists distort the real reasons for the revolt as the Kronstadt rebellion did not call for "free trade" as Trotskyists argue but rather something far more important:

*"In the Kronstadt Isvestia of March 14th we find a characteristic passage on this subject. The rebels proclaimed that 'Kronstadt is not asking for freedom of trade but for genuine power to the Soviets.' The Petrograd strikers were also demanding the reopening of the markets and the abolition of the road blocks set up by the militia. But they too were stating that freedom of trade by itself would not solve their problems."* [Ida Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 77]

Thus we have the Petrograd (and other) workers calling for free trade (and so, presumably, expressing their economic interests) while the Kronstadt sailors were demanding first and foremost soviet power. Their programme called for the "*granting to the peasants of freedom of action on their own soil, and of the right to own cattle, provided they look after themselves and do not employ hired labour.*" This was point 11 of the 15 demands, which showed the importance it ranked in their eyes. This would have been the basis of exchange between town and village, but exchange between worker and peasant and not between worker and kulak. This indicates a level of political awareness, an awareness of the fact that wage labour is the essence of capitalism. Thus Ante Ciliga:

*"People often believe that Kronstadt forced the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) -- a profound error. The Kronstadt resolution pronounced in favour of the defence of the workers, not only against the bureaucratic capitalism of the State, but also against the restoration of private capitalism. This restoration was demanded -- in opposition to Kronstadt -- by the social democrats, who combined it with a regime of political democracy. And it was Lenin and Trotsky who to a great extent realised it (but without political democracy) in the form of the NEP. The Kronstadt resolution declared for the opposite since it declared itself against the employment of wage labour in agriculture and small industry. This resolution, and the movement underlying, sought for a revolutionary alliance of the proletarian and peasant workers with the poorest sections of the country labourers, in order that the revolution might develop towards socialism. The NEP, on the other hand, was a union of bureaucrats with the upper layers of the village against the proletariat; it was the alliance of State capitalism and private capitalism against socialism. The NEP is as much opposed to the Kronstadt demands as, for example, the revolutionary socialist programme of the vanguard of the European workers for the abolition of the Versailles system, is opposed to the abrogation of the Treaty of Versailles achieved by Hitler."* ["*The Kronstadt Revolt*", **Op. Cit.**, pp. 334-5]

Point 11 did, as Ida Mett noted, *"reflected the demands of the peasants to whom the Kronstadt sailors had remained linked -- as had, as a matter of fact, the whole of the Russian proletariat . . . In their great majority, the Russian workers came directly from the peasantry. This must be stressed. The Baltic sailors of 1921 were, it is true, closely linked with the peasantry. But neither more nor less than had been the sailors of 1917."* To ignore the peasantry in a country in which the vast majority were peasants would have been insane (as the Bolsheviks proved) and so a *"workers and peasants' regime that did not wish to base itself exclusively on lies and terror, had to take account of the peasantry."* [Op. Cit., p. 150 and p. 151]

Given this, it comes as no surprise to discover Rees rather lamely admitting in passing that *"no other peasant insurrection reproduced the Kronstadters demands."* Perhaps that explains why he failed to mention any of the demands raised either in the strikes or by Kronstadt for to do so would have shown that clearly **proletarian** strikes, resolutions and activists all produced demands similar or identical to the Kronstadt demands. [Op. Cit., p. 63]

Similarly, the working class nature of the resolution can be seen from who agreed to it. The resolution passed by the sailors on the battleships was ratified by a mass meeting and then a delegate meeting of workers, soldiers and sailors. In other words, by workers **and** peasants. Yet J.G. Wright, following his guru Trotsky without question (and using him as the sole reference for his "facts"), stated that *"the incontestable facts"* were the *"sailors composed the bulk of the insurgent forces"* and *"the garrison and the civil population remained passive."* This, apparently, is evidence that *"underlying the mutiny was the expression of the petty bourgeois reaction against the difficulties and privations imposed by the conditions of the proletarian revolution. Nobody can deny this class character of the two camps."* ["The Truth about Kronstadt", Lenin and Trotsky, Op. Cit., p. 123] Let us contest these *"incontestable facts"* (i.e. assertions by Trotsky).

First, the meeting of 1st March in Anchor Square involved *"some fifteen to sixteen thousand sailors, soldiers and civilians."* [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 215] As this represented over 30% of Kronstadt's total population, it hardly points to a "passive" attitude on behalf of the civilians and soldiers.

Second, the conference of delegates had a *"membership that fluctuated between which two and three hundred sailors, soldiers, and working men."* This body remained in existence during the whole revolt as the equivalent of the 1917 soviet and, like that soviet, had delegates from Kronstadt's *"factories and military units."* It was, in effect, a *"prototype of the 'free soviets' for which the insurgents had risen in revolt."* In addition, a new Trade Union Council was created, free from Communist domination. [Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 159 and p. 157] Elections were held for the Council of Trade Unions on the 7th and 8th of March and this was a *"Council committee consisting of representatives from all trade unions"* while the Conference of Delegates *"had been elected by Kronstadt's body politic at their places of work, in army units, factories, workshops and Soviet institutions."* The revolutionary troikas (the equivalent of the commissions of the Executive Committee of the Soviet in 1917) were also *"elected by the base organisations."* Likewise, *"the secretariats of the trade unions and the newly founded Council of Trade Unions were both elected by the entire membership of trade unions."* [Getzler, Op. Cit., pp. 238-9 and p. 240]

Third, the declarations by sailors, soldiers and workers printed in *Izvestiia* which expressed their support for the revolt and those which announced they had left the Communist Party

also present evidence which clearly contests Wright's "*incontestable facts.*" One declaration of the "*soldiers of the Red Army from the fort Krasnoarmeietz*" stated they were "*body and soul with the Revolutionary Committee.*" [quoted by Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 500] Likewise, given that the Red Army troops manned the main bastion and the outlying forts and gun emplacements at Kronstadt and that the Bolshevik troops had to take these forts by force, we can safely argue that the Red Army soldiers did not play a "passive" role during the rebellion. [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 54 and pp. 205-6] In short, the "*local land forces of the Kronstadt garrison . . . fell in and joined the seamen.*" [D. Fedotoff-White, **The Growth of the Red Army**, p. 154]

That is a lot of activity for "passive" people. In short: "*But if the sailors took the lead, the Kronstadt garrison . . . the Red Army troops who manned the surrounding forts and batteries . . . soon fell into line; and the townspeople too, always susceptible to the influence of the seamen, with whom their occupations brought them into close contact, offered their active support*" [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 159]

As can be seen, the **Petropavlovsk** resolution not only reflected the demands of proletarians in Petrograd, it gained the support of proletarians in Kronstadt in the fleet, the army and the civilian workforce. More, the Kronstadt demands found support in urban areas. For example, "*Workers [in Moscow] applauded pro-Kronshtadt speakers at mass meetings, but at no point during the Kronshtadt events did this sympathy translate into action, however limited. On 25 March workers at the Bromlei factory, who passed a resolution supporting Kronshtadt, were punished with arrests, and the mass sacking and selective re-employment of the entire workforce, which in turn triggered some solidarity strikes in nearby factories. But that was all.*" [Simon Pirani, "*The Moscow Workers' Movement in 1921 and the Role of Non-Partyism*", pp. 143-160, **Europe-Asia Studies**, Vol. 56, No. 1, p. 149] At least two other revolts **did** raise demands similar to those raised by Kronstadt and both were by urban workers.

The first revolt started in Saratov when the authorities cut the already meagre rations at the beginning of March. The strike saw metallurgical plants and other large factories send representatives to the railroad shops and "*the initiative . . . came from the skilled stratum that the Communists normally deemed the most conscious.*" Strikers gatherings alarmed the local authorities, which "*agreed to permit the setting up of a commission that would re-examine the activities of all economic organs and the Cheka*" but "*the assemblies held at factories to elect delegates to the commission bitterly denounced the Communists*" and elected 270 members (less than 10 were Communists). This commission "*believed a **political** solution offered the best answer to putting an end to workers' economic distress . . . the workers' delegates . . . demanded the freeing of political prisoners, new elections to the soviets and to all labour organisations, independent unions, and freedom of speech, the press, and assembly.*" These were identical to the demands raised in Kronstadt at the same time. The Bolsheviks "*resolved to shut down the commission before it could issue a public statement calling for free elections and independent labour organisations*" and "*set up a Provincial Revolutionary Committee (**gubrevkom**), which introduced martial law both in the city and the garrison. It arrested the ringleaders of the workers' movement*" and "*the police crackdown depressed the workers' movement and activities of the rival socialist parties*". The Cheka "*sentenced 219 people to death and others to various prison terms. It also expanded its network of informants*" while the "*next month the Cheka shot another 62 individuals and sentenced 205 more to jail.*" The local party reported to Moscow that the "*all but general*

*strike was liquidated after tremendous efforts of the entire party and Soviet apparatus."*  
[Donald J. Raleigh, **Experiencing Russia's Civil War**, pp. 387-9]

Another revolt took place in Ekaterinoslav (in the Ukraine) in May 1921 which the local communists called a "*little Kronstadt*." It started in the railway workshops and became "*quickly politicised*," with the strike committee raising a "*series of political ultimatums that were very similar in content to the demands of the Kronstadt rebels*." The strike "*spread to the other workshops. The very close similarity of the demands of the Ekaterinoslav workers to those of the Kronstadt rebels is evidence of their consciousness of being part of a wider movement but even more impressive is the speed and effectiveness with which the strike spread*." On June 1st the main large Ekaterinoslav factories joined the strike. The strike was spread via the use of trains and telegraph and soon an area up to fifty miles around the town was affected. The local Communist Party leader was instructed "*to put down the rebellion without mercy . . . Use Budennyi's cavalry*." The strike was finally ended by the use of the Cheka, using mass arrests and shootings, with 15 workers immediately shot and their bodies dumped in the River Dnepr. After a trial of 20 strike leaders, the communists held a series of meetings amongst the workers at which they "*spoke at length about the suppression of the Kronstadt revolt and the treatment meted out to the rebels*" and "*warned the workers of the consequences of further protest*." After a guarantee of immunity, a debate was held with Cheka agents hidden in the crowds "*to note the names of those workers who supported anti-Soviet speeches*" but the response to one such speech "*was so overwhelming they could do very little*." [Jonathan Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, pp. 171-4]

Thus the claim that the Kronstadt resolution purely reflected the interests of the peasantry is refuted. The Kronstaders (like the Petrograd and other workers) raised economic and political demands in 1921 just as they had four years earlier when they overthrew the Tsar. Which, again, refutes the logic of defenders of Bolshevism. For example, Wright excelled himself when he argued the following:

*"The supposition that the soldiers and sailors could venture upon an insurrection under an abstract political slogan of 'free soviets' is absurd in itself. It is doubly absurd in the view of the fact [!] that the rest of the Kronstadt garrison consisted of backward and passive people who could not be used in the civil war. These people could have been moved to an insurrection only by profound economic needs and interests. These were the needs and interests of the fathers and brothers of these sailors and soldiers, that is, of peasants as traders in food products and raw materials. In other words the mutiny was the expression of the petty bourgeoisie's reaction against the difficulties and privations imposed by the proletarian revolution. Nobody can deny this class character of the two camps."* ["The Truth about Kronstadt", Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 111-2]

Of course, no worker or peasant could possibly reach beyond a trade union consciousness by their own efforts, as Lenin so thoughtfully argued in **What is to be Done?** (see [section H.5](#)). Neither could the experience of two revolutions have an impact on anyone, nor the extensive political agitation and propaganda of years of struggle. Indeed, the sailors were so backward that they had no "*profound economic needs and interests*" of their own but rather fought for "*the needs and interests of the fathers and brothers*"! Yet, according to Trotsky, "*[t]hey themselves did not clearly understand that what their fathers and brothers needed first of all was free trade*." [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 92] And these were the sailors the Bolsheviks desired to operate some of the most advanced warships in the world?

Sadly for Wright's assertions history has proven him wrong time and time again. Working people have constantly raised political demands which were far in advance of those of the "professional" revolutionaries (a certain German and the Paris Commune springs to mind, never mind a certain Russian and the soviets). The fact that the Kronstadt sailors not only "*venture[d] upon an insurrection under an abstract political slogan of 'free soviets'*" but actually **created** one (the conference of delegates) goes unmentioned. Likewise, it is forgotten that the motivation for the resolution was solidarity with the strikes in Petrograd and so it also, naturally enough, included the dissatisfaction of both the workers and the peasants. For the Kronstadters, it was a case of the needs of **all** the toilers and so their resolution reflected the needs and demands of both. That two other worker revolts -- waged by that proletarian weapon, the strike -- also raised similar demands shows the baselessness of Wright's assertions.

Thus claims that the Kronstadt demands reflected peasant needs is mistaken. In fact, they reflected the needs of the whole working population, including the urban working class who raised these demands continually throughout the Civil War period during their strikes. Simply put, the policies of the Bolsheviks as regards food did not work and were, in fact, counter-productive -- as many of the Russian proletariat recognised.

So to claim that Kronstadt solely reflected the plight or interests of the peasantry is nonsense, whether that claim was made in 1938, 1991 or now. Yet there is an irony in such assertions for, after all, the very demands which Trotskyists claims show the revolt's peasant nature -- point 8 (withdrawn of roadblocks) and point 11 (free action for peasants who do not use wage-labour) -- were quickly agreed to by the Bolshevik authorities. During the revolt Zinoviev announced various "*concessions to the workers' most pressing demands*" which included that "*plans were afoot to abandon the forcible seizure of grain from the peasants in favour of a tax in kind . . . which would at least partially restore freedom of trade between town and country*" plus "*the withdrawal of all roadblocks from the whole of the Petrograd province.*" [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 49] Surely, then, it was the Bolsheviks who represented the most "backward" elements of the peasantry? Moreover, given that the New Economic Policy (NEP) allowed wage labour does this not mean the Bolsheviks represented the interests of the kulak?

## **5 What lies did the Bolsheviks spread about Kronstadt?**

From the start, the Bolsheviks lied about the uprising. Indeed, Kronstadt provides a classic example of how Lenin and Trotsky used slander against their political opponents. Both attempted to paint the revolt as being organised and lead by the Whites. As Paul Avrich notes, "*every effort was made to discredit the rebels*" and that the "*chief object of Bolshevik propaganda was to show that the revolt was not a spontaneous outbreak of mass protest but a new counterrevolutionary conspiracy, following the pattern established during the Civil War. According to the Soviet press, the sailors, influenced by Mensheviks and SR's in their ranks, had shamelessly cast their lot with the 'White Guards,' led by a former tsarist general named Kozlovsky . . . This, in turn, was said to be part of a carefully laid plot hatched in Paris by Russian emigres in league with French counterintelligence.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 88 and p. 95]

Lenin, for example, argued in a report to the Tenth Congress of the Communist Party on March 8th that "*White Guard generals were very active over there. There is ample proof of this*" and that it was "*the work of Social Revolutionaries and White Guard emigres.*" The first

government statement on the Kronstadt events was entitled *"The Revolt of Ex-General Kozlovsky and the Warship Petropavlovsk"* and stated that the revolt was *"expected by, and undoubtedly prepared by, French counterintelligence"* and that on the morning of March 2 *"the group around ex-General Kozlovsky . . . had openly appeared on the scene . . . [he] and three of his officers . . . have openly assumed the role of insurgents. Under their direction . . . a number of . . . responsible individuals, have been arrested. . . Behind the SRs again stands a tsarist general."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 44 and pp. 65-6]

The reality was different and the Bolsheviks knew it. Victor Serge, a French illegalist-anarchist turned Bolshevik, later recounted how he was first told that *"Kronstadt is in the hands of the Whites"* and that *"[s]mall posters stuck on the walls in the still empty streets proclaimed that the counter-revolutionary General Kozlovsky had seized Kronstadt through conspiracy and treason."* However, the *"truth seeped through little by little, past the smokescreen put out by the Press, which was positively berserk with lies"* (indeed, it *"lied systematically"*). He found out that the Bolshevik's official line was *"an atrocious lie"* and that *"the sailors had mutinied, it was a naval revolt led by the Soviet."* However, the *"worse of it all was that we were paralysed by the official falsehoods. It had never happened before that our Party should lie to us like this. 'It's necessary for the benefit of the public,' said some . . . the strike [in Petrograd] was now practically general"* This confirms the obvious: if the Bolshevik leaders had considered the revolt to be counter-revolutionary (passing a *"SR-Black Hundreds"* resolution as Zinoviev informed Lenin on the 28th of February) then why were Kalinin and Kuzmin sent to Kronstadt the next day to parley with the sailors? Is it really conceivable that leading Bolsheviks could safely undertake an official visit to the headquarters of a counter-revolution? Serge suggested that it *"was probably Kalinin who, on his return to Petrograd, invented 'the White General Kozlovsky'"* for he had attended the initial mass meeting at Kronstadt and *"whose brutal bungling provoked the rebellion" by "treat[ing] them as rogues and traitors merely out for themselves, and threatened them with merciless reprisals."* [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, pp. 124-6 and p. 127]

Thus the claim that the Kronstadt rebellion was the work of Whites and led by a Tsarist General was a lie -- a lie deliberately and consciously spread. This was concocted to weaken support for the rebellion in Petrograd and in the Red Army, to help isolate it. Lenin admitted as much on the 15th of March when he stated at the Tenth Party Conference that in Kronstadt *"they do not want either the whiteguards or our government"*. This did not, of course, stop him proclaiming earlier at this conference that the revolt was *"bound up initially with the whiteguards"* [**Collected Works**, vol. 32, p. 228 and p. 185]

If you agree with Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci that *"to tell the truth is a communist and revolutionary act"* then it is clear that the Bolsheviks in 1921 (and for a long time previously) were not communist or revolutionary (and as the subsequent Leninist accounts of Kronstadt show, Bolshevism is still neither). [quoted by Gwyn A. Williams, **Proletarian Order**, p. 193] In stark contrast to the Bolsheviks, the Kronstadt paper *Izvestiia* published Bolshevik leaflets, paper articles and radio broadcasts so that the inhabitants of the island could see exactly what lies the Bolsheviks were telling about them.

So by the 1950s even Isaac Deutscher, Trotsky's somewhat uncritical biographer, had to admit that the Bolsheviks *"denounced the men of Kronstadt as counter-revolutionary mutineers, led by a White general. The denunciation appears to have been groundless."* [**The Prophet Armed**, p. 511] Yet this did not stop the Trotskyist editors of **Kronstadt** showing the same contempt for their readers as the Bolsheviks showed for the truth. They include an

*"Introduction"* to their work by Pierre Frank in which he argues that the Bolsheviks merely "state that [White] generals, counterrevolutionaries, sought to manipulate the insurgents" and that anarchists "turn this into a claim that these generals had launched the rebellion and that [quoting Ida Mett] 'Lenin, Trotsky and the whole Party leadership knew quite well that this was no mere "generals' revolt,""' . This apparently shows how "[a]nything having to do with the facts" gets treated by such authors, who "merely distort the Bolsheviks' positions." Somewhat amazingly, Franks states this in the same work that quotes Lenin actually stating on March 8th, 1921, that "the familiar figures of White Guard generals" were "very quickly revealed," that "White generals were very active" in Kronstadt, that it was "quite clear that it is the work of Social Revolutionaries and White Guard emigres" and that Kronstadt was "bound up initially" with "the White Guards." Lenin is also quoted, on March 9th, arguing that "the Paris newspapers reported the events two weeks before they actually occurred, and a White general appeared on the scene. That is what actually happened." Frank makes this claim in spite of the book it appears in including the government statement entitled "The Revolt of Ex-General Kozlovsky and the Warship Petropavlovsk" which states on "the morning of March 2 the group around ex-General Kozlovsky (chief of artillery) and three of his officers . . . have openly assumed the role of insurgents." [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 22, pp. 44-5, p. 48 and p. 66-7]

Nor can it be said that Ida Mett claims that the Lenin and Trotsky had said a general had "launched" the revolt. She quotes Moscow radio as stating that the revolt ("*Just like other White Guard insurrections*") was in fact "*the mutiny of ex-General Kozlovsky and the crew of the battle ship 'Petropavlovsk'*" and it was "*clear that the Kronstadt revolt is being led from Paris. The French counter espionage is mixed up in the whole affair . . . The Socialist Revolutionaries, who have their headquarters in Paris, are preparing the ground for an insurrection against the Soviet power. The ground prepared, their real master, the Tsarist general appeared*". [quoted by Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 155] It seems strange that Frank complains that others "distort" the Bolsheviks position when, firstly, the person he quotes does not and, secondly, he distorts that persons' actual position. As can be seen, Mett provided evidence for her claim -- the quote provided heads the section from which Frank cherry-picks -- yet Frank fails to inform his readers of this before quoting her on how "*Lenin, Trotsky and the whole Party leadership knew quite well that this was no mere 'generals' revolt.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 43]

After providing evidence that the Bolsheviks had blamed the revolt on a White conspiracy, she **then** turns to General Kozlovsky whom the Bolsheviks indicated by name as its leader and had outlawed in the proclamation of March 2nd. Who was he and what part did he play? Mett sums up the evidence:

*"He was an artillery general, and had been one of the first to defect to the Bolsheviks. He seemed devoid of any capacity as a leader. At the time of the insurrection he happened to be in command of the artillery at Kronstadt. The communist commander of the fortress had defected. Kozlovsky, according to the rules prevailing in the fortress, had to replace him. He, in fact, refused, claiming that as the fortress was now under the jurisdiction of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee, the old rules no longer applied. Kozlovsky remained, it is true, in Kronstadt, but only as an artillery specialist. Moreover, after the fall of Kronstadt, in certain interviews granted to the Finnish press, Kozlovsky accused the sailors of having wasted precious time on issues other than the defence of the fortress. He explained this in terms of their reluctance to resort to bloodshed. Later, other officers of the garrison were also to accuse the sailors of military incompetence, and of complete lack of confidence in*

*their technical advisers. Kozlovsky was the only general to have been present at Kronstadt. This was enough for the Government to make use of his name.*

*"The men of Kronstadt did, up to a point, make use of the military know how of certain officers in the fortress at the time. Some of these officers may have given the men advice out of sheer hostility to the Bolsheviks. But in their attack on Kronstadt, the Government forces were also making use of ex Tsarist officers. On the one side there were Kozlovsky, Salomianov, and Arkannihov; On the other, ex-Tsarist officers and specialists of the old regime, such as Toukhatchevsky. Kamenev, and Avrov. On neither side were these officers an independent force." [Op. Cit., pp. 156-7]*

These facts have been well-known since 1921 but they are not good enough for Trotskyists. Wright, for example, would have none of it and after quoting Alexander Berkman -- that there was *"a former general, Kozlovsky, in Kronstadt. It was Trotsky who had placed him there as an Artillery specialist. He played no role whatever in the Kronstadt events."* ["The Kronstadt Rebellion", **Op. Cit.**, p. 69] -- he goes on to protest that this is not true. As evidence, Wright quotes from an interview by Kozlovsky and states that *"[f]rom the lips of the counterrevolutionary general himself . . . we get the unambiguous declaration that **from the very first day**, he and his colleagues had openly associated themselves with the mutiny, had elaborated the 'best' plans to capture Petrograd . . . If the plan failed it was only because Kozlovsky and his colleagues were unable to convince the 'political leaders', i.e. his SR allies [!], that the moment was propitious for exposing their true visage and program."* ["The Truth about Kronstadt", Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 119] In other words, because the Provisional Revolutionary Committee **failed** to take the advice of the military specialists it proves that, in fact, they were in league. That is very impressive. We wonder if the Kronstadters **had** taken their advice then this would have proved that they were not, in fact, in league with them after all?

Every non-Leninist account agrees that Kozlovsky played no part in the revolt. Paul Avrich notes that when trouble erupted *"the Bolsheviks at once denounced him as the evil genius of the movement,"* immediately *"outlawed"* him and seized his family as hostages. He confirms that the military specialists *"threw themselves into the task of planning military operations on behalf of the insurrection"* and that Kozlovsky had refused to succeed as the commander of the fortress after the old one had fled to the mainland (as demanded by military rules). He stresses that *"the officers remained in a purely advisory capacity throughout the rebellion. They had no share, as far as one can tell, in initiating or directing the revolt, or in framing its political program, which was alien to their way of thinking."* Their role *"was confined to providing technical advice, just as it had been under the Bolsheviks."* The Provisional Revolutionary Committee *"showed its distrust of the specialists by repeatedly rejecting their counsel, however sound and appropriate it might be."* And, of course, *"[f]or all the government's accusations that Kronstadt was a conspiracy of White Guard generals, ex-tsarist officers played a much more prominent role in the attacking force than among the defenders."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 99, p. 100, p. 101 and p. 203]

Kozlovsky before the revolt *"had served the Bolsheviks so loyally that on 20 October 1920 the chief commander of the Baltic Fleet . . . had awarded him a watch 'for courage and feat of arms in the battle against Yudenich'"* [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 219] This officially confirmed the award made on the 3rd of December, 1919, by the Petrograd Soviet *"for military feats and energetic activities during the attack of the Yudenich bands on Petrograd."* Indeed, he was one of the first generals who entered into service of the

Bolsheviks and the Kronstadt soviet had elected him Chief-of-Staff of the fortress in the wake of the February revolution in 1917. All this did not stop the Bolsheviks claiming on March 3rd, 1921, that Kozlovsky was a "*supporter of Yudenich and Kolchak*". [quoted by Israel Getzler, "*The Communist Leaders' Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents*", **Op. Cit.**, p. 43 and p. 31]

Berkman was clearly correct and Wright, wrong. Kozlovsky took no role in the revolt and the Trotskyists join the Stalinists in the "*historical falsification [which] had singled out [him] as the leader of the rebellion.*" What he did do was offer his expertise to the Kronstadt rebels (just as he had to the Bolsheviks) and make plans which were rejected. If associating yourself with an event and making plans which are rejected by those involved equals a role in that event then Trotsky's role in the Spanish revolution equalled that of Durruti's. Likewise, no Trotskyist concludes that if Tsarist Generals providing advice makes something counter-revolutionary, then the Red Army must also have been. After all, the Bolshevik regime gave command of the assault on Kronstadt to Toukhatchevsky, a professional soldier and former Tsarist officer whose social background would have ensured he would harbour no sympathies -- unlike many of the troops he commanded -- for the socialist ideas being raised by the rebels and who would not think twice at placing machine-guns behind the Red Army forces to ensure their obedience. Indeed, after crushing Kronstadt he "*turned to his next task -- the suppression of the peasant rising in the Tambov and the adjoining provinces*". [George Katkov, **Op. Cit.**, p. 40 and p. 66]

It should be noted that Bolsheviks slandering their opponents was hardly new. For example, Serge, a few pages before his account of the Kronstadt rebellion in his memoirs, mentions "*the strenuous calumnies put out by the Communist Press*" about Nestor Makhno, "*which went so far as to accuse him of signing pacts with the Whites at the very moment when he was engaged in a life-and-death struggle against them*" which suggests that Kronstadt was hardly the first time the Party had lied to them. [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 124-6 and p. 122] Sadly, he fails to mention that he himself contributed to the Bolshevik lie machine about Kronstadt by, for example, publically repeating the Soviet regime's falsifications about the rebels in March 1922. [**The Serge-Trotsky Papers**, pp. 18-9] Nor was this an isolated case -- he also repeated the usual Bolshevik slanders against the Makhnovists in 1920 before, in 1938, admitting such claims were "*not true*" [Victor Serge, **Anarchists Never Surrender**, p. 169 and p. 223] Likewise, a revolt in Saratov in May 1918 saw the party depict it "*as the outgrowth of the actions of its collective enemies: White Guards, tsarist officer organisations, Black Hundreds, Cossacks, Czechoslovaks, and . . . Right SRs and Mensheviks. But the classified report of the Extraordinary Investigative Commission charged with studying the insurrection saw it as a spontaneous, disorganised movement caused by excessive use of force that turned the city's inhabitants against Soviet power, which lacked a popular mandate.*" [Donald J. Raleigh, **Experiencing Russia's Civil War**, p. 54]

Finally, we must note that in the late 1920s the Stalinists tried to link the Trotskyist Opposition to a White General. Thus the "*charge that the Opposition had ties with White Guards was trumpeted*" and, while baseless, "*the objective of further discrediting the Opposition had been accomplished. 'The myth about the "Wrangel officer" is being broadcast through the land, poisoning the minds of a million party members and tens of millions of non party men', reported the Opposition leaders.*" [Tony Cliff, **Trotsky**, vol. 3, pp. 256-7]

These days, it is hard to find a Leninist who subscribes to this particular Bolshevik lie about Kronstadt. It has, in the main, been long abandoned by those who follow those who created it

despite the fact it was the cornerstone of the official Bolshevik account of the rebellion. As the obvious falseness of the claims became more and more well-known, Trotsky and his followers turned to other ways to slander the uprising. The most famous is the assertion that the "*Kronstadt sailors were quite a different group from the revolutionary heroes of 1917.*" [Wright, "*The Truth about Kronstadt*", **Op. Cit.**, p. 129] We turn to this question in the [section 8](#) and indicate that subsequent research has refuted it (and how Trotskyists have misused this research). The more sophisticated ones utilise a variation on Serge's arguments for why he, in the end, supported the Bolsheviks in 1921 and we discuss this in [section 12](#). However, first we must discuss whether the Kronstadt revolt was, in fact, a White conspiracy ([section 6](#)) and its real relationship to the Whites ([section 7](#)).

## 6 Was the Kronstadt revolt a White plot?

As discussed in the [last section](#), at the time the Bolsheviks portrayed the Kronstadt revolt as a conspiracy organised by a foreign spies and a former Tsarist General. Lenin, for example, proclaimed on March 8th that "*White Guard generals were very active*" at Kronstadt. "*There is ample proof of this. A fortnight before the Kronstadt events, the Paris newspapers reported a mutiny at Kronstadt. It is quite clear that it is the work of Social Revolutionaries and White Guard emigres.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 32, p. 184] Trotsky, on March 16th, made the same point, arguing that "*in a number of foreign newspapers . . . news of an uprising in Kronstadt appeared as far back as the middle of February . . . How [to] explain this? Very simply . . . The Russian counterrevolutionary organisers promised to stage a mutiny at a propitious moment, while the impatient yellow and financial press write about it as an already accomplished fact.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 68]

This appears to be the best, indeed only, "evidence" provided by Lenin and Trotsky as regards the White Guardist nature of the revolt. To see the truth of these claims it is simply a case of looking at how the Bolsheviks reacted to this announcement of an uprising in Kronstadt two weeks before it took place: they did nothing. As the Trotskyist editors of a book justifying the repression note, the "*Red Army command was caught unprepared by the rebellion.*" J.G. Wright, in his "*The Truth about Kronstadt*", similarly noted that the "*Red Army command*" was "*[c]aught off guard by the mutiny.*" This in spite of Trotsky stating at the time that on "*basis of the dispatch*" he had "*sent a warning to Petrograd to my naval colleagues.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 6, p. 123 and p. 68] This clearly shows how little weight the newspaper reports were held **before** the rebellion. Of course, **during** and **after** the rebellion was a different matter and they quickly became a focal point for Bolshevik smears.

This is perhaps to be expected for, as proof of a White plot, this evidence is pathetic as can be seen by Lenin himself who noted a "*campaign of lies*" which produced "*a vast number of fabrications in this period*". [**Collected Works**, vol. 32, p. 269] Likewise, Trotsky admitted that "*the imperialist press . . . prints . . . a great number of fictitious reports about Russia*" but also maintained that the reports on Kronstadt were examples of "*forecasts*" of "*attempts at overturns in specific centres of Soviet Russia*" (indeed, the "*journalistic agents of imperialism only 'forecast' that which is entrusted for execution to other agents of this very imperialism.*"). [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 50-1]

Yet this same press can be used as evidence for a White conspiracy in Kronstadt? "*In reality,*" as Emma Goldman noted, "*this advance news was like other news from Paris, Riga or Helsingfors, and which rarely, if ever, coincided with anything that had been claimed by*

*the counter-revolutionary agents abroad . . . No, the advance news in the Paris Press had no bearing whatever on the Kronstadt rebellion. In point of fact, no one in Petrograd in 1921 believed its connection, not even quite a number of Communists.*" ["Trotsky Protests Too Much", **Op. Cit.**, p. 262] Ida Mett states the obvious:

*"The publication of false news about Russia was nothing exceptional. Such news was published before, during, and after the Kronstadt events. It is undeniable that the bourgeoisie throughout the world was hostile to the Russian Revolution and would exaggerate any bad news emanating from that country. The Second Communist Conference of the Baltic Fleet had just voted a resounding resolution, critical of the political leadership of the Fleet. This fact could easily have been exaggerated by the bourgeois press, once again confusing the wishes with reality. To base an accusation on a 'proof' of this kind is inadmissible and immoral."*

*In 1938 Trotsky himself was to drop this accusation. But . . . he refers his readers to a study of the Kronstadt rebellion undertaken by an American trotskyist John G Wright . . . [who] takes up once again the claim that the revolt must have been planned before-hand . . . He says: 'the connection between Kronstadt and the counterrevolution can be established not only out of the mouths of the enemies of Bolshevism but also on the basis of irrefutable facts'. What irrefutable facts? Again, quotations from the bourgeois press . . . giving false news before and during the insurrection." [Op. Cit., p. 196]*

The question of **why** the counterrevolutionary plotters would give their enemies advance notice of their plans and so time to take preventive action never cross Leninist minds. How seriously these reports were taken can be seen by how the revolt took all the various Bolshevik hierarchies by surprise. Similarly, at the time **no** evidence was forthcoming that the Whites organised or took part in the revolt. Bukharin in July 1921, for example stated that, as regards Kronstadt, the "*documents which have since been brought to light show clearly that the affair was instigated by purely White Guard centres.*" [**In Defence of the Russian Revolution**, Al Richardson (ed.), p. 192] It is redundant to note that said "documents" were not published by the Soviet Government then or since:

*"If, at the time the Bolshevik Government had proofs of these alleged contacts between Kronstadt and the counter-revolutionaries why did it not try the rebels publicly? Why did it not show the working masses of Russia the 'real' reasons for the uprising? If this wasn't done it was because no such proofs existed." [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 197]*

The first soviet investigation into the revolt came to the conclusion that it was spontaneous. A special plenipotentiary of the Secret-Operation Department of the **Vecheka** was sent by the presidium of that body to Kronstadt soon after the crushing of the uprising. His mandate was "*to ascertain the role of various parties and groups in the start and development of the uprising and the ties of its organisers and inspirers with counter-revolutionary parties and organisations operating both in and outside Soviet Russia.*" He produced a report on the 5th of April, 1921, which expressed his considered opinion that the "*uprising was entirely spontaneous in origin and drew into its maelstrom almost the entire population and the garrison of the fortress . . . the investigation failed to show the outbreak of the mutiny was preceded by the activity of any counter-revolutionary organisation at work among the fortress's command or that it was the work of the **entente**. The entire course of the movement*

*speaks against that possibility. Had the mutiny been the work of some secret organisation which predated its outbreak, then that organisation would not have planned it for a time when the reserves of fuel and provisions were hardly sufficient for two weeks and when the thawing of the ice was still far off.*" He noted that the "masses" in Kronstadt "were fully aware of the spontaneity of their movement." This conclusion was shared by chairman of the Extraordinary **Troika** of the First and Second Special Section who was given the double assignment of "the punishment of the mutineers and the unmasking of all the organisations that prepared and led the mutiny." He reported on April 20th, 1921, that "in spite of all efforts we have been unable to discover the presence of any organisation and to seize any agents." [quoted by Israel Getzler, "The Communist Leaders' Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents", **Op. Cit.**, pp. 25-6]

These conclusions were drawn in spite of the interrogation of prisoners who would have been willing to tell the authorities what they wanted to hear in order to escape execution or imprisonment (unless of course placing the word "proletarian" before interrogation or torture -- like state -- produces different results?). Still, the Bolsheviks were apparently quite willing to consider inventing evidence of a conspiracy. Trotsky, for example, raised, on the 24th of March 1921, the possibility of a "Political Trial of Kronstadters and Makhnovites." This show trial would be part of the "struggle" against "anarchism (Kronstadt and Makhno)." This was "presently an important task" and so it "seems . . . appropriate to organise trials of Kronstadters . . . and of Makhnovites." The "effect of the reports and the speeches of the prosecutor etcetera would be far more powerful than the effects of brochures and leaflets about . . . anarchism." [quoted by Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 39] While Trotsky's show trial was never staged, the fact that the idea was taken seriously can be seen from the invented summaries of the testimonies of three men considered by the Bolsheviks as ringleaders of the revolt. Perhaps the fact that the three (Kozlovsky, Petrichenko, Putilin) managed to escape to Finland ensured that Trotsky's idea was never carried out. Stalin, of course, utilised the "powerful" nature of such trials in the 1930s.

While the Bolsheviks never published any of the documents they at times claimed to have proving the White conspiracy at Kronstadt, decades later historian Paul Avrich **did** discover an unsigned hand written manuscript labelled "Top Secret" and entitled "Memorandum on the Question of Organising an Uprising in Kronstadt." Trotskyist Pierre Frank considered it "so convincing" that he "reproduced it in its entirety" to prove a White conspiracy existed behind the Kronstadt revolt. Indeed, he considers it as an "indisputable" revelation and that Lenin and Trotsky "were not mistaken in their analysis of Kronstadt." [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 26 and p. 32]

However, reading the document quickly shows that Kronstadt was not a product of a White conspiracy but rather that the White National Centre aimed to try and use a spontaneous "uprising" it thought was likely to "erupt there in the coming spring" for its own ends. The report notes that "among the sailors, numerous and unmistakable signs of mass dissatisfaction with the existing order can be noticed." Indeed, the Memorandum states that "one must not forget that even if the French Command and the Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations do not take part in the preparation and direction of the uprising, a revolt in Kronstadt will take place all the same during the coming spring, but after a brief period of success it will be doomed to failure." [quoted by Avrich, **Kronstadt 1921**, p. 235 and p. 240] Avrich himself rejected the idea that this Memorandum explains the revolt:

*"Nothing has come to light to show that the Secret Memorandum was ever put into practice or that any links had existed between the emigres and the sailors before the revolt. On the contrary, the rising bore the earmarks of spontaneity . . . there was little in the behaviour of the rebels to suggest any careful advance preparation. Had there been a prearranged plan, surely the sailors would have waited a few weeks longer for the ice to melt . . . The rebels, moreover, allowed Kalinin [a leading Communist] to return to Petrograd, though he would have made a valuable hostage. Further, no attempt was made to take the offensive . . . Significant too, is the large number of Communists who took part in the movement . . .*

*"The Sailors needed no outside encouragement to raise the banner of insurrection . . . Kronstadt was clearly ripe for a rebellion. What set it off were not the machinations of emigre conspirators and foreign intelligence agents but the wave of peasant risings throughout the country and the labour disturbances in neighbouring Petrograd. And as the revolt unfolded, it followed the pattern of earlier outbursts against the central government from 1905 through the Civil War." [Op. Cit., pp. 111-2]*

He concludes that while the National Centre had "anticipated" the revolt and "laid plans to help organise it," they had "no time to put these plans into effect." The "eruption occurred too soon, several weeks before the basic conditions of the plot . . . could be fulfilled." It "is not true," he stresses, "that the emigres had engineered the rebellion." The revolt was "a spontaneous and self-contained movement from beginning to end." Most obviously, as Avrich notes, an "underlying assumption of the Memorandum is that the revolt would not occur until after the springtime thaw, when the ice had melted and Kronstadt was immune from an invasion from the mainland." [Op. Cit., pp. 126-7 and pp. 106-7]

Voline, then, just stated the obvious when he argued that the revolt "broke out spontaneously" for if it "had been the result of a plan conceived and prepared in advance, it would certainly not have occurred at the beginning of March, the least favourable time. A few weeks later, and Kronstadt, freed of ice, would have become an almost impregnable fortress . . . The greatest opportunity of Bolshevik government was precisely the spontaneity of the movement and the absence of any premeditation, of any calculation, in the action of the sailors." [Op. Cit., p. 487] Given that the Memorandum also recognised this need for the ice to thaw and it was the basic assumption behind it, the revolt **was** spontaneous and actually undercut the assumptions behind the Memorandum. Likewise, a prominent right-SR leader and head of the SR Administrative Centre in Finland wrote a letter on the 18th of March that while "[o]ne usually looks for those responsible [for the failure]; it is difficult to find them in this case, as it is generally difficult to analyse the causes and results of events that are so absolutely spontaneous. The movement began spontaneously, without any organisation and quite unexpectedly. After all, a month later, Kronstadt would have been inaccessible to the Bolsheviks and a hundred times more dangerous to them." [quoted by Getzler, Op. Cit., pp. 25-6]

Moreover, whether the Memorandum played a part in the revolt can be seen from the reactions of the White National Centre to the uprising. Firstly, they failed to deliver aid to the rebels nor get French aid to them. Secondly, Professor Grimm, the chief agent of the National Centre in Helsingfors and General Wrangel's official representative in Finland, stated to a colleague after the revolt had been crushed that if a new outbreak should occur then their group must not be caught unawares again. Avrich also notes that the revolt "caught the emigres off balance" and that "[n]othing . . . had been done to implement the Secret

*Memorandum, and the warnings of the author were fully borne out.* " [Op. Cit., p. 212 and p. 123] If Kronstadt was a White conspiracy then how could the organisation of the conspiracy have been caught unawares?

Clearly, the attempts of certain later-day Trotskyists to justify and prove their heroes slanders against Kronstadt are pathetic. No evidence of a White-Guardist plot existed until 1970 when Paul Avrich produced his study of the revolt and the single document in question clearly does not support the claim that the Whites organised the revolt. Rather, the Whites aimed to use a sailors uprising to further their cause, an uprising which they predicted would occur in the spring with or without them. The predicted revolt **did** take place, but earlier than expected and was not a product of a conspiracy. Indeed, the historian who discovered this document explicitly argues that it proves nothing and that the revolt was spontaneous in nature. All it shows is that Whites were better informed of the alienation of the Kronstadt sailors than the Bolshevik state and its military hierarchies.

The claim that Kronstadt was a White plot cannot be defended with anything but assertions. No evidence exists to back up such claims.

## 7 What was the real relationship of Kronstadt to the Whites?

As we indicated in the [last section](#), the Kronstadt revolt was not a White conspiracy. It was a spontaneous popular revolt from below. However, some Trotskyists still try and smear the revolt by arguing that it was, in fact, really or "objectively" pro-White. We turn to this question now.

We must first stress that the Kronstadters' rejected every offer of help from the National Centre and other obviously pro-White group. Historian Israel Getzler stressed that *"the Kronstadters were extremely resentful of all gestures of sympathy and promises of help coming from the White-Guardist emigres."* He quotes a Red Cross visitor who stated that Kronstadt *"will admit no White political party, no politician, with the exception of the Red Cross."* [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 235] Avrich notes that the Kronstadter's *"passionately hated"* the Whites and that *"both during and afterwards in exile"* they *"indignantly rejected all government accusations of collaboration with counterrevolutionary groups either at home or abroad."* As the Communists themselves acknowledged, no outside aid ever reached the insurgents. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 187, p. 112 and p. 123] In short, there was no relationship between the revolt and the Whites.

It must be noted that the rebels did accept help towards the end of the rebellion from the Russian Red Cross when the food situation had become critical but the fortress fell before any supplies sent. Yet, the Bolsheviks themselves turned to the American Relief Administration and the International Red Cross to fight the famine in the Volga provinces and southern Urals later in 1921 and without whose aid *"millions more would have died."* [S.A. Smith, **Russia in Revolution**, pp. 232-3] This crisis, a direct result of the disastrous Bolsheviks policies as regards the peasantry and food supplies the Kronstadters opposed, also saw the Bolshevik rebuff others of help by left dissidents in favour of the right *"who had bitterly fought the October Revolution. They had repeatedly been arrested as counter-revolutionists, but now they were accepted with open arms as the 'Citizens' Committee.' Every facility was given them in their work: a building, telephones, typists, and the right to publish*

*a paper*" This, though, was short-lived and they were soon *"again denounced as counter-revolutionary, and its leaders exiled to distant parts of the country."* [Emma Goldman, **Living My Life**, vol. 2, pp. 900-1]

While there were no direct links between the rebels and the Whites, there is no denying that the latter **were** extremely happy that Kronstadt had revolted. However, it would be weak politics indeed that based itself on the reactions of reactionaries to evaluate social struggles. If we did then we would have to conclude that the Stalinists were right to crush the 1956 Hungarian revolt and the 1968 Prague Spring. Likewise, we would have to conclude that the overthrow of Stalinism in 1989 was nothing more than a counter-revolution rather than a popular revolt against a specific form of capitalism (namely state capitalism) and, indeed, many orthodox Trotskyists took this position. It smacks of the crude Stalinist amalgam which argued that because fascists and Trotskyists criticised Stalin, this showed that they were somehow linked.

Unsurprisingly, the Kronstadters themselves acknowledged that the Whites were happy to support their actions (indeed, **any** actions against the Bolsheviks) and the danger this represented. However, they noted that this joy was for different reasons than theirs:

*"The . . . Kronstadt sailors and workers have wrested the tiller from the Communists' hands and have taken over the helm . . . Comrades, keep a close eye upon the vicinity of the tiller: enemies are even now trying to creep closer. A single lapse and they will wrest the tiller from you, and the soviet ship may go down to the triumphant laughter from tsarist lackeys and henchmen of the bourgeoisie."*

*"Comrades, right now you are rejoicing in the great, peaceful victory over the Communists' dictatorship. Now, your enemies are celebrating too."*

*"Your grounds for such joy, and theirs, are quite contradictory."*

*"You are driven by a burning desire to restore the authentic power of the soviets, by a noble hope of seeing the worker engage in free labour and the peasant enjoy the right to dispose, on his land, of the produce of his labours. **They** dream of bringing back the tsarist knout and the privileges of the generals."*

*"Your interests are different. They are not fellow travellers with you."*

*"You needed to get rid of the Communists' power over you in order to set about creative work and peaceable construction. Whereas they want to overthrow that power to make the workers and peasants their slaves again."*

*"You are in search of freedom. They want to shackle you as it suits them. Be vigilant! Don't let the wolves in sheep's clothing get near the tiller."* [**No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 2, pp. 187-8]

Of course, this is not enough for the followers of Lenin and Trotsky. John Rees, for example, quotes Paul Avrich to support his assertion that the Kronstadt revolt was, in fact, pro-White. He argues as follows:

*"Paul Avrigh . . . says there is 'undeniable evidence' that the leadership of the rebellion came to an agreement with the Whites after they had been crushed and that 'one cannot rule out the possibility that this was the continuation of a longstanding relationship.'" [Op. Cit., p. 64]*

What Rees **fails** to mention is that Avrigh **immediately** adds "[y]et a careful search has yielded no evidence to support such a belief" before stating that "[n]othing has come to light to show that . . . any links had existed between the emigres and the sailors before the revolt." How strange that Rees fails to quote or even mention Avrigh's conclusion to his own speculation! As for the post-revolt links between the leadership of the rebellion and the Whites, Avrigh correctly argues that "[n]one of this proves that there were any ties between the [National] Centre and the Revolutionary Committee either before or during the revolt. It would seem, rather, that the mutual experience of bitterness and defeat, and a common determination to overthrow the Soviet regime, led them to join hands in the aftermath." [Avrigh, **Op. Cit.**, p. 111 and p. 129] Seeing you friends and fellow toilers murdered by dictators may affect your judgement, unsurprisingly enough.

Let us, however, assume that certain elements in the leadership of the revolt were, in fact, scoundrels. What does this mean when evaluating it?

Firstly, we must point out that this leadership was elected by and under the control of the Conference of Delegates which was, in turn, elected by and under the control of the rank-and-file sailors, soldiers and civilians. This body met regularly during the revolt *"to receive and debate the reports of the Revolutionary Committee and to propose measures and decrees."* [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 217] The actions of the leadership were not independent of the mass of the population and so, regardless of their own agendas, had to work under control from below. In other words, the revolt cannot be reduced to a discussion of whether a few of the leadership were scoundrels or not. Indeed, to do so just reflects the elitism of bourgeois history yet Rees does just that and reduces the Kronstadt revolt and its "ideology" down to just one person (Petrichenko). Perhaps we can evaluate Bolshevism with this method? Or Italian Socialism. After all, influential figures in both these movements ended up making contacts and deals with extremely suspect organisations and acting in ways we (and the movements they sprang from) would oppose. Does that mean we gain an insight into their natures by concentrating on Stalin's or Mussolini's later activities? Or evaluating their revolutionary nature from such individuals? Of course not. Indeed, Rees's article is an attempt to argue that objective circumstances rather than Bolshevism as such lead to Stalinism. Rather than do the same for Kronstadt, he prefers to concentrate on an individual. This indicates a distinctly bourgeois perspective:

*"What passes as socialist history is often only a mirror image of bourgeois historiography, a percolation into the ranks of the working class movement of typically bourgeois methods of thinking. In the world of this type of 'historian' leaders of genius replace the kings and queens of the bourgeois world . . . . The masses never appear independently on the historic stage, making their own history. At best they only 'supply the steam', enabling others to drive the locomotive, as Stalin so delicately put it . . . . This tendency to identify working class history with the history of its organisations, institutions and leaders is not only inadequate -- it reflects a typically bourgeois vision of mankind, divided in almost pre-ordained manner between **the few** who will manage and decide, and **the many**, the malleable mass, incapable of acting consciously on its own behalf . . . . Most histories of the degeneration of the Russian*

*Revolution rarely amount to more than this.*" [Maurice Brinton "Preface to Ida Mett's 'The Kronstadt Commune'", **Op. Cit.**, pp. 18-9]

Secondly, the question is one of whether workers are in struggle and what they aim for and definitely **not** one of whether some of the "leaders" are fine upstanding citizens. Ironically, Trotsky indicates why. In 1934, he had argued "*[a]nyone who had proposed that we not support the British miners' strike of 1926 or the recent large-scale strikes in the United States with all available means on the ground that the leaders of the strikes were for the most part scoundrels, would have been a traitor to the British and American workers.*" ["No Compromise on the Russian Question", **Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement (1934-40)**, p. 539] The same applies to Kronstadt. Even if we assume that some of the leadership or those active in revolt did have links with the National Centre (an assumption we must stress has no evidence to support it), this in no way invalidates the Kronstadt revolt. The movement was not produced by the so-called "leaders" of the revolt but rather came from below and so reflected the demands and politics of those involved. To use an obvious example, if it were proved, as KGB and other soviet sources argued, that some of the leaders of the Hungary uprising of 1956 had CIA links or were CIA agitators, would that make the revolution and its workers' councils somehow invalid? Of course not. If some of the leadership were scoundrels, as Trotsky argued, this does not invalid the revolt itself. Maurice Brinton stated the obvious:

*"During the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 many were the messages of verbal or moral support for the rebels, emanating from the West, piously preaching the virtues of bourgeois democracy or of free enterprise. The objective of those who spoke in these terms were anything but the institution of a classless society. But their support for the rebels remained purely verbal, particularly when it became clear to them what the real objectives of the revolution were . . . The backbone of the Hungarian revolution was the network of workers' councils. Their main demands were for workers' management of production and for a government based on the councils. These facts justified the support of revolutionaries throughout the world . . . The class criterion is the decisive one.*

*"Similar considerations apply to the Kronstadt rebellion. Its core was the revolutionary sailors. Its main objectives were ones with which no real revolutionary could disagree. That others sought to take advantage of the situation is inevitable -- and irrelevant."* ["Preface to Ida Mett's 'The Kronstadt Commune'", **Op. Cit.**, p. 137]

This is recognised in their own way by the Trotskyists themselves. Trotsky used the strike example against those claiming, correctly, that to unconditionally defend the Soviet Union was to give an endorsement to Stalinism. Hence we see him, immediately after the words quoted above, add: "*Exactly the same thing applies to the USSR!*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 539] Wright echoes this with regards to Kronstadt:

*"underlying the mutiny was the expression of the petty bourgeois reaction against the difficulties and privations imposed by the conditions of the proletarian revolution. Nobody can deny this class character of the two camps. All other questions are only of secondary importance. That the Bolsheviks may have committed errors of a general or concrete character, cannot alter the fact that they defended the acquisitions of the proletarian revolution against the bourgeois (and petty bourgeois) reaction. That is why every critic must himself be examined from the standpoint as to which side of the*

*firing line he finds himself. If he closes his eyes to the social and historical content of the Kronstadt mutiny then he is himself an element of petty bourgeois reaction against the proletarian revolution . . . A trade union, say, of agricultural labourers may commit errors in a strike against farmers. We can criticise them but our criticism should be based upon a fundamental solidarity with the worker's trade union and upon our opposition to the exploiters of the workers even if these exploiters happen to be small farmers." ["The Truth about Kronstadt", **Op. Cit.**, p. 112]*

This was written in 1938 in apparent ignorance that Emma Goldman had debunked similar assertions over ten years previously:

*"There is another objection to my criticism on the part of the Communists. Russia is on strike, they say, and it is unethical for a revolutionist to side against the workers when they are striking against their masters. That is pure demagoguery practised by the Bolsheviki to silence criticism.*

*"It is not true that the Russian people are on strike. On the contrary, the truth of the matter is that the Russian people have been **locked out** and that the Bolshevik State -- even as the bourgeois industrial master -- uses the sword and the gun to keep the people out. In the case of the Bolsheviki this tyranny is masked by a world-stirring slogan: thus they have succeeded in blinding the masses. Just because I am a revolutionist I refuse to side with the master class, which in Russia is called the Communist Party." [My **Disillusionment in Russia**, p. xlix]*

So there was a few obvious differences which invalidates the Trotskyist analogy as regards both Stalinism and Kronstadt. First, in both cases there are more than two classes involved -- along with the peasants and workers, there is the bureaucracy. In Russia in 1921 as in 1934, the state and party bureaucracy was oppressing and exploiting the workers. Trade union bureaucrats, for all their faults, are not at a head of a dictatorship defended by troops and secret police. Second, in 1921 as before, the heads of the bureaucratic class had declared martial law and utilised troops, lock-outs and arrests against the striking workers -- a practice continued under Stalin. Trade union bureaucrats are, at best, hesitant to make a strike official and may well sell it out but they rarely call in the armed might of the state against their own members. Third, the regime in Russia in both 1921 and 1934 was a party dictatorship. Strikes are usually run to some degree by the strikers. Fourth, strikes are examples of proletarian direct action which can, and do, get out of control of union structures and bureaucrats. They can be the focal point for creating new forms of working class organisation and power which can end the power of the union bureaucrats and replace it with self-managed strikers assemblies and councils. Both the Bolshevik and Stalinist regimes were organised to repress any attempts at unseating them -- indeed, the Kronstadt revolt was precisely such a rank-and-file movement. In short, Russian state was **not** a form of working class self-defence in even the limited form that trade unions are -- rather, it was as Emma Goldman noted the organ of a new master class. That neither Trotsky nor Wright could see this obvious fact explains why they sided with the bureaucratic reaction against the proletarian revolution -- although as the former was then part of the ruling bureaucracy, this is understandable.

While being more aware of the bureaucratic nature of the Bolshevik regime, John Rees continued this line of attack on Kronstadt:

*"As it became clear that the revolt was isolated Petrichenko was forced to come to terms with the reality of the balance of class forces. On 13 March Petrichenko wired David Grimm, the chief of the National Centre and General Wrangel's official representative in Finland, for help in gaining food. On 16 March Petrichenko accepted an offer of help from Baron P V Vilkin, an associate of Grimm's whom 'the Bolsheviks rightly called a White agent.' None of the aid reached the garrison before it was crushed, but the tide of events was pushing the sailors into the arms of the Whites, just as the latter had always suspected it would." [Op. Cit., p. 64]*

We should note that it was due to the *"food situation in Kronstadt . . . growing desperate"* that Petrichenko contacted Grimm. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 121] If the revolt had spread to Petrograd and the striking workers there, such requests would have been unnecessary. However, as historian V. Brovkin notes, the *"key here is that the Communists suppressed the workers uprising in Petrograd in the first days of March. The sailors' uprising in Kronstadt, which was an outgrowth of the uprising in Petrograd, was now cut off from its larger social base and localised on a small island. From this moment on the Kronstadt sailors were on the defensive."* [**Behind the Lines during the Civil War**, pp. 396-7] So, in a sense, Rees is correct to point to *"the reality of the balance of class forces"* but he fails to appreciate that the bureaucratic class has to be factored in. Isolation was a product of the actions and so power of the state bureaucracy and was due to the reality of the balance of coercive forces -- the Bolshevik state machine had successfully repressed the Petrograd strikes (see [section 10](#)).

So, in his analysis of the *"balance of class forces"*, Rees -- like Trotsky and Wright -- fails to account for the class which had real power (and the related privileges) in Russia at the time -- the state and party bureaucracy. The working class and peasantry were officially powerless and the only influence they exercised in the "workers' and peasants state" was when they rebelled, forcing "their" state to make concessions or to repress them (usually, a combination of both happened). The balance of class forces was between the workers, peasants and ruling bureaucracy. To ignore this class, the ruling class in Russia, means to misunderstand the problems facing the revolution and the Kronstadt revolt itself.

Given that the Bolshevik dictatorship had lied to and suppressed the Petrograd working class, the Kronstadters had few options left as regards aid. Rees's argument smacks of the "logic" of Right as regards the Spanish Civil War, the Cuban revolution and the Sandinistas. Isolated, each of these revolts turned to the Soviet Union for aid thus proving what the Right had always known from the start, namely their objectively Communist nature and their part in the International Communist Conspiracy. Few revolutionaries would evaluate these struggles on such an illogical and narrow basis but Rees wants us to do so with Kronstadt.

Worse, the logic of Rees arguments was used by the Stalinists -- yet it is doubtful he would agree with them that the fact the Hungarian revolution of 1956 called on Western aid against the Red Army shows that it was objectively counter-revolutionary and pro-capitalist, just as the Communist Party bureaucrats had argued. The fact that during that revolt many messages of support for the rebels also preached bourgeois values would also, according to Rees's logic, damn that revolt in the eyes of all socialists. Similarly, the fact that the Polish union **Solidarity** got support from the West against the Stalinist regime does not mean that its struggle was counter-revolutionary. So the arguments used by Rees are identical to those used by Stalinists to support their repression of working class revolt in the Soviet Empire. Indeed, orthodox Trotskyists drew these conclusions and called **Solidarnosc** a company union of the CIA, bankers, the Vatican and Wall Street for capitalist counterrevolution in Poland and

considered the fall of the Soviet Union as a defeat for the working class and socialism, in other words, a counterrevolution. As evidence they pointed to the joy and support each generated in Western elite circles -- and denounced neo-Trotskyists like Rees' party when they, rightly, argued that these were popular revolts against state-capitalist exploitation.

In reality, of course, the fact that others sought to take advantage of these (and other) situations is inevitable and irrelevant. The important thing is whether working class people were in control of the revolt and what the main objectives of it were. By this class criteria, it is clear that the Kronstadt revolt was a **revolutionary** revolt as, like Hungary 1956, the core of the revolt was working people and their councils. It was they who were in control and called the tune. That Whites tried (unsuccessfully) to take advantage of it is as irrelevant to evaluating the Kronstadt revolt as the fact that Stalinists tried (successfully) to take advantage of the Spanish struggle against Fascism.

Lastly, we must comment upon the fact that members of Kronstadt's Revolutionary Committee took refuge in Finland along with "[s]ome 8,000 people (some sailors and the most active part of the civilian population)." [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 172] This was as the Bolsheviks had predicted on March 5th: "*At the last minute, all those generals, the Kozlovskys, the Bourksers, and all that riff raff, the Petrichenkos, and the Tourins will flee to Finland, to the White guards*". [quoted by Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 162] However, this does not indicate any "White guardist" connections for where else **could** they go? The fact that active participants in the revolt ended up in the only place they could end up to avoid death has no bearing to that nature of that revolt nor can it be used as "evidence" of a "white conspiracy."

In short, the attempts of Trotskyists to smear the Kronstadt sailors with having White links have no basis. That the Whites celebrated the revolt is as irrelevant as any warm words expressed towards the Hungarian revolution of 1956 by politicians in the West. Likewise, the actions of some rebels **after** the Bolsheviks had crushed the revolt cannot be used to discredit the revolt itself. The real relationship of the revolt to the Whites is clear. It was one of hatred and opposition.

## 8 Did the rebellion involve new sailors?

The most common Trotskyist assertion to justify the repression of the Kronstadt revolt was first raised by Trotsky. It consists of arguing that the sailors in 1921 were different than those in 1917. Trotsky started this line of justification towards the end of the revolt itself when he stated on March 16th that the Baltic Fleet had been "*inevitably thinned out with respect to personnel*" and so a "*great many of the revolutionary sailors*" of 1917 had been "*transferred*" elsewhere. They had been "*replaced in large measure by accidental elements*" and this had "*facilitated*" the work of the "*counterrevolutionary organisers*" who had "*selected*" Kronstadt. In 1937 and 1938, he repeated this claim. [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 68-9, p. 79, p. 81 and p. 87]

His followers have repeated his assertions since. Wright suggested that "*the personnel of the fortress could not possibly have remained static throughout the years between 1917 and 1921*" and doubted that the revolutionary sailors of 1917 could have remained behind in the fortress while their comrades fought the Whites. [ "*The Truth about Kronstadt*", **Op. Cit.**, pp. 122-3] John Rees, continuing this line of rationale, argued that "*the composition of the garrison had changed . . . it seems likely that the peasants had increased their weight in the*

*Kronstadt, as Trotsky suggested.*" [Rees, **Op. Cit.**, p. 61] In short, the revolutionary sailors of 1917 had been replaced by peasant conscripts in 1921. What are we to make of these claims?

First, we must note that this defence is completely irrelevant. If, as the Bolsheviks claimed, the revolt was a White plot or have led to a White counter-revolution then whether the sailors of 1921 had been there in 1917 is beside the point. Even if it were proven categorically that the bulk of the sailors had been revolutionary veterans the Bolsheviks would still have crushed the rebellion and their supporters would still justify this act. At best, this defence amounts to the unstated assumption that the revolutionary sailors of 1917 would have been either completely indifferent to, or supportive of, the Bolshevik repression of the Petrograd strikes in 1921. This, to say the least, seems unlikely but it suggests that for Leninists the highest expression of class consciousness is identical to the lowest once they are in power.

Second, we have to determine what are the facts as regards the social composition and turnover of personnel in Kronstadt. Thanks to research by academics, this can be done and the evidence is clear -- the bulk of the sailors in 1921 were veterans from 1917. Given this conclusion, it may come as no surprise to discover that these sources have been misused by Trotskyists and we will, after presenting the evidence, discuss this in order to indicate how far they will abuse the truth.

Academic Evan Mawdsley concludes that *"it seems reasonable to challenge the previous interpretation"* that there had been a *"marked change in the composition of the men in the fleet . . . particularly . . . at the Kronstadt Naval Base."* From the *"statistical data, it would appear that the situation in the DOT [Active Detachment] was"* that *"the majority of men have been veterans of 1917 . . . and available information indicates that as many as three-quarters of the DOT ratings -- the Kronstadt mutineers -- had served in the fleet at least since the World War."* The data suggests *"for the DOT as a whole on 1 January 1921, 23.5% could have been drafted before 1911, 52% from 1911 to 1918 and 24.5% after 1918."* In terms of the two battleships whose sailors played the leading role in 1921 revolt, the Petropavlovsk and the Sevastopol, he shows that *"at the time of the uprising"* of the 2,028 sailors, 20.2% were recruited into the navy before 1914, 59% joined in the years 1914-16, 14% in 1917 and 6.8% in the years 1918-21. So 93.2% of the sailors who launched the revolt in 1921 had been there in 1917. In short, the *"majority of men seem to have been veterans of 1917"*. [*The Baltic Fleet and the Kronstadt Mutiny*, pp. 506-521, **Soviet Studies**, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 508-9] Thus:

*"Although the number of ratings in the Baltic Fleet as a whole rose by 1 December 1920 to 24,914 -- still 1,079 below the establishment -- the basic composition of the DOT did not change greatly. The important point is that the 10,000 new recruits were trainees, not replacements . . . and these men were in training depots in Petrograd, not at Kronstadt; furthermore, as at 1 December only 1,313 of a planned total of 10,384 had arrived. It also seems unlikely that the new volunteers could have been appeared in large numbers by the end of February 1921; those that did were probably in Petrograd and not aboard the ships of the DOT . . . [and so] remobilisation, difficulties in finding suitable replacements . . . [meant] that as many as three-quarters of the DOT ratings -- the Kronstadt mutineers -- had served in the fleet at least since the World War."*

*"By the time of the rising the demobilisation of the older classes had hardly begun . . . The composition of the DOT had not fundamentally changed, and anarchistic young*

*peasants did not predominate there. The available data suggest that the main difficulty was not . . . that the experienced sailors were being demobilised. Rather, they were not being demobilized rapidly enough.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 509-10]

Another academic, Israel Getzler in his excellent account of Kronstadt during the revolution, also investigated this issue and presented identical conclusions. He demonstrated that of those serving in the Baltic fleet on 1st January 1921 at least 75.5% were drafted before 1918. Over 80% were from Great Russian areas, 10% from the Ukraine and 9% from Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Poland. He argues that the *"veteran politicised Red sailor still predominated in Kronstadt at the end of 1920"* and presents more *"hard statistical data"* like that just quoted by also investigating the crews of the two main battleships, the **Petropavlovsk** and the **Sevastopol**, showing like Mawdsley that of the 2,028 sailors whose years of enlistment are known, only 6.8% were recruited in the years 1918-21 (including three who were conscripted in 1921) and they were the only ones who had not been there during the 1917 revolution. [Kronstadt 1917-1921, pp. 207-8]

Historian Fedotoff-White also noted that *"a good many"* of the rebels *"had had ample experience in organisational and political work since 1917. A number had long-standing associations with Anarchists and the Socialist Revolutionaries of the Left"*. The cruiser **Rossia** joined in the decision to re-elect the Kronstadt Soviet and its *"crew consisted mostly of old seamen."* [The Growth of the Red Army, p. 155 and p. 138] Moreover, the majority of the revolutionary committee were veterans of the Kronstadt Soviet and the October revolution. [Ida Mett, Op. Cit., p. 42] While obviously not a miniature of the 1917 Baltic Fleet, the available information indicates that by length of service the sailors of Kronstadt in 1921 had been there since 1917 -- including the sailors manning the battleships which were *"the powder kegs of the rising."* Moreover, *"[g]iven their maturity and experience, not to speak of their keen disillusionment as former participants in the revolution, it was only natural that these seasoned bluejackets should be thrust into the forefront of the uprising."* [Avrich, Kronstadt 1921, p. 93 and p. 91]

So Getzler was right to conclude that it was *"certainly the case"* that the *"activists of the 1921 uprising had been participants of the 1917 revolutions"* for the *"1,900 veteran sailors of the Petropavlovsk and the Sevastopol who spearheaded it. It was certainly true of a majority of the Revolutionary Committee and of the intellectuals . . . Likewise, at least three-quarters of the 10,000 to 12,000 sailors -- the mainstay of the uprising -- were old hands who had served in the navy through war and revolution."* [Op. Cit., p. 226] As Paul Avrich notes in a review of Getzler's book:

*"Getzler draws attention to the continuity in institutions, ideology, and personnel linking 1921 with 1917. In doing so he demolishes the allegation of Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders that the majority of veteran Red sailors had, in the course of the Civil War, been replaced by politically retarded peasant recruits from the Ukraine and Western borderlands, thereby diluting the revolutionary character of the Baltic fleet. He shows, on the contrary, that no significant change had taken place in the fleet's political and social composition, that at least three-quarters of the sailors on active duty in 1921 had been drafted before 1918 and were drawn predominantly from Great Russian areas."* [Soviet Studies, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 139-40]

This is not the end of the matter. A report by Vasilii Sevei, Plenipotentiary of the Special Section of the **Vecheka**, dated March 7th, 1921, stated that a *"large majority"* of the sailors

of Baltic Fleet *"were and still are professional revolutionaries and could well form the basis for a possible third revolution."* He notes that the *"disease from which they suffer has been too long neglected."* What is significant about this social-political profile of the *"large majority"* of sailors was that it was **not** written in response of the Kronstadt revolt but that it was formulated well before. As its author put it in the report, *"I stated these views more than a month ago in my memorandum to comrade Krestinskii"* (then secretary of the Communist Party). And the recipient of this March 7th, 1921, report? Leon Trotsky. [quoted by Israel Getzler, *"The Communist Leaders' Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents"*, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 32-3]

It should also be noted that Stalinist works on the Kronstadt Rebellion tried to prove that the Red Sailors of 1917 had been replaced by 1921. As one historian notes: *"Statistical arguments used by these authors are not convincing. They show that the actual proportion of peasants serving in the Baltic Navy in 1921 was at that time rather smaller than the proportion of peasants in the Red Army in the same year."* [George Katkov, **Op. Cit.**, p. 21] This places Trotsky's assertion that the *"workers who marched over the ice against the fortress represented the proletarian revolution"* while the *"sailors in revolt represented the peasant Thermidor"* in context. [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 82] Perhaps, for Trotskyists, this explains the fact that the *"ordinary Red Army soldiers . . . were reluctant and unreliable fighters against Red Kronstadt, although driven at gunpoint onto the ice and into battle"?* [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 243]

Needless to say, this statistical information was unavailable when libertarians wrote their accounts of the uprising. All they could go on were the facts of the uprising itself and the demands of the rebels. Based on these, it is little wonder that anarchists like Alexander Berkman stressed the continuity between the Red Kronstadters of 1917 and the rebels of 1921. Firstly, the rebels in 1921 took action in **solidarity** with the striking workers in Petrograd. In the words of Emma Goldman, it was *"after the report of their Committee of the real state of affairs among the workers in Petrograd that the Kronstadt sailors did in 1921 what they had done in 1917. They immediately made common cause with the workers. The part of the sailors in 1917 was hailed as the red pride and glory of the Revolution. Their identical part in 1921 was denounced to the whole world as counter-revolutionary treason"* by the Bolsheviks. [*"Trotsky Protests Too Much"*, **Op. Cit.** p. 259] Secondly, their demands were thoroughly in-line with the aspirations and politics of 1917 and clearly showed a socialist awareness and analysis. Thirdly, Emma Goldman spoke to some of those wounded in the attack on Kronstadt. She records how one *"had realised that he had been duped by the cry of 'counter-revolution.' There were no Tsarist generals in Kronstadt, no White Guardists -- he found only his own comrades, sailors and soldiers who had heroically fought for the Revolution."* [**My Disillusionment in Russia**, pp. 199-200] Similarly, Ante Ciliga quoted the testimony regarding Kronstadt of a fellow political prisoner in Soviet Russia: *"It is a myth that, from the social point of view, Kronstadt of 1921 had a wholly different population from that of 1917," [a] man from Petrograd, Dv., said to me in prison. In 1921 he was a member of the Communist youth, and was imprisoned in 1932 as a 'decist' (a member of Saponov's group of 'Democratic Centralists')."* [*"The Kronstadt Revolt"*, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 335-6] Hence Goldman:

*"Now, I do not presume to argue what the Kronstadt sailors were in 1918 or 1919. I did not reach Russia until January, 1920. From that time on until Kronstadt was 'liquidated' the sailors of the Baltic fleet were held up as the glorious example of valour and unflinching courage. Time on end I was told not only by Anarchists,*

*Mensheviks and social revolutionists, but by many Communists, that the sailors were the very backbone of the Revolution. On the 1st of May, 1920, during the celebration and the other festivities organised for the first British Labour Mission, the Kronstadt sailors presented a large clear-cut contingent, and were then pointed out as among the great heroes who had saved the Revolution from Kerensky, and Petrograd from Yudenich. During the anniversary of October the sailors were again in the front ranks, and their re-enactment of the taking of the Winter Palace was wildly acclaimed by a packed mass.*

*"Is it possible that the leading members of the party, save Leon Trotsky, were unaware of the corruption and the demoralisation of Kronstadt, claimed by him? I do not think so. Moreover, I doubt whether Trotsky himself held this view of the Kronstadt sailors until March, 1921. His story must, therefore, be an afterthought, or is it a rationalisation to justify the senseless 'liquidation' of Kronstadt?" ["Trotsky Protests Too Much", **Op. Cit.**, pp. 257-8]*

In short, the continuity between the sailors of 1917 and 1921 could be seen from their actions (rising in solidarity with the Petrograd workers) and in their politics (as expressed in their demands and in their paper). The later research has just confirmed what is obvious from an analysis of such facts, namely that the rebels in 1921 were acting in the spirit of their comrades of 1917 and this implies a significant continuity in personnel (which perhaps explains the unwillingness of Leninists to mention that the revolt was in solidarity with the strikers or the demands of the rebels). The empirical evidence available supports the political analysis of the revolt conducted by revolutionaries like Berkman, Voline, Goldman and Ciliga.

So academic research refutes the claims of Trotskyists since Trotsky suggested that Kronstadt had "*been completely emptied of proletarian elements*" as "*[a]ll the sailors*" belonging to the ships' crews "*had become commissars, commanders, chairmen of local soviets.*" Later, realising the stupidity of this claim, he changed it to Kronstadt being "*denuded of all revolutionary forces*" by "*the winter of 1919.*" He also acknowledged that "*a certain number of qualified workers and technicians*" remained to "*take care of the machinery*" but these were "*politically unreliable*" as proven by the fact they had not been selected to fight in the civil war. As evidence, he mentions that he had wired a "*request at the end of 1919, or in 1920, to 'send a group of Kronstadt sailors to this or that point'*" and they had answered "*No one left to send.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 87, p. 90 and p. 81] Obviously, the Communist commander at Kronstadt had left his fortress and its ships totally unmanned! Such common sense is sadly lacking from Trotsky and the evidence does not support his claims.

Moreover, does this claim not also apply to the Communist Party membership at Kronstadt? Is Trotsky **really** arguing that the Bolsheviks in Kronstadt after the winter of 1919 were not revolutionary? Given that the bulk of them had joined the party during or after this time, we must obviously conclude that the recruiters let anyone join. Moreover, there had been a "*rigorous local purge*" of the party conducted in the autumn of 1920 by the commander of the Baltic Fleet. [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 211 and p. 205] Must we also conclude that this purge did not have revolutionary politics as a factor when determining whether a party member should be expelled or not?

Trotsky claims too much. There are two possibilities. The first is that the Kronstadt Communist Party was not revolutionary and was made up of politically backward individuals, careerists and so on. If that were the case in Kronstadt then it must also have been the case elsewhere in Russia and this discredits any attempt to argue that the Bolshevik party dictatorship was revolutionary. The second is that it **did** have revolutionary elements. If so, then the fact that hundreds of these members left the party during the revolt and only a minority opposed it makes the claim that the rebellion was "counter-revolutionary" difficult (indeed, impossible) to maintain. Of the around 2,000 members of the Communist Party in Kronstadt, some 500 officially resigned along nearly 300 candidate members. Trotsky later estimated that 30% of the party in Kronstadt took an active part in the revolt while 30% remained neutral. [Avrich, **Kronstadt 1921**, tp. 183-4] This shows that Trotsky's claims that Kronstadt was denuded of revolutionary elements were false.

J.G. Wright, as noted above, thought that it was "*impossible*" to believe that the sailors of 1917 could leave their comrades to fight the Whites while they stayed at Kronstadt. [ "*The Truth About Kronstadt*", **Op. Cit.**, pp. 122-3] This may have been a valid argument **if** the Soviet armed forces were democratically run. However, as we indicated in [section 2](#), it was organised in a typically bourgeois fashion. Trotsky had abolished democratic soldiers and sailors councils and the election of officers in favour of appointed officers and hierarchical, top-down, military structures. This meant that the sailors would have stayed in Kronstadt if they had been ordered to -- and probably shot if they had not followed those orders. The fact that they had to defend Petrograd combined with the level of technical knowledge and experience required to operate the battleships and defences at Kronstadt would have meant that many of the sailors of 1917 would have been irreplaceable and so had to remain at Kronstadt. This is what, in fact, did happen:

*"One reason for the remarkable survival in Kronstadt of these veteran sailors, albeit in greatly diminished numbers, was precisely the difficulty of training, in war-time conditions, a new generation competent in the sophisticated technical skills required of Russia's ultra-modern battleships, and, indeed, in the fleet generally." [Op. Cit., p. 208]*

We should also note here that "*by the end of 1919 thousands of veteran sailors, who had served on many fronts of the civil war and in the administrative network of the expanding Soviet state, had returned to the Baltic Fleet and to Kronstadt, most by way of remobilisation.*" [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 197-8] Thus the idea that any sailors who had been ordered away did not come back is not a valid one.

Trotsky obviously felt that this argument of changing social composition of the sailors would hold more water than claims White Guards organised it and he continued this theme:

*"The best, most self-sacrificing sailors were completely withdrawn from Kronstadt and played an important role at the fronts and in the local soviets throughout the country. What was left was the grey mass with big pretensions ('We are from Kronstadt'), but without the political education and unprepared for revolutionary sacrifice. The country was starving. The Kronstadters demanded privileges. The uprising was dictated by a desire to get privileged food rations." [Lenin and Trotsky, Op. Cit., p. 79]*

This was Trotsky's first comment on the uprising for 16 years and, as Ida Mett notes, "[s]uch a demand was never put forward by the men of Kronstadt" and so Trotsky "started his public accusations with a lie." [Op. Cit., p. 191] He repeated the claim again, six months later [Lenin and Trotsky, Op. Cit., p. 92] Unfortunately for him, the opposite was the case: point 9 of the Kronstadt demands explicitly called for an end of privileges by the "equalisation of rations for all workers." This was implemented during the uprising.

As an aside, Trotsky later stated that "[w]hen conditions became very critical in hungry Petrograd, the Political Bureau more than once discussed the possibility of securing an 'internal loan' from Kronstadt, where a quantity of old provisions still remained. But delegates of the Petrograd workers answered: 'You will get nothing from them by kindness. They speculate in cloth, coal, and bread. At present in Kronstadt every kind of ruffraff has raised its head.'" [Lenin and Trotsky, Op. Cit., pp. 87-8] As Ida Mett pointed out, "[w]e should add that before the insurrection these 'stores' were in the hands of communist functionaries and that it was upon these people alone that consent to the proposed 'loan' depended. The rank and file sailor, who took part in the insurrection, had no means open to him whereby he could have opposed the loan, even if he had wanted to." [Op. Cit., p. 193] If Trotsky's words were true, then they were a crushing indictment of the Bolshevik regime and **not** the Kronstadt rebels.

As for Trotsky's claim of a lack of political education and unwillingness for sacrifice, the 15 point resolution voted upon by the sailors exposes this as nonsense and the fact the sailors fought the Red Army to the end indicates that they were prepared to die for their ideals. Similarly, his argument that "in 1917-18, the Kronstadt sailor stood considerably higher than the average level of the Red Army" but by 1921 they "stood . . . on a level considerably lower, in general, than the average level of the Red Army" but, as we indicate in [section 9](#), the political programme of the revolt was fundamentally the same as the dominant ideas within Kronstadt during 1917. [Op. Cit., p. 87] More, we should note that the Kronstadt rebels opposed the introduction of wage labour, a basic socialist idea and one raised in 1917 by anarchists and others, while this was missing from the Bolshevik's NEP policies. This shows clear continuity between 1921 and 1917 and, moreover, the mass meeting that agreed the resolution did so unanimously, meaning old and new sailors agreed to it. So much for Trotsky's assertions.

Now we turn to the misuse of these sources to support their case. This indicates well the nature of Bolshevik ethics. "While the revolutionaries," argued Ciliga with regards to the Bolsheviks, "remaining such only in words, accomplished in fact the task of the reaction and counter-revolution, they were compelled, inevitably, to have recourse to lies, to calumny and falsification." ["The Kronstadt Revolt", Op. Cit., p. 335] Defending these acts also pays its toll on those who follow this tradition, as we shall see.

Needless to say, such evidence as provided by Avrich and Getzler is rarely mentioned by supporters of Bolshevism. However, rather than ignore these works, the Trotskyists use them in their own way, for their own purposes -- indeed, both Paul Avrich's **Kronstadt 1921** and Getzler's **Kronstadt 1917-1921** have been used to support pro-Bolshevist conclusions when, in fact, they do the opposite. The misuse of these references is quite unbelievable and shows the mentality of Trotskyism well.

Pierre Frank, for example argues that Avrich's work has "conclusions" which are "similar to Trotsky's" and "confirms the changes in the composition of the Kronstadt garrison that took

place during the civil war, although with a few reservations." [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 25] A quick look at these reservations shows how false Frank is. It is worth quoting Avrich at length to show this:

*"There can be little doubt that during the Civil War years a large turnover had indeed taken place within the Baltic Fleet, and that many of the old-timers had been replaced by conscripts from rural districts who brought with them the deeply felt discontent of the Russian peasantry. By 1921, according to official figures, more than three-quarters of the sailors were of peasant origin, a substantially higher proportion than in 1917 . . . Yet this does not necessarily mean that the behavioural patterns of the fleet had undergone any fundamental change. On the contrary, alongside the technical ratings, who were largely drawn from the working class, there had always been a large and unruly peasant element among the sailors . . . Indeed, in 1905 and 1917 it was these very youths from the countryside who had given Kronstadt its reputation as a hotbed of revolutionary extremism. And throughout the Civil War the Kronstadters had remained an independent and headstrong lot, difficult to control and far from constant in their support for the government. It was for this reason so many of them . . . had found themselves transferred to new posts remote from the centres of Bolshevik powers. Of those who remained, many hankered for the freedoms they had won in 1917 before the new regime began to establish its one-party dictatorship throughout the country.*

*"Actually, there was little to distinguish the old-timers from the recent recruits in their midst. Both groups were largely of peasant background . . . Not unexpectedly, when the rebellion finally erupted, it was the older seamen, veterans of many years of service (dating in some cases before the First World War) who took the lead . . . Given their maturity and experience, not to speak of their keen disillusionment as former participants of the revolution, it was only natural that these seasoned bluejackets should be thrust into the forefront of the uprising . . . The proximity of Petrograd, moreover, with its intense intellectual and political life, had contributed towards sharpening their political awareness, and a good many had engaged in revolutionary activity during 1917 and after. . .*

*"As late as the autumn of 1920, Emma Goldman recalled, the sailors were still held up by the Communists themselves as a glowing example of valour and unflinching courage; on November 7, the third anniversary of the Bolshevik seizure of power, they were in the front ranks of the celebrations . . . No one at the time spoke of any 'class degeneration' at Kronstadt. The allegation that politically retarded **muzhiks** had diluted the revolutionary character of the fleet, it would seem, was largely a device to explain away dissident movements among the sailors, and had been used as such as early as October 1918, following the abortive mutiny at the Petrograd naval station, when the social composition of the fleet could not yet have undergone any sweeping transformation." [Kronstadt 1921, pp. 89-92]*

As can be seen, Avrich's "few reservations" are such as to make clear he does **not** share Trotsky's "conclusions" as regards the class make-up of Kronstadt and, indeed, noted the ideological bias in it.

Moreover, Avrich points to earlier revolts which the Bolsheviks had also explained in terms of a diluting of the revolutionary sailors of the Baltic Fleet by peasants. In April 1918 "the

crews of several Baltic vessels passed a strongly worded resolution" which "went so far as to call for a general uprising to dislodge the Bolsheviks and install a new regime that would adhere more faithfully to the principles of the revolution." In October that year, "a mass meeting at the Petrograd naval base adopted a resolution" which included the sailors going "on record against the Bolshevik monopoly of political power. Condemning the suppression of the anarchists and opposition socialists, they called for free elections to the soviets" and "denounced the compulsory seizure of grain." Their demands, as Avrich notes, "strikingly anticipated the Kronstadt programme of 1921, down to the slogans of 'free soviets' and 'Away with the commissarocracy.'" He stresses that a "glance at the behaviour of the Baltic Fleet from 1905 to 1921 reveals many elements of continuity." [Op. Cit., pp. 63-4] Frank's selective quoting should be sufficient to dismiss his arguments.

However, an even worse example of Trotskyist betrayal of the truth is provided by the British SWP's John Rees. The evidence Rees musters for the claim that the "composition" of the Kronstadt sailors "had changed" between 1917 and 1921 is a useful indication of the general Leninist method when it comes to the Russian revolution. Rees argues as follows:

*"In September and October 1920 the writer and Bolshevik party lecturer Ieronymus Yasinsky 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'." [Op. Cit., p. 61]*

This quote is referenced to Israel Getzler's **Kronstadt 1917-1921**. Rees account is a fair version of the first half of Yasinskys' report. However, Getzler 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 inexperienced, 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.'" [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 207]*

Rees handy 'editing' of this quote transforms it from one showing that three months before the rising that Kronstadt had retained its revolutionary spirit to one implying the garrison had indeed been replaced.

Rees also tries to generate "[f]urther evidence of the changing class composition" by looking at the "social background of the Bolsheviks at the base." What is the basis of Rees "further evidence"? Simply that in "September 1920, six months before the revolt, the Bolsheviks had 4,435 members at Kronstadt. Some 50 per cent of these were peasants, 40 percent workers and 10 percent intellectuals . . . Thus the percentage of peasants in the party was considerably higher than nationally . . . If we **assume** that the Bolshevik party was more working class in composition than the base as a whole, then it seems **likely** that the peasants had increased their weight in the Kronstadt, as Trotsky suggested." [our emphasis, **Op. Cit.**,

p. 61] So on the basis of an assumption, it may be "*likely*" that Trotsky was correct: impressive "*evidence*" indeed.

The figures Rees uses are extracted from D. Fedotoff-White's **The Growth of the Red Army**. Significantly, Rees fails to mention that the Kronstadt communists had just undergone a "*re-registration*" which saw about a quarter of the 4,435 members in August 1920 voluntarily resigning. By March 1921, the party had half as many members as in the previous August and during the rebellion 497 members (again, about one-quarter of the total membership) voluntarily resigned, 211 were excluded after the defeat of the rebellion and 137 did not report for re-registration. [Fedotoff-White, **Op. Cit.**, p. 140] It seems strange that the party leadership had not taken the opportunity to purge the Kronstadt party of "excessive" peasant influence in August 1920 when it had the chance.

Other questions arise from Rees' argument. He uses the figures of Communist Party membership in an attempt to prove that the class composition of Kronstadt had changed, favouring the peasantry over the workers. Yet this is illogical. Kronstadt was primarily a military base and so its "class composition" would be skewed accordingly. Since the Bolshevik military machine was made up mostly of peasants, can we be surprised that the Communist Party in Kronstadt had a higher percentage of peasants than the national average? Significantly, Rees does not ponder the fact that the percentage of workers in the Kronstadt Communist Party was around the national average (indeed, Fedotoff-White notes that it "*compares favourably in that respect with some of the large industrial centres.*" [Op. Cit., p. 142]).

Also, given that Rees acknowledges that by December 1920 only 1,313 new recruits had arrived in the Baltic Fleet, his pondering of the composition of the Communist organisation at Kronstadt smacks more of desperation than serious analysis. By arguing that we "*do not know how many more new recruits arrived in the three months before Kronstadt erupted,*" Rees fails to see that this shows the irrelevance of his statistical analysis. [Op. Cit., p. 61] After all, how many of these "*new recruits*" would be allowed to join the Communist Party in the first place? Given that the Bolshevik membership had halved between August 1920 and March 1921, his analysis is simply pointless, a smokescreen to draw attention away from the weakness of his own case. Moreover, as evidence of **changing** class composition these figures are not very useful. This is because they do not compare the composition of the Kronstadt Bolsheviks in 1917 to those in 1921. Given that the Kronstadt base always had a high percentage of peasants in its ranks, it follows that in 1917 the percentage of Bolsheviks of peasant origin could have been higher than normal as well. If this were the case, then Rees' argument falls. Simply put, he is not comparing the appropriate figures.

It would have been very easy for Rees to inform his readers of the real facts concerning the changing composition of the Kronstadt garrison. He could have quoted Getzler's work on this subject. As noted above, Getzler 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. Or, then again, he could have reported Samuel Farber's summary of Getzler's (and others) evidence. Rees rather lamely notes that Farber "*does not look at the figures for the composition of the Bolsheviks*" [Op. Cit., p. 62] Why should he when he has the appropriate figures for the sailors? Here is Farber's account of the facts:

*"this [Trotsky's class composition] interpretation has failed to meet the historical test of the growing and relatively recent scholarship on the Russian Revolution . . . In fact, in 1921, a smaller proportion of Kronstadt sailors were of peasant social origin than was the case of the Red Army troops supporting the government . . . recently published data strongly suggest that the class composition of the ships and naval base had probably remained unchanged since before the Civil War. We now know that, given the war-time difficulties of training new people in the technical skills required in Russia's ultra-modern battleships, very few replacements had been sent to Kronstadt to take the place of the dead and injured sailors. Thus, at the end of the Civil War in late 1920, no less than 93.9 per cent of the members of the crews of the **Petropavlovsk** and the **Sevastopol** . . . were recruited into the navy before and during the 1917 revolutions. In fact, 59 per cent of these crews joined the navy in the years 1914-16, while only 6.8 per cent had been recruited in the years 1918-21 . . . of the approximately 10,000 recruits who were supposed to be trained to replenish the Kronstadt garrison, only a few more than 1,000 had arrived by the end of 1920, and those had been stationed not in Kronstadt, but in Petrograd, where they were supposed to be trained."* [Before Stalinism, pp. 192-3]

Yet Rees bemoans Farber for not looking at the Bolshevik membership figures! Yes, assumptions and likely conclusions drawn from assumptions are more important than hard statistical evidence.

After stating "if, for the sake of argument, we accept Sam Farber's interpretation of the evidence" (evidence Rees refuses to inform the reader of) Rees then tries to save his case. He states Farber's "point only has any validity if we take the statistics in isolation. But in reality this change [!] in composition acted on a fleet whose ties with the peasantry had recently been strengthened in other ways. In particular, the Kronstadt sailors had recently been granted leave for the first time since the civil war. Many returned to their villages and came face to face with the condition of the countryside and the trials of the peasantry faced with food detachments." [Op. Cit., p. 62] Yet such an argument has **nothing to do with Rees original case**. Let us not forget that he argued that the **class** composition of the garrison had changed, **not** that its **political** composition had changed. Faced with overwhelming evidence against his case, he not only does not inform his readers of it, he changes his original argument. Very impressive.

So, what of this argument? Hardly an impressive one. Let us not forget that the revolt came about in response to the wave of strikes in Petrograd, **not** a peasant revolt. Moreover, the demands of the revolt predominantly reflected worker demands, **not** peasant ones (as noted in [section 4](#), Rees himself acknowledged that the Kronstadt demands were not reproduced by any peasant insurrection). The political aspects of these ideas reflected the political traditions of Kronstadt, which were not, in the main, Bolshevik. The sailors supported soviet power in 1917, not party power, and they again raised that demand in 1921. In other words, the **political** composition of the garrison was the same as in 1917 (see [section 9](#)). Rees is clearly clutching at straws.

The fact that the class composition of the sailors was similar in 1917 and in 1921 **and** that the bulk of the sailors at the heart of the revolt were veterans of 1917, means that Trotskyists can only fall back on their ideological definition of class. This perspective involves defining a specific "proletarian" political position (i.e. the politics of Bolshevism) and arguing that anyone who does not subscribe to that position is "petty-bourgeois" regardless of their actual

position in society (i.e. their class position). As Ida Mett suggests, "[w]hen Trotsky asserts that all those supporting the government were genuinely proletarian and progressive, whereas all others represented the peasant counterrevolution, we have a right to ask of him that he present us with a serious factual analysis in support of his contention." [Op. Cit., p. 195]

Given the political aspects of the Kronstadt demands we can safely argue that even if the rebellion had been the work of recent recruits they obviously had been influenced by the veteran sailors who remained. They, like the peasant-workers of 1905 and 1917, would have been able to raise their own political demands and ideas while, at the same time, listening to those among them with more political experience. Unsurprisingly, this is what did happen.

Rees, while studiously ignoring the hard data provided by Gelzter and repeated by Farber, comments that while we did not know the composition of the sailors, we did "know about the composition of some of the other units based at Kronstadt, like the 2,5000 Ukrainians of the 160th Rifle Regiment, recruited from areas particularly friendly to the Makhno guerrillas and with less than 2 percent of Bolsheviks in its ranks." [Op. Cit., p. 61] In other words, we know the origin of **one** other unit at Kronstadt, not the class "composition" of "some of the other units" there. Ignoring this, there are a few issues with Rees's use of this fact. First, Rees gained his information on the 160th Rifle Regiment from Fedotoff-White's work but does not think it important to note that he also indicated that Communists numbered less than 2 per cent of metal-workers in Petrograd and only 4 per cent of 2,200 employed in metal works in Moscow. [Fedotoff-White, Op. Cit., p. 132] As such the low figure for Communists in the 160th Rifle Regiment does not tell us much about its class composition. Second, as Fedotoff-White notes, while "the soldiers were also disaffected and had no love of the Communists and the commissars," they were "unable to formulate their grievances clearly and delineate the issues at stake . . . They did not have it in them to formulate a plan of action. All that was done at Kronstadt was the work of the bluejackets [the sailors], who were the backbone of the movement." If, as Rees argues, that new recruits explain the uprising, then how can he explain the differences between the army and navy? He cannot. The difference can be explained only in terms of what Rees is at pains to deny, namely the existence and influence of sailors who had been there since 1917. As Fedotoff-White speculates, "the younger element among the seamen" would "easily [fall] under the spell of the . . . older men they served with on board ships" and of the "large number of old-ex-sea men, employed in the industrial enterprises of Kronstadt." He notes that "a good many" of the rebels "had had ample experience in organisational and political work since 1917. A number had long-standing associations with Anarchists and the Socialist Revolutionaries of the Left." Thus the "survival of the libertarian pattern of 1917 . . . made it possible for the bluejackets not only to formulate, but carry out a plan of action, no doubt under a certain amount of influence of the Anarchists, and those who had left the party in such great numbers during the September 1920 re-registration." [Op. Cit., pp. 154-5]

Rees, needless to say, ignores all this and how it shows the political and personnel continuity of the Kronstadt rebellion. Ultimately, though, the assumption that the sailors could not raise revolutionary political demands if they were "raw recruits" only makes sense if we subscribe to Lenin's dictum that the working class, by its own efforts, can only reach a trade union consciousness (i.e. that toiling people cannot liberate themselves). The bulk of the sailors at the start of 1921 had been there since 1917 but even if this were not the case and we assume that a majority of the sailors at Kronstadt were recent recruits, does this invalidate the rebellion? Of course not. After all, the Red sailors of 1917 were once raw recruits. They had

become politicised over time by debate, discussion and struggle. So had the workers in Petrograd and elsewhere. Would Leninists have denounced strikers in 1905 or 1917 if it were discovered that most of them were recent peasant arrivals in the city? Of course not -- they do so with regards to Kronstadt only because the rebels in question are facing Lenin and Trotsky.

Ironically, the Bolsheviks were simply repeating old Menshevik arguments once raised against them. Between 1910 and 1914, the industrial workforce in Russia grew from 1,793,000 workers to 2,400,000. At the same time, the influence of the Bolsheviks grew at Menshevik expense which the latter considered as *"consequence of the changes that were taking place in the character of urban Russia"* with peasants joining the labour force. ["Introduction", **The Mensheviks in the Russian Revolution**, Abraham Archer (ed.), p. 24] The Mensheviks argued that the Bolsheviks gained their influence from such worker-peasant industrial *"raw recruits"* and not from the genuine working class. [Orlando Figes, **A People's Tragedy**, p. 830] As Robert Service noted, *"Menshevik critics were fond of carping that most Bolshevik newcomers were young lads fresh from the villages and wanting in long experience of industrial life and political activity. It was not completely unknown for Bolshevik spokesmen to come close to admitting this."* [**The Bolshevik Party in Revolution**, p. 44] It was the industrial "raw recruits" who took part in the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, helping to raise and formulate demands as well as organising soviets, strikes and demonstrations and raising slogans which were to the left of the Bolsheviks. Does this process somehow grind to a halt when these "raw recruits" oppose the vanguard party? Of course not.

In short, this Trotsky inspired sociology has been debunked -- and misses the point. Sadly, we have to address it in order to refute common-place Leninist arguments against Kronstadt and expose how willing they are to selectively quote from the sources they use. As we show in the [next section](#), the political composition of the Kronstadt rebels, like their class composition, was basically unchanged in 1921 when compared to that which pre-dominated in 1917.

## 9 Was Kronstadt different politically in 1921?

As we indicated in the [last section](#), over 90% of the Kronstadt sailors on the two battleships which were the catalyst for the rebellion for whom years of enlistment are known had been there since 1917. However, given that most Leninists mean "support the party" by the term "class consciousness," it is useful to compare the political perspectives of Kronstadt in 1917 to that raised in the 1921 revolt. As will soon become clear, the political ideas expressed in 1921 were essentially similar to those popular in 1917. This similarly also proves the continuity between the Red sailors of 1917 and the rebels of 1921.

Kronstadt in 1917 was **never** dominated by the Bolsheviks, they were always a minority and a *"radical populist coalition of Maximalists and Left SRs held sway, albeit precariously, within Kronstadt and its Soviet"* while *"externally Kronstadt was a loyal stronghold of the Bolshevik regime"*. [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 179] This confirms Trotsky's recollections from 1938 that *"the Bolsheviks constituted less than one-half of the Kronstadt Soviet. The majority consisted of SRs and anarchists."* ["Hue and Cry Over Kronstadt", Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 86] Indeed, in 1917 Trotsky even stated that the Kronstadters *"are anarchists."* [quoted by Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 98]

Kronstadt was in favour of soviet power and, unsurprisingly, supported those parties which claimed to support that goal, which explains its initial support for the Bolshevik regime. Yet internally, the political climate in Kronstadt was *"very close to the politics of the Socialist Revolutionary Maximalists, a left-wing split-off from the SR Party, politically located somewhere between the Left SRs and the Anarchists."* [Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 194] In Kronstadt this group was led by Anatolii Lamanov and *"it rejected party factionalism"* and *"stood for pure sovietism"*. They sought an immediate agrarian and urban social revolution, calling for the *"socialisation of power, of the land and of the factories"* to be organised by a federation of soviets based on direct elections and instant recall, as a first step towards socialism. [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 135] The similarities with anarchism are clear.

At the time of the October revolution, the Kronstadt soviet did not have a Bolshevik majority. The soviet elections in August saw the Bolsheviks receive 96 seats, as did the Non-Party grouping, the Left-SRs receiving 73, the Menshevik Internationalists 13 and anarchists 7. Kronstadt's delegates to the third All-Russian Congress of Soviets were a Left-SR (157 votes), a SR-Maximalist (147 votes) and a Bolshevik (109 votes). It was only in the January elections in 1918 that the Bolsheviks improved their position, gaining 139 deputies compared to their previous 96. In spite of securing their highest ever vote during the era of multi-party soviets the Bolsheviks only gained 46 percent of seats in the soviet. Also elected at this time were 64 SRs (21 percent), 56 Maximalists (19 percent), 21 non-party delegates (7 percent), 15 Anarchists (5 percent) and 6 Mensheviks (2 percent). The soviet elected a Left SR as its chairman and in March it elected its three delegates to the Fourth Congress of Soviets, with the Bolshevik delegate receiving the lowest vote (behind a Maximalist and an anarchist with 124, 95 and 79 votes respectively). By the April 1918 elections, as in most of Russia, the Bolsheviks found their support had decreased. Only 53 Bolsheviks were elected (29 per cent) as compared to 41 SR Maximalists (22 percent), 39 Left SRs (21 percent), 14 Menshevik Internationalists (8 percent), 10 Anarchists (5 percent) and 24 non-party delegates (13 percent). Indeed, Bolshevik influence at Kronstadt was so weak that on April 18th, the Kronstadt soviet denounced the Bolsheviks attack against the anarchists in Moscow, April 12th by a vote of 81 to 57. The *"Bolshevisation"* of Kronstadt *"and the destruction of its multi-party democracy was not due to internal developments and local Bolshevik strength, but decreed from outside and imposed by force."* [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 134, pp. 182-4 and p. 186]

Thus the dominant political perspective in 1917 was one of *"sovietism"* -- namely, all power to the soviets and not to parties. This was the main demand of the 1921 uprising. Politically, Kronstadt had not changed: *"What is impressive is that Kronstadt seems to have changed so little throughout the period from 1905 to 1921. Moreover, the argument of ideological degeneration was used against the sailors as early as the mutiny of October 1918, when it was quite implausible"*. [Nicolas Walter, **The Anarchist Past and Other Essays**, p. 138]

In addition to the soviet, there was the *"general meetings in Anchor square, which were held nearly every day."* [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 57] The Kronstadt Soviet was itself constantly pressurised by these mass meetings. For example, on 25 May 1917, a large crowd, inspired by Bolshevik and anarchist speakers, marched to the Naval Assembly and forced the leaders of the Soviet to rescind their agreement with the more moderate Petrograd Soviet. In February 1921, the Kronstadt rebels met in Anchor square to pass the **Petropavlovsk** resolution -- just as happened before in 1917. And as in 1917, they elected a Conference of Delegates to manage the affairs of the Kronstadt. In other words, the sailors re-introduced exactly the same political forms they practised in 1917.

These facts suggest that any claims that the majority of sailors, soldiers and workers in Kronstadt had changed politically are unfounded. This, ironically enough, is confirmed by Trotsky.

Trotsky's memory (which, after all, seems to be the basis of most of his and his followers' arguments) did play tricks on him. He states that there *"were no Mensheviks at all in Kronstadt."* As for the anarchists, *"most" of them "represented the city petty bourgeoisie and stood at a lower level than the SRs."* The Left SRs *"based themselves on the peasant part of the fleet and of the shore garrison."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 86] So we have Trotsky arguing that the majority of the *"pride and glory"* of the revolution in 1917 voted for groups of a *"lower level"* than the Bolsheviks (and quite a few for a party, the Mensheviks, Trotsky said did not exist there).

Looking at the politics of these groups, we discover some strange inconsistencies which undermine the validity of Trotsky's claims. For example, in the beginning of 1918, *"the working population of Kronstadt, after debating the subject at many meetings, decided to proceed to socialise dwelling places . . . A final monster meeting definitely instructed several members of the Soviet -- Left Social-Revolutionaries and Anarcho-Syndicalists -- to raise the question at the next [soviet] plenary session."* While the Bolshevik delegates tried to postpone the decision (arguing in the soviet that the decision was too important and should be decided by the central government) the *"Left Social-Revolutionaries, Maximalists and Anarcho-Syndicalists asked for an immediate discussion and carried the vote."* [Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, pp. 460-1] This fits in exactly with the communist-anarchist programme of socialisation but it is hardly an expression of representatives of *"the city petty bourgeoisie."* Let us quote one:

*"I am an anarchist because contemporary society is divided into two opposing classes: the impoverished and dispossessed workers and peasants . . . and the rich men, kings and presidents . . ."*

*"I am an anarchist because I scorn and detest all authority, since all authority is founded on injustice, exploitation and compulsion over the human personality. Authority dehumanises the individual and makes him a slave."*

*"I am an opponent of private property when it is held by individual capitalist parasites, for private property is theft . . ."*

*"I am an anarchist because I believe only in the creative powers and independence of a united proletariat and not of the leaders of political parties of various kinds."*

*"I am an anarchist because I believe that the present struggle between the classes will end only when the toiling masses, organised as a class, gain their true interests and conquer, by means of a violent social revolution, all the riches of the earth . . . having abolished all institutions of government and authority, the oppressed class must proclaim a society of free producers . . . The popular masses themselves will conduct their affairs on equal and communal lines in free communities."* [N. Petrov, quoted by Paul Avrich, **Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, pp. 35-6]

Very "petty bourgeois"! Of course Trotsky could argue that this represented the minority of *"real revolutionaries,"* the *"elements most closely linked to the Bolsheviks"* among the

anarchists, but such an analysis cannot be taken seriously considering the influence of the anarchists in Kronstadt. [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 86] For example, a member of the Petrograd Committee and the Helsingfors party organisation in 1917 recalled that the Anarchist-Communists had great influence in Kronstadt. Moreover, according to historian Alexander Rabinowitch, they had an *"undeniable capacity to influence the course of events"* and he speaks of *"the influential Anarcho-Syndicalist Communists [of Kronstadt] under Iarchuk."* Indeed, anarchists *"played a significant role in starting the July uprising"* in 1917. [**Prelude to Revolution**, p. 62, p. 63, p. 187 and p. 138] This confirms Paul Avrich's comments that the *"influence of the anarchists . . . had always been strong within the fleet"* and *"the spirit of anarchism"* had been *"powerful in Kronstadt in 1917"* (it *"had by no means dissipated"* in 1921). [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 168 and p. 169]

A similar analysis of the Maximalists would produce the same results for Trotsky's claims. Paul Avrich provides a useful summary of their politics. He notes the Maximalists occupied *"a place in the revolutionary spectrum between the Left SR's and the anarchists while sharing elements of both."* They *"preached a doctrine of total revolution"* and called for a *"'toilers' soviet republic' founded on freely elected soviets, with a minimum of central state authority. Politically, this was identical with the objective of the Kronstadters [in 1921], and 'Power to the soviets but not the parties' had originally been a Maximalist rallying-cry."* Economically, the parallels *"are no less striking."* They denounced grain requisitioning and demanded that *"all the land be turned over to the peasants."* For industry they rejected the Bolshevik theory and practice of *"workers' control"* over bourgeois administrators in favour of the *"social organisation of production and its systematic direction by representatives of the toiling people."* Opposed to nationalisation and centralised state management, they argued for socialisation and workers' self-management of production. Little wonder he states that the *"political group closest to the rebels in temperament and outlook were the SR Maximalists"* and *"[o]n nearly every important point the Kronstadt program, as set forth in the rebel Izvestiia, coincided with that of the Maximalists."* [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 171-2]

This can be quickly seen from reading both the *Petropavlovsk* resolution and the Kronstadt newspaper *Izvestiia* (see **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 2, pp. 183-204). The political continuity is striking between 1917 and 1921, as can be seen from the article *"So-Called Socialism"* published in its last issue on March 16th:

*"In making the October Revolution, the sailors and Red soldiers, the workers and peasants, spilled their blood for the power of the Soviets, for the building of a workers' republic.*

*"The Communist Party paid close attention to the aspirations of the masses. Having inscribed on its banners attractive slogans which aroused the enthusiasm of the workers, it swept them into the struggle and promised them that it would lead them into the beautiful kingdom of socialism which only the Bolsheviks knew how to build . . . It seemed as if the time of free labour in the fields, factories and workshops had come. It seemed as if power were going to pass into the hands of the workers . . . Then, feeling themselves strong enough, the Communists progressively eliminated from power first the socialists of other tendencies, then they pushed workers and peasants out of many state posts, while continuing to govern in their name.*

*"In this way the Communists have brought in the rule of the commissars, with all the despotism of personal power. Against all reason and contrary to the will of the*

*workers, they then began stubbornly to build a state socialism with slaves, instead of building a society based on free labour . . . the Bolsheviks established the nationalisation of works and factories. From a slave of the capitalist the worker was transformed into a slave of state enterprises. Soon this no longer sufficed, and they planned the application of the Taylor system.*

*"The whole mass of the peasants were declared enemies of the people and identified with the 'kulaks.' Very enterprisingly the Communists then set about ruining the peasants and substituting Soviet exploitation, that is to say, establishing the estates of the new agrarian profiteer, the State. That is what the peasants have obtained from the Socialism of the Bolsheviks, instead of free labour on the liberated land for which they had hoped. In exchange for bread and livestock, almost entirely requisitioned, they obtained the raids of the Cheka and mass shootings. A fine system of exchange in a workers' state -- lead and bayonets for bread!*

*"The life of the citizen became monotonous and banal to the point of death, regulated according to the rules of the authorities. Instead of a life animated by free labour and the free development of the individual, an unprecedented and incredible slavery was born. All independent thought, all just criticism of the acts of the criminal rulers became crimes, punished by prison and often by death. Indeed, the death penalty, that disgrace to humanity, was extended in the 'socialist fatherland.'*

*"Such is the beautiful kingdom of socialism to which the dictatorship of the Communist party has brought us. We have received State Socialism with Soviets of functionaries who vote docilely what the authorities and their infallible commissars dictate to them. The slogan, 'He who does not work shall not eat,' has been modified under this beautiful 'Soviet' regime to 'Everything for the Commissars.' And as for the workers, peasants and intellectual workers, they have just to carry out their tasks in a prison.*

*"This has become insupportable. Revolutionary Kronstadt has been the first to break the chains and bars of the prison. It fights for the true Soviet republic of the workers in which the producer himself will be owner of the products of his labour and can dispose of them as he wishes." [quoted by Voline, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 518-9]*

So as can be seen, the Maximalists were in advance of the Bolsheviks too. They argued for soviet power, not party power, as well as workers' self-management to replace the state capitalism of the Bolshevik party dictatorship. The political outlook of the Kronstadt rebels had not changed dramatically. Heavily influenced by anarchist and semi-anarchists in 1917, in 1921 the same political ideas came to the fore again once the sailors, soldiers and civilians had freed themselves from Bolshevik dictatorship and created the Conference of Delegates.

According to the logic of Trotsky's argument, the Kronstadt sailors were revolutionary simply because of the actions of the Bolshevik minority, as a *"revolution is 'made' directly by a minority. The success of a revolution is possible, however, only where this minority finds more or less support . . . on the part of the majority. The shift in different stages of the revolution . . . is directly determined by changing political relations between the minority and the majority, between the vanguard and the class."* It is this reason that necessitates *"the dictatorship of the proletariat"* as the level of the masses cannot be *"equal"* and of *"extremely high development."* Trotsky argued that the *"political composition of the Kronstadt Soviet*

*reflected the composition of the garrison and the crews.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 85, p. 92 and p. 86]

In other words, with the vanguard (the minority of Bolsheviks) gone, the majority of the Kronstadters fell back to their less developed ways. Yet, if the political composition of the revolt reflected the composition of the crews, then Trotsky's argument suggests that this composition was remarkably unchanged for in the early months of 1918 the Bolsheviks saw their vote nearly half between late January and April 1918. Similarly, we find John Rees, in contradiction to his main argument that the sailors were backward new recruits, admitting that the *"ideology of the Kronstadt garrison was one factor"* in the revolt because *"in its heroic days the garrison had an ultra-left air."* [Rees, **Op. Cit.**, p. 62] Yet if, as he maintains, the sailors **were** new, how could they had time to be influenced by this ideology, the ideology of sailors he claims were not there? And if the new recruits he claims were there **had** been influenced by the sailors of 1917 then it is hard to maintain that the revolt was alien to the spirit of 1917. By this apparently simple admission of the facts, he seems unaware that he fatally undermines his own case.

All of which raises an interesting question. If revolutions are made by a minority who gain the support of the majority, what happens when the majority reject the vanguard? As we indicate in [section 15](#), Trotsky was not shy in providing the answer -- party dictatorship. Such socialism from above, as the Kronstadt sailors recognised, cannot create genuine socialism but only state-capitalism.

To conclude, the evidence shows that the political ideas dominant in Kronstadt had not changed since 1917 -- the same libertarian socialist ideas prevailed although now enriched by the experience of the state socialism anarchists had warned of. Indeed, it is the politics expressed in 1921 which clearly confirm the statistical evidence on the length of service of the rebel sailors we presented in the [last section](#). The revolt of 1921 reflected the politics and aspirations of those active since at least 1917. It was these politics which had made Kronstadt the *"pride and glory"* of the revolution in 1917 and, four years later, made it so dangerous to the Bolsheviks.

## **10 Why did the Petrograd workers not support Kronstadt?**

For Trotskyists, the inaction of the Petrograd workers during the revolt is a significant factor in showing its *"backward peasant"* character. Trotsky, for example, argued that from *"the class point of view"* it is *"extremely important to contrast the behaviour of Kronstadt to that of Petrograd in those critical days"* for the *"uprising did not attract the Petrograd workers. It repelled them. The stratification proceeded along class lines. The workers immediately felt that the Kronstadt mutineers stood on the opposite side of the barricades -- and they supported the Soviet power. The political isolation of Kronstadt was the cause of its internal uncertainty and its military defeat."* [*"Hue and Cry Over Kronstadt"*, Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 90-1]

First, it should be noted that Trotsky's claims in 1937 are at odds with his opinion during the crisis. In a cable dated March 5th, 1921, to a member of the Council of Labour and Defence Trotsky insisted that *"only the seizure of Kronstadt will put an end to the political crisis in Petrograd."* [quoted by Israel Getzler, *"The Communist Leaders' Role in the Kronstadt*

*Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents*", **Op. Cit.**, p. 32] Thus, in 1921, Trotsky was well aware of the links between the Kronstadt revolt and the Petrograd strikes, seeing the destruction of the former as a means to defeating the latter. Simply put, the crushing of Kronstadt would give the rebel workers in Petrograd a clear message of what to expect if they persisted in their protests.

Second, Trotsky's later arguments leave a lot to be desired. For example, he fails to note (to use Victor Serge's words that the state and Communist Press *"was positively berserk with lies"* and *"lied systematically"*) [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, pp. 125-6] The press and radio campaign directed against Kronstadt stated that the revolt had been organised by foreign spies and was led by ex-Tsarist generals. As an example (see [section 5](#) for more details), on 5th March the Petrograd Defence Committee put out a call to the insurgents, inviting them to surrender:

*"You are being told fairy tales when they tell you that Petrograd is with you or that the Ukraine supports you. These are impertinent lies. The last sailor in Petrograd abandoned you when he learned that you were led by generals like Kozlovsky. Siberia and the Ukraine support the Soviet power. Red Petrograd laughs at the miserable efforts of a handful of White Guards and Socialist Revolutionaries."* [quoted by Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 162]

These lies would, of course, alienate many workers in Petrograd. Two hundred emissaries were sent from Kronstadt to distribute their demands but only a few avoided capture. The Party had brought the full weight of its propaganda machine to bear, lying about the revolt and those taking part in it. The government also placed a *"careful watch"* on the *"trains from Petrograd to mainland points in the direction of Kronstadt to prevent any contact with the insurgents."* [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 140 and p. 141]

However, while lying is a factor in the lack of active support, it is by no means the key one. That factor was state repression. Emma Goldman recalled the situation in Petrograd at the time:

*"Extraordinary martial law was declared over the entire Petrograd Province, and none but specially authorised officials could leave the city. The Bolshevik press opened a campaign of calumny and vituperation against Kronstadt, proclaiming that the sailors and soldiers had made common cause with the 'tsarist general Kozlovsky,' and declaring the Kronstadt people outlawed."* [**Living My Life**, vol. 2, pp. 878-9]

Given what everyone knew what happened to people outlawed by the Bolsheviks, is it surprising that many workers in Petrograd (even if they knew they were being lied to) did not act? Particularly as the threat could be seen on the streets of Petrograd:

*"On March 3 the Petrograd Defence Committee, now vested with absolute power throughout the entire province, took stern measures to prevent any further disturbances. The city became a vast garrison, with troops patrolling in every quarter. Notices posted on the walls reminded the citizenry that all gatherings would be dispersed and those who resisted shot on the spot. During the day the streets were nearly deserted, and, with the curfew now set at 9 p.m., night life ceased altogether."* [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 142]

Berkman, also an eyewitness to the repression like Goldman, stated that:

*"The Petrograd committee of defence, directed by Zinoviev, its chairman, assumed full control of the city and Province of Petrograd. The whole Northern District was put under martial law and all meetings prohibited. Extraordinary precautions were taken to protect the Government institutions and machine guns were placed in the Astoria, the hotel occupied by Zinoviev and other high Bolshevik functionaries. The proclamations posted on the street bulletin boards ordered the immediate return of all strikers to the factories, prohibited suspension of work, and warned the people against congregating on the streets. 'In such cases', the order read, 'the soldiery will resort to arms. In case of resistance, shooting on the spot.'*

*"The committee of defence took up the systematic 'cleaning of the city.' Numerous workers, soldiers and sailors suspected of sympathising with Kronstadt, placed under arrest. All Petrograd sailors and several Army regiments thought to be 'politically untrustworthy' were ordered to distant points, while the families of Kronstadt sailors living in Petrograd were taken into custody **as hostages.**" ["The Kronstadt Rebellion", **Op. Cit.**, p. 71]*

As we noted in [section 2](#), the events in Kronstadt were in solidarity with the strike wave in Petrograd at the end of February. Then the Bolsheviks had repressed the workers with *"arrests, the use of armed patrols in the streets and in the factories, and the closing and re-registration of an enterprise labour force."* [Mary McAuley, **Op. Cit.**, p. 409] A three-man Defence Committee was formed and Zinoviev *"proclaimed martial law"* on February 24th (this was later *"vested with absolute power throughout the entire province"* on March 3rd). As part of this process, they had to rely on the *kursanty* (Communist officer cadets) as the local garrisons had been caught up the general ferment and could not be relied upon to carry out the government's orders: *"Overnight Petrograd became an armed camp. In every quarter pedestrians were stopped and their documents checked . . . the curfew [was] strictly enforced."* The Petrograd Cheka made widespread arrests. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 39, p. 142 and pp. 46-7]

However, part of the Petrograd proletariat continued to strike during the Kronstadt events including the biggest factories of Petrograd: Poutilov, Baltisky, Oboukhov, Nievskaja Manoufactura, etc. However, the Bolsheviks acted quickly to shut down the factories and started the re-registration of the workers. For workers to be locked out of a factory meant to be *"automatically deprived of their rations."* [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 41] On the day the Bolsheviks attacked Kronstadt (March 7th) the Cheka reported that it was launching *"decisive actions against the workers."* These *"decisive actions"* involved a *"massive purge of Petrograd factories and plants."* At the Arsenal factory, for example, *"the workers organised a mass meeting on 7th March, (the day the bombardment of Kronstadt began). This meeting adopted a resolution of the mutinous sailors! It elected a commission which was to go from factory to factory, agitating for a general strike."* [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 164] The Cheka confirms this event, reporting to Zinoviev on March 8th that *"[a]t a rally of workers of the Arsenal Plant a resolution was passed to join the Kronstadt uprising. The general meeting had elected a delegation to maintain contact with Kronstadt."* This delegation had already been arrested. This was a common practice and during this period the Cheka concentrated its efforts on the leaders and on disrupting communication: all delegates to other workplaces, all Mensheviks and SRs who could be found, all speakers at rallies were being arrested day after day. Thus the Communists *"suppressed the workers' uprising in Petrograd in the first days of*

*March.* "Unlike the Kronstadt sailors, the workers did not have weapons and *"were essentially defenceless vis-a-vis the Cheka."* [V. Brovkin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 396]

The state of siege was finally lifted on the 22nd of March, five days after the crushing of Kronstadt. The city had been *"appeased by [economic] concessions and cowed by the presence of troops."* [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 200] In these circumstances, is it surprising that the Petrograd workers did not join in the rebellion? So Trotsky is insulting the intelligence of his readers by arguing that the lack of support in Petrograd for Kronstadt reflected *"class lines."* Indeed, by failing to mention (to use Emma Goldman's words) *"the campaign of slander, lies and calumny against the sailors"* conducted by the Soviet Press (which *"fairly oozed poison against the sailors"*) or that *"Petrograd was put under martial law"* Trotsky, quite clearly, *"deliberately falsifies the facts."* ["Trotsky Protests Too Much", **Op. Cit.**, p. 264] In short:

*"Here again Trotsky is saying things which are quite untrue. Earlier on we showed how the wave of strikes had started in Petrograd and how Kronstadt had followed suit. It was against the strikers of Petrograd that the Government had to organise a special General Staff: the Committee of Defence. The repression was first directed against the Petrograd workers and against their demonstrations, by the despatch of armed detachments of Koursantys.*

*"But the workers of Petrograd had no weapons. They could not defend themselves as could the Kronstadt sailors. The military repression directed against Kronstadt certainly intimidated the Petrograd workers. The demarcation did not take place 'along class lines' but according to the respective strengths of the organs of repression. The fact that the workers of Petrograd did not follow those of Kronstadt does not prove that they did not sympathise with them. Nor, at a later date, when the Russian proletariat failed to follow the various 'oppositions' did this prove that they were in agreement with Stalin! In such instances it was a question of the respective strengths of the forces confronting one another."* [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 191-2]

Not that this was the first time Trotsky confused force with class. In 1920 he had defended the fact *"of having substituted for the dictatorship of the Soviets the dictatorship of our party"* by arguing that *"it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party"* and that there is *"no substitution at all"* when the *"power of the party"* replaces that of the working class. The rule of the party *"has afforded to the Soviets the possibility of becoming transformed from shapeless parliaments of labour into the apparatus of the supremacy of labour."* [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. 109] He continued:

*"But where is your guarantee, certain wise men ask us, that it is just your party that expresses the interests of historical development? Destroying or driving underground the other parties, you have thereby prevented their political competition with you, and consequently you have deprived yourselves of the possibility of testing your line of action.*

*"This idea is dictated by a purely liberal conception of the course of the revolution. In a period in which all antagonisms assume an open character, and the political struggle swiftly passes into a civil war, the ruling party has sufficient material standard by which to test its line of action, without the possible circulation of Menshevik papers. Noske [in Germany] crushes the Communists, but they grow. We*

*have suppressed the Mensheviks and the S.R.s -- and they have disappeared. This criterion is sufficient for us.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 109-10]

An interesting criterion, to say the least. By this logic Hitler expressed the "*interests of historical development*" when the German Communists and Trotskyists "*disappeared*" by leaps and bounds. Similarly, the Trotskyists in Russia "*disappeared*" under Stalin. Is this a Trotskyist justification of Stalinism? After all, in November 1927, the Left Opposition called for workers to demonstrate in its support during the 10th anniversary celebrations of the October Revolution. The workers did not heed their call, leading neo-Trotskyist Tony Cliff to lament "*the passivity of the mass of the workers, their lack of will to fight for the Opposition*". This lack of response was critical for the success of Stalinism: "*For the ruling group to win it needed the passivity of the mass of the workers, while the Opposition needed the activity and consciousness of the masses for success.*" [Trotsky, vol. 3, p. 263] So, if we apply the Leninist arguments against Kronstadt to this then, surely, we must conclude that the fact the workers remained passive shows that the Stalinists represented the "proletarian revolution" while the Trotskyists represented "petty bourgeois reaction"? That the Left Opposition proclaimed its proletarian credentials matters little, as Trotsky reminded us as regards the Kronstadt rebels, "*Marx has said that it is impossible to judge either parties or peoples by what they say about themselves*". [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 88] Likewise, noting the repressive nature of the regime in 1927 to explain this passivity would be acceptable if the repression in Petrograd before, during and after the Kronstadt rebellion was not ignored by the Trotskyists.

Rather than being an irrefutable case against Kronstadt Trotskyists think it is, all that the isolation of Kronstadt proves is the power of the repressive system the rebels and the Russian masses faced.

On this theme, we can see the depths which Trotskyists go to re-write history from Pierre Frank's "*Introduction*" to the work **Kronstadt**. He decides to quote Paul Avrigh's work (after, of course, warning the reader that Avrigh "*is not a Bolshevik or a Trotskyist*" and his "*political features are blurred*") and states that Avrigh "*done his work conscientiously, without skipping over the facts.*" It is a shame that the same cannot be said of Frank who states that Avrigh "*discusses the strikes in Petrograd preceding Kronstadt and comes to the following conclusion*":

*"For many intellectuals and workers, moreover, the Bolsheviks, with all their faults, were still the most effective barrier to a White resurgence and the downfall of the revolution.*

*"For these reasons, the strikes in Petrograd were fated to lead a brief existence. Indeed, they ended almost as suddenly as they had begun, never having reached the point of armed revolt against the regime."* [quoted by Frank, Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 24-25]

It is the "*moreover*" in the first paragraph that gives the game away. Avrigh lists a few more reasons than the one given by Frank. Here is what Avrigh actually lists as the reasons for the end of the strike wave:

*"after several days of tense excitement, the Petrograd disturbances petered out . . . The concessions had done their work, for more than anything else it was cold and*

*hunger which had stimulated popular disaffection. Yet there is no denying that the application of military force and the widespread arrests, not to speak of the tireless propaganda waged by the authorities had been indispensable in restoring order. Particularly impressive in this regard was the discipline shown by the local party organisation. Setting aside their internal disputes, the Petrograd Bolsheviks swiftly closed ranks and proceeded to carry out the unpleasant task of repression with efficiency and dispatch . . .*

*"Then, too, the collapse of the movement would not have come so soon but for the utter demoralisation of Petrograd's inhabitants. The workers were simply too exhausted to keep up any sustained political activity . . . What is more, they lacked effective leadership and a coherent program of action. In the past these had been supplied by the radical intelligentsia . . . [but they] were themselves in no condition to lend the workers any meaningful support, let alone active guidance . . . they now felt too weary and terrorised . . . to raise their voices in opposition. With most of their comrades in prison or exile, and some already executed, few of the survivors were willing to risk the same fate, especially when the odds against them were so overwhelming and when the slightest protest might deprive their families of their rations. For many intellectuals and workers, moreover, the Bolsheviks, with all their faults, were still the most effective barrier to a White resurgence and the downfall of the revolution.*

*"For these reasons, the strikes in Petrograd were fated to lead a brief existence. Indeed, they ended almost as suddenly as they had begun, never having reached the point of armed revolt against the regime." [Paul Avrich, **Kronstadt**, pp. 49-51]*

As can be seen, Frank "skips over" most of Avrich's argument and so the basis of his conclusion. Indeed, what Frank calls Avrich's "conclusion" cannot be understood by providing, as Frank does, the **last** reason Avrich gives for it. The dishonesty is clear, if not unexpected nor an isolated case.

John Rees, to provide another example, states that the revolt was "*preceded by a wave of serious but quickly resolved strikes.*" No mention that the strikes were "*resolved*" by force nor that the Kronstadt revolt was not only "*preceded*" by the strikes but was directly inspired by them, was in **solidarity with them** and raised many of the same demands. Similarly, he argues that the Kronstadters' "*insistence that they were fighting for a 'third revolution', freedom of expression and for 'soviets without parties' [although, as Avrich notes, they **never** raised that slogan and so we have to wonder who Rees is quoting here] has convinced many historians that this revolt was fundamentally distinct from the White Rebellions.*" But this, apparently, is not the case as "*one must be careful to analyse the difference between the conscious aims of the rebels and the possible outcome of their actions. The Bolshevik regime still rested on the shattered remnants of the working class. The Kronstadt sailors' appeals to the Petrograd workers had met with little or no response.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 61 and p. 63]

One has to wonder what planet Rees is on. After all, **if** the Bolsheviks **had** rested on the "*shattered remnants of the working class*" then they would **not** have had to turn Petrograd into an armed camp, repress strikes, impose martial law and arrest militant workers. The Kronstadt sailors' appeals "*met with little or no response*" due to the Bolshevik coercion exercised in those fateful days. To not mention the repression in Petrograd is to deliberately deceive the reader. That the Kronstadt demands would have met with strong response in

Petrograd can be seen from the actions of the Bolsheviks (who did not rest upon the workers but rather arrested them). Given that the Kronstadt demands simply reflected those raised by the Petrograd strikers **themselves** we can safely say that Rees is talking nonsense (see [section 4](#)). Thus Rees' "class analysis" of the Kronstadt revolt is pathetic and has no bearing to the reality of the situation in Petrograd nor to the history of the revolt itself.

As can be seen, any attempt to use the relative inaction of the Petrograd workers as evidence of the class nature of the revolt has to be based on ignoring all the relevant facts of the situation. This can go so far as to selectively quote from academic accounts to present a radically different conclusion to that of the misused author's.

## 11 Were the Whites a threat during the Kronstadt revolt?

The lack of foreign intervention during the Kronstadt revolt suggests more than just the fact that the revolt was not a "White conspiracy." It also suggests that the White forces were in no position to take advantage of the rebellion or even support it. This is significant simply because the Bolsheviks and their supporters argue that the revolt had to be repressed simply because the Soviet State was in danger of White or foreign intervention. How much danger was there? According to John Rees, a substantial amount:

*"The Whites, even though their armies had been beaten in the field, were still not finished -- as the emigre response to the Kronstadt rising shows . . . They had predicted a rising at Kronstadt and the White National Centre abroad raised a total of nearly 1 million French Francs, 2 million Finnish marks, £5000, \$25,000 and 900 tons of flour in just two weeks; Indeed, the National Centre was already making plans for the forces of the French navy and those of General Wrangel, who still commanded 70,000 men in Turkey, to land in Kronstadt if the revolt were to succeed." [Op. Cit., pp. 63-4]*

To back up his argument, Rees references Paul Avrich's book. We, in turn, will consult that work to evaluate his argument.

First, the Kronstadt revolt broke out months after the end of the Civil War in Western Russia. Wrangel had fled from the Crimea in November 1920. The Bolsheviks were so afraid of White invasion that by early 1921 they demobilised half the Red Army (some 2,500,000 men). Second, the Russian emigres *"remained as divided and ineffectual as before, with no prospect of co-operation in sight."* Third, as far as the last of the White Generals goes, Wrangel's forces were in no state to re-invade Russia. His troops were *"dispersed and their moral sagging"* and it would have taken *"months . . . merely to mobilise his men and transport them from the Mediterranean to the Baltic."* A second front in the south *"would have meant almost certain disaster."* Indeed, in a call issued by the Petrograd Defence Committee on March 5th, they asked the rebels: *"Haven't you heard what happened to Wrangel's men, who are dying like flies, in their thousands of hunger and disease?"* The call goes on to add *"[t]his is the fate that awaits you, unless you surrender within 24 hours."* [Paul Avrich, **Kronstadt 1921**, p. 13, p. 219, p. 146 and p. 105]

Clearly, the prospect of a White invasion was slim. This leaves the question of capitalist governments. Avrich has this to say on this:

*"Apart from their own energetic fund-raising campaign, the emigres sought the assistance of the Entente powers . . . the United States government, loath to resume the interventionist policies of the Civil War, turned a deaf ear to all such appeals. The prospects of British aid were even dimmer . . . The best hope of foreign support came from France . . . the French refused to interfere either politically or militarily in the crisis."* [Op. Cit., pp. 117-9]

The French government had also *"withdrew its recognition of Wrangel's defunct government"* in November 1920 *"but continued to feed his troops on 'humane grounds,' meanwhile urging him to disband."* [Op. Cit., p. 105] The demobilising of the Red Army confirms that this threat was considered non-existent.

Thus, the claim that foreign intervention was likely seems without basis. Indeed, the Communist radio was arguing that *"the organisation of disturbances in Kronstadt have the sole purpose of influencing the new American President and changing his policy toward Russia. At the same time the London Conference is holding its sessions, and the spreading of similar rumours must influence also the Turkish delegation and make it more submissive to the demands of the Entente. The rebellion the **Petropavlovsk** crew is undoubtedly part of a great conspiracy to create trouble within Soviet Russia and to injure our international position."* [quoted by Berkman, *"The Kronstadt Rebellion"*, Op. Cit., p. 71] Lenin himself argued on March 16th that *"the enemies"* around the Bolshevik state were *"no longer able to wage their war of intervention"* and so were launching a press campaign *"with the prime object of disrupting the negotiations for a trade agreement with Britain, and the forthcoming trade agreement with America"* for *"we see that what they fear most, from the practical angle of international capital, is the resumption of proper trade relations. But they will fail in their attempts to disrupt them."* [Lenin, **Collected Works**, vol. 32, p. 270]

Moreover, these governments had to take into account of its own working class. It was doubtful that they would, after years of war, been able to intervene, particularly if there was a clearly socialist revolt coming from below. Their own working class, in such a situation, would have prevented intervention by foreign capitalist states. This was, in fact, acknowledged in Lenin on 5 July 1921: *"we are not entirely isolated, since the whole international bourgeoisie is incapable of waging open war against us just now, because the whole working class, even though the majority is not yet communist, is sufficiently class-conscious to prevent intervention. The bourgeoisie is compelled to reckon with the temper of the masses even though they have not yet entirely sided with communism."* [Op. Cit., p. 495]

So in spite of massive social unrest and the revolt of a key fortress protecting Petrograd, the Western powers took no action. The Whites were disorganised and could only raise non-military supplies (none of which reached Kronstadt). Could this situation have changed if Kronstadt had spread to the mainland? It is doubtful simply because the Western governments, as Lenin argued, had to take into account the anti-interventionist position of their own working classes. The Whites had no military forces available, as the Bolsheviks themselves admitted. Avrich notes it would have taken months for what was left of these forces to reach Kronstadt by which time soviet democracy would have been consolidated and ready to protect itself.

Even if we assume that Kronstadt had survived until the ice melted while Petrograd remained under Bolshevik dictatorship it, again, is doubtful that it would have been the basis for renewed White attacks. Neither Wrangel's troops nor foreign government forces would have

been welcomed by Red Kronstadt. While non-military aid would have been welcome (i.e. food supplies and so on), it is hard to believe that the Conference of Delegates would have allowed troops to arrive or pass them by to attack Petrograd. Simply put, the Kronstadters were fighting for soviet power and were well aware that others may try to support the revolt for their own, anti-revolutionary, reasons (see [section 7](#)).

In short, the possibility of foreign intervention was negligible. The arguments of Lenin at the time, plus the demobilisation of the Red Army, all point in that direction. Moreover, the lack of response by Western governments during the revolt indicates that they were unlikely to take advantage of continuing unrest in Kronstadt, Petrograd and other towns and cities. Their working classes, sick of war and class consciousness enough to resist another intervention in Russia, would have been a factor in this apathetic response. Wrangel's troops, as the Bolsheviks were aware, were not a threat.

The only real threat to Bolshevik power was internal -- from the workers and peasants the Bolsheviks claimed to be representing. Many of the deserters from the Red Army swelled the ranks of peasant guerrilla forces fighting the repressive and counter-productive food collection squads. In the Ukraine, the Bolsheviks were fighting the remnants of the Makhnovist army (a fight, incidentally, brought upon the Bolsheviks by themselves as they had betrayed the agreements made with the anarchist forces and attacked them once Wrangel had been defeated). In the towns and cities, the Bolsheviks faced general strikes, protests and mass meetings.

Thus the only danger facing the "soviet power" (i.e. Bolshevik power) was soviet democracy, a danger which had existed since the October revolution. As in 1918, when the Bolsheviks disbanded any soviet elected with non-Bolshevik majorities, they met the danger of soviet democracy with violence. The Bolsheviks were convinced that their own dictatorship was equivalent to the revolution and that their power was identical to that of the working class. They considered themselves to be the embodiment of "soviet power" and it obviously did not bother them that the demand for free soviets can hardly be considered as actions against the power of the soviets.

In such circumstances, the Bolshevik government viewed the Kronstadt revolt **not** as socialists should but rather as a ruling class. It was suppressed for "reasons of state" and not to defend a revolutionary regime (which was, by this stage, revolutionary in name only). This is reflected in Paul Avrich's introduction which ends by suggesting that "*[e]ach side behaved in accordance with its own particular goals and aspirations. To say this is not to deny the necessity of moral judgment. Yet Kronstadt presents a situation in which the historian can sympathise with the rebels and still concede that the Bolsheviks were justified in subduing them. To recognise this, indeed, is to grasp the full tragedy of Kronstadt.*" [Op. Cit., p. 6] As anarchist Nicolas Walter suggests:

*"But to recognise this is in fact to surrender the possibility of moral judgement and so to abdicate the responsibility of the historian. World history, as Hegel said, is world judgement; the historian is not just a mechanical recorder of facts, but also part of the human process he is investigating. If we sympathise with the Kronstadt rebels and still concede that the Bolsheviks were justified in subduing them -- as indeed Victor Serge did -- then we can sympathise with any rebels (the Paris Commune, say, or the plots against Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco) and still concede that any government is justified in subduing them."* [Op. Cit., p. 152]

A socialist regime cannot be defended by proclaiming that they did the same as a capitalist regime would do in similar circumstances. The criteria must be higher as the goals it is meant to embody and pursue are meant to be higher -- they are meant to reflect the goal of human liberation. To suggest that it can act the same as a regime dedicated to defending human exploitation and oppression shows a confusion of mind.

The only possible justification for maintaining the party dictatorship was the argument that soviet democracy would have led to the defeat of the Communists at the polls (which would mean admitting that it was a dictatorship **over** the proletariat and had been for some time). This would, it is argued, have resulted in (eventually) a return of the Whites and an anti-working class dictatorship that would have slaughtered the Russian workers and peasants *en masse*. As we note in [section 13](#), this was the position of Victor Serge in his Memoirs and echoed by more sophisticated Leninists ever since. Yet, such a position is self-serving and could have been used by Stalin to justify **his** regime and, unsurprisingly enough, the Hungarian Stalinists argued after crushing the 1956 revolution that *"the dictatorship of the proletariat, if overthrown, cannot be succeeded by any form of government other than fascist counter-revolution."* [quoted by Andy Anderson, **Hungary '56**, p. 101] Moreover, such an argument ignores the awkward facts that Lenin's regime was by any objective measure an anti-working class dictatorship and that an even worse one did appear which **did** slaughter the Russian workers and peasants *en masse*, namely Stalinism.

Finally, why was the call that *"[b]ureaucratic autocracy must give place to Soviet democracy"* inevitably counter-revolution in 1921 when raised in Kronstadt but revolutionary when (apparently) raised by Trotsky in 1936? [**The Revolution Betrayed**, p. 289] After all, in 1936 Russia was still surrounded by capitalist countries which hated it as well as facing re-armed and belligerent fascist Germany, Italy and Japan rather than states weary and exhausted after the First World War and facing internal revolts of their own. We will discuss this in [section 13](#) and here simply note that, by opposing the Kronstadt revolt, Trotskyists *"weaken their own case, for if the demands for freely elected soviets, for freedom of expression (proletarian democracy) and for workers' management of production were wrong in 1921, why did they become partially correct in 1923? If in 1921 Lenin and Trotsky represented the 'real' interests of the workers (against the actual workers), why couldn't Stalin? Why couldn't Kadar in Hungary in 1956? The Trotskyist school of hagiography has helped to obscure the real lessons of the struggle against the bureaucracy."* [Maurice Brinton, *"Preface to Ida Mett's 'The Kronstadt Commune'"*, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 130-1]

## 12 Was the country too exhausted to allow soviet democracy?

Trotskyists have, in general, three main lines of attack with regards the Kronstadt revolt. The first was that it was simply a White General revolt (see [section 6](#)). The second is that the sailors of 1921 were not those of 1917 (see [section 8](#)). The third is that the country was too exhausted for the Bolshevik dictatorship to agree to the revolt's demands and introduce soviet democracy. The working class was decimated and in such circumstances, it is argued, objective conditions meant that soviet democracy was impossible and so the Bolsheviks had to maintain their dictatorship at all costs to defend what was left of the revolution. Leninist Pat Stack of the British SWP is typical of this approach:

*"Because anarchists dismiss the importance of material reality, events such as the 1921 Kronstadt rising against the Bolshevik government in Russia can become a rallying cry. The revolutionary Victor Serge was not uncritical of the Bolshevik handling of the rising, but he poured scorn on anarchist claims for it when he wrote, 'The third revolution it was called by certain anarchists whose heads were stuffed by infantile delusions.'*

*"This third revolution, it was argued, would follow the first one in February 1917 and the second in October. The second had swept away the attempts to create capitalist power, had given land to the peasants and had extracted Russia from the horrible imperialist carnage of the First World War. The revolution had introduced a huge literacy programme, granted women abortion rights, introduced divorce and accepted the rights of the various Russian republics to self-determination. It had done so, however, against a background of a bloody and horrendous civil war where the old order tried to regain power. Sixteen imperialist powers sent armies against the regime, and trade embargoes were enforced.*

*"The reality of such actions caused huge suffering throughout Russia. The regime was deprived of raw materials and fuel, transportation networks were destroyed, and the cities began running out of food. By 1919 the regime only had 10 percent of the fuel that was available in 1917, and the production of iron ore in the same year stood at 1.6 percent of that in 1914. By 1921 Petrograd had lost 57 percent of its population and Moscow 44.5 percent. Workers were either dead, on the frontline of the civil war, or were fleeing the starvation of the city. The force that had made the revolution possible was being decimated . . .*

*"The choice facing the regime in Russia was either to crush the uprising and save the revolution, or surrender to the rising and allow the forces of reaction to march in on their back. There was no material basis for a third way. A destroyed economy and infrastructure, a population faced with starvation and bloody war, and a hostile outside world were not circumstances in which the revolution could move forward. Great efforts would have to be made to solve these problems. There were no overnight solutions and preserving the revolutionary regime was crucial. Ultimately real solutions could only be found if the revolution were to spread internationally, but in the meantime to have any chance of success the regime had to survive. Only the right and the imperialist powers would have benefited from its destruction." ["Anarchy in the UK?", **Socialist Review**, no. 246]*

As we discuss in the [next section](#), Victor Serge's own mind was stuffed by infantile delusions on the nature of the regime he was part of and the possibility of a benevolent dictatorship. Here, we address the suggestion that objective circumstances meant that genuine socialist solutions to the problems facing the Russian Revolution were impossible.

The first thing to note is how disingenuous Stack is being. *"World history"*, as Marx himself noted, *"would indeed be very easy to make if the struggle were taken up only on condition of infallibly favourable chances"* [Marx, **Marx-Engels Collected Works**, vol. 44. p. 136] Revolutions have a habit of breaking out when circumstances are hardly ideal -- the Paris Commune springs to mind -- but that is not reason to oppose them. Indeed, Stack's fellow party member provides this very quote by Marx against those who dismiss the Bolshevik revolution as a complete delusion due to the backwardness of the country, arguing that "[t]he

*unavoidable conclusion is that all the talk about 'premature' revolution . . . is an excuse born of expediency, not a serious argument against revolutionary socialism.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 9-10] The **real** question is whether revolutionaries, when faced with a popular revolt for socialism, should side with the rebels or a bureaucratic, state-capitalist party dictatorship.

The second thing to note is that Anarchists, regardless of Stack's assertions, were and are well aware of the problems facing the revolution. Alexander Berkman (who was in Petrograd at the time) pointed out the "[l]ong years of war, revolution, and civil struggle" which "had bled Russia to exhaustion and brought her people to the brink of despair." ["The Kronstadt Rebellion", Op. Cit., p. 61] Like every worker, peasant, sailor and soldier in Russia, anarchists knew (and know) that reconstruction would not take place "overnight." The Kronstadters' recognised this in the first issue of their newspaper **Izvestiia**:

*"Comrades and citizens, our country is passing through a tough time. For three years now, famine, cold and economic chaos have trapped us in a vice-like grip. The Communist Party which governs the country has drifted away from the masses and proved itself powerless to rescue them from a state of general ruination . . . All workers, sailors and Red soldiers today can clearly see that only concentrated efforts, only the concentrated determination of the people can afford the country bread, wood and coal, can clothe and shoe the people and rescue the Republic from the impasse in which it finds itself."* [quoted in **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 2, p. 183]

The Kronstadt **Izvestiia** of March 8 wrote that it was "here in Kronstadt that the foundation stone was laid of the Third Revolution that will smash the last shackles on the toiler and open up before him the broad new avenue to socialist construction." It stressed that the "new revolution will rouse the toiling masses of the Orient and Occident. For it will offer the example of fresh socialist construction as opposed to mechanical, governmental 'Communist' construction." [Op. Cit., p. 194] Clearly, the Kronstadt rebels knew that construction would take time and were arguing that the only means of rebuilding the country in a socialist direction was via the participation of what of left of the working class and peasantry in free class organisations like freely elected soviets and unions. Rather than wasting resources -- both human and material -- on repressing their strikes and revolts, Kronstadt's success would have seen these used for reconstruction.

So, for example, the partial freeing of the economy from the Bolshevik bureaucracy expressed by the New Economic Policy (NEP) saw factory output rise by over 40% between 1920 and 1921 and by a further 30% between 1921 and 1922 while agriculture "too made remarkable strides forward." [Robert Service, **The Bolshevik Party in Revolution**, p. 160] Victor Serge recalled how the NEP "was, in the space of a few months, already giving marvellous results. From one week to the next, the famine and the speculation were diminishing perceptibly. Restaurants were opening again". [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 147] Would workers' freedom and democracy not have had at least a similar result and have the benefit of not enriching a new boss class?

The experience of the revolt provides evidence that this analysis was far from utopian. A Finish reporter in Kronstadt was struck by the "enthusiasm" of its inhabitants, by their renewed sense of purpose and mission. Avrich argues that for a "fleeting interval Kronstadt was shaken out of its listlessness and despair." [**Kronstadt 1921**, p. 159] The sailors, soldiers and civilians sent their delegates to delegates, started to re-organise their trade unions and so on. Freedom and soviet democracy was allowing the masses to start to rebuild their society

and they took the opportunity. This suggests that a similar policy implemented by the workers who had just organised general strikes, demonstrations and protest meetings all across Russia's industrial centres was neither impossible nor doomed to failure.

Indeed, this wave of strikes refutes Stack's claim that "*[w]orkers were either dead, on the frontline of the civil war, or were fleeing the starvation of the city. The force that had made the revolution possible was being decimated.*" Clearly, a sizeable percentage of the workers were still working: approximately one-third of factory workers were still in Petrograd (the overall decrease of urban working people throughout Russia exceeded 50 percent [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 24]). So, yes, the size of the working class in 1921 **was** smaller in 1921 than it was in 1917 but the figures for May 1918 and 1920 were nearly identical. In 1920, the number of factory workers in Petrograd was 148,289 (which was 34% of the population and 36% of the number of workers in 1910). [Mary McAuley, **Op. Cit.**, p. 398] In January 1917, the number was 351,010 and in April 1918, it was 148,710. [S.A. Smith, **Red Petrograd**, p. 245] Thus factory worker numbers were about 40% of the pre-Civil War number and remained so throughout the Civil War. Does soviet democracy become invalid once a certain number of workers is reached? So we should remember that a proletarian core remained in every industrial town or city in Russia and, more importantly, this work force was capable of collective action and decision making in the face of state repression under Lenin from 1918 onwards (see [section H.6.3](#)). By the start of 1921, another strike wave surfaced and became near general strikes in many cities, including Petrograd and Moscow (see [section 2](#)). If the workers could organise strikes (and near general strikes at that), protest meetings and committees to co-ordinate their struggles, what could stop them starting to manage their own destinies and begin to rebuild an economy suffering under the counter-productive policies of a party dictatorship?

So, in stark contrast to Stack's claims, all across Russia in February 1921 the Russian working class were going on strike, organising meetings and demonstrations. In other words, **taking collective action** based on demands collectively agreed in workplace meetings. One factory would send delegates to others, urging them to join the movement which soon became a general strike in Petrograd and Moscow. In Kronstadt, workers, soldiers and sailors went the next step and organised a delegate conference. In other places they tried to do so, with various degrees of success. During the strikes in Petrograd "*workers from various plants elected delegates to the Petrograd Assembly of Plenipotentiaries*" which raised demands later championed in Kronstadt. Its activities and other attempts to organise collectively were obviously hindered by the fact the Cheka arrested "*all delegates to other enterprises*" the strikers sent. Brovkin states that following the example of Petrograd, "*workers in some cities set up assemblies of plenipotentiaries*" as well. In Saratov "*such a council grew out of a strike co-ordination committee.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 393, p. 396 and p. 398]

Any claim that the Russian working class had no capacity for collective action seems invalidated by such events. If anything was going to shatter what was left of working class collective power it would have been the Bolshevik repression of these strikes which, by its very nature, atomised and individualised the masses in order to break the collective action being practised. Martial law, the use of armed patrols on the streets and in the factories, the closing and re-registration of an enterprise labour force were all designed to break the strike and atomise the workforce -- these actions would not have been needed if the Russian working class was, as Stack claims, non-existent, atomised and incapable of collective action and decision making.

The fact that these strikes did not last longer of course suggests that the strikers could not sustain this activity indefinitely. However, this was more a product of state repression and the rations being withheld by the authorities to break the strike than any objectively predetermined impossibility of collective decision making. The workers may have been too exhausted to wage indefinite general strikes against a repressive state but that does not imply they could not practice collective decision making if that regime was replaced by a genuine soviet democracy. Likewise, the poor state of the Russian economy cannot be understood without reference to the negative impact of Bolshevik economic policies which made a bad situation far worse -- both in terms of limiting economic activity and initiative as well as the powerful bureaucracy it had created. As Emma Goldman suggested:

*"In the economic field this transformation must be in the hands of the industrial masses: the latter have the choice between an industrial State and anarcho-syndicalism. In the case of the former the menace to the constructive development of the new social structure would be as great as from the political State. It would become a dead weight upon the growth of the new forms of life . . . It is only when the libertarian spirit permeates the economic organizations of the workers that the manifold creative energies of the people can manifest themselves and the revolution be safeguarded and defended. Only free initiative and popular participation in the affairs of the revolution can prevent the terrible blunders committed in Russia. For instance, with fuel only a hundred versts [about sixty-six miles] from Petrograd there would have been no necessity for that city to suffer from cold had the workers' economic organizations of Petrograd been free to exercise their initiative for the common good. The peasants of the Ukraina would not have been hampered in the cultivation of their land had they had access to the farm implements stacked up in the warehouses of Kharkov and other industrial centres awaiting orders from Moscow for their distribution. These are characteristic examples of Bolshevik governmentalism and centralisation, which should serve as a warning to the workers of Europe and America of the destructive effects of Statism."* [My Disillusionment in Russia, p. 253]

The fact, of course, is that the majority of what remained of the working class would not have voted Communist in free soviet elections. Thus political considerations have to be factored in when evaluating Stack's arguments. Likewise, he makes no mention of the Bolshevik orthodoxy on the necessity of party dictatorship nor makes any comments on the Bolshevik embrace of centralised economic and political structures and their obvious negative impact on the situation. Rather all the blame for the terrible economic situation he describes is laid purely at the feet of the counter-revolution -- a position which, at best, is a half-truth and deliberately obscures the failure of Bolshevik policies. Nor was it believed at the time, for as Berkman summarised *"the workers of Petrograd . . . charged that, aside from other causes, Bolshevik centralisation, bureaucracy, and autocratic attitude toward the peasants and workers were directly responsible for much of the misery and suffering of the people."* ["The Kronstadt Rebellion", **Op. Cit.**, p. 61] As such, it takes an impressive amount of gall to argue that we must support the repressive actions of a party dictatorship because the nation is exhausted when it is the case that *"the dictatorship had paralysed the initiative of both the city proletariat and the peasantry."* [Goldman, "Trotsky Protests Too Much", **Op. Cit.**, p. 263]

Incredibly, Stack fails to even mention the power and privileges of the bureaucracy at the time. Officials got the best food, housing and so on. The lack of effective control or influence

from below ensured that corruption was widespread. One of the leaders of the Workers' Opposition gives us an insight of the situation which existed at the start of 1921:

*"The rank and file worker is observant. He sees that so far . . . the betterment of the workers' lot has occupied the last place in our policy . . . We all know that the housing problem cannot be solved in a few months, even years, and that due to our poverty, its solution is faced with serious difficulties. But the facts of ever-growing inequality between the privileged groups of the population in Soviet Russia and the rank and file workers, 'the frame-work of the dictatorship', breed and nourish the dissatisfaction.*

*"The rank and file worker sees how the Soviet official and the practical man lives and how he lives . . . [It will be objected that] 'We could not attend to that; pray, there was the military front.' And yet whenever it was necessary to make repairs to any of the houses occupied by the Soviet institutions, they were able to find both the materials and the labour."* [Alexandra Kollontai, **The Workers' Opposition**, p. 10]

A few months earlier, the Communist Yoffe wrote to Trotsky expressing the same concerns. *"There is enormous inequality,"* he wrote, *"and one's material position largely depends on one's post in the party; you'll agree that this is a dangerous situation."* [quoted by Orlando Figes, **A People's Tragedy**, p. 695] Indeed, part of the factors resulting in Kronstadt was *"the privileges and abuses of commissars, senior party functionaries and trade union officials who received special rations, allocations and housing and . . . quite openly enjoying the good life."* [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 210] As one historian summarised:

*"Between the Eighth Congress (March 1919) and the Tenth, the party grew from 310,000 to 730,000 . . . Worker members comprised 41 per cent of the membership, as opposed to 60 per cent in 1917, but most of these were workers by social origin who no longer worked on the factory floor, having been promoted to positions in the state administration, economic organs, or the Red Army. The rest of the membership was more or less equally divided between peasants (most soldiers) and white-collar employees (most of whom worked in the state apparatuses. On the eve of the Tenth Party Congress, L.B. Krasin declared: 'The source of the woes and unpleasantness that we are currently experiencing is the fact that the Communist Party consists of 10% convinced idealists, and 90% hangers-on without consciences, who have joined the party in order to get a position.' Krasin articulated a growing sense that the party had been hijacked by careerists; and if the purge of 1921 is any guide, he was right . . . many rank-and-file party members began vociferously to attack the privileges enjoyed by 'those at the top'. In June 1920 Preobrazhenskii reported to the Central Committee that the 'majority of rank-and-file members' supported slogans such as 'Down with the privileged caste of the communist elite!' . . . in September 1920 . . . a commission was set up to investigate 'Kremlin privileges.' Its recommendations were never implemented . . . [Even party members showed] exasperation at red tape and careerism [as well as] disaffection at the arbitrary transfers of cadres and the substitution of political departments, such as Trotsky had created in the Red Army, for party committees . . . it was clear that proletarians promoted into positions of authority often behaved little differently from those officials who had moved seamlessly from positions in tsarist ministries or zemstvos into commissariats or soviets."* [S.A. Smith, **Russia in Revolution**, pp. 212-3]

As such, to talk about anarchists dismissing the importance of material reality and a "revolutionary regime" while ignoring the inequalities in power and wealth, and the bureaucratisation and despotism which were their root, is definitely a case of the pot calling the kettle black! It means joining Lenin in having "no inkling that the state itself could become an instrument of exploitation and showed little understanding of how the Bolsheviks could themselves be 'captured' by the apparatus which they notionally controlled." [S.A. Smith, **Op. Cit.**, p. 216]

The question for anarchists, as for the Kronstadt rebels, was what the necessary pre-conditions for the needed reconstruction were. Could Russia be re-built in a socialist way while being subject to a dictatorship which crushed every sign of working class protest and collective action? It is an infantile delusion to think that such a regime could achieve this and it ill-suits a self-proclaimed socialist to suggest that a benevolent dictatorship is possible, particularly one who claims to believe in "socialism from below." Surely the first step, as Kronstadt shows, would have to be the re-introduction of workers' democracy and power for only this would give allow expression to the creative powers of the masses and interest them in the reconstruction of the country. Continuing party dictatorship would **never** do this:

*"by its very essence a dictatorship destroys the creative capacities of a people. . . The revolutionary conquest could only be deepened through a genuine participation of the masses. Any attempt to substitute an 'elite' for those masses could only be profoundly reactionary.*

*"In 1921 the Russian Revolution stood at the cross roads. The democratic or the dictatorial way, that was the question. By lumping together bourgeois and proletarian democracy the Bolsheviks were in fact condemning both. They sought to build socialism from above, through skilful manoeuvres of the Revolutionary General Staff. While waiting for a world revolution that was not round the corner, they built a state capitalist society, where the working class no longer had the right to make the decisions most intimately concerning it." [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 204-5]*

Under the harsh material conditions facing Russia at the time, it goes without saying that the bureaucracy would utilise its position to gather the best resources around it. Stack fails to mention this and instead talks about the necessity of defending a "workers' state" in which workers had no power and where bureaucratic abuses were rampant. If anyone is denying reality, it is him. Thus Ciliga:

*"The Soviet Government and the higher circles in the Communist Party applied their own solution [to the problems facing the revolution] of **increasing the power of the bureaucracy**. The attribution of powers to the 'Executive Committees' which had hitherto been vested in the soviets, the replacement of the dictatorship of the class by the dictatorship of the party, the shift of authority even within the party from its members to its cadres, the replacement of the double power of the bureaucracy and the workers in the factory by the sole power of the former -- to do all this was to 'save the Revolution!' . . . The Bureaucracy prevented the bourgeois restoration . . . by eliminating the proletarian character of the revolution." ["The Kronstadt Revolt", **Op. Cit.**, p. 331]*

Perhaps, in light of this, it is significant that, in his list of revolutionary gains from October 1917, Stack fails to mention what anarchists would consider the most important, namely

workers' power, freedom, democracy and rights. But, then again, the Bolsheviks did not rate these gains highly either and were more than willing to sacrifice them to ensure their most important gain, state power. So when Stack argues that it was necessary to crush Kronstadt to "save the revolution" and "preserv[e] the revolutionary regime" we feel entitled to ask what was there left to save and preserve? The dictatorship and decrees of "Communist" leaders? In other words, party power. Yes, by suppressing Kronstadt Lenin and Trotsky saved the revolution: saved it for Stalin. This is hardly something to be proud of.

Ironically, given Stack's assertions that anarchists ignore "material reality", anarchists had long predicted that a revolution would be marked by economic disruption. Kropotkin, for example, argued that it was "certain that the coming Revolution . . . will burst upon us in the middle of a great industrial crisis . . . There are millions of unemployed workers in Europe at this moment. It will be worse when Revolution has burst upon us . . . The number of the out-of-works will be doubled as soon as barricades are erected in Europe and the United States . . . we know that in time of Revolution exchange and industry suffer most from the general upheaval . . . A Revolution in Europe means, then, the unavoidable stoppage of at least half the factories and workshops." He stressed that there would be "the complete disorganisation" of the capitalist economy and that during a revolution "[i]nternational commerce will come to a standstill" and "the circulation of commodities and of provisions will be paralysed." [**The Conquest of Bread**, pp. 69-70 and p. 191]

Elsewhere, Kropotkin argued that a revolution would "mean the stoppage of hundreds of manufactures and workshops, and the impossibility of reopening them. Thousands of workmen will find no employment . . . The present want of employment and misery will be increased tenfold." He stressed that "the reconstruction of Society in accordance with more equitable principles **will** necessitate a disturbed period" and argued that any revolution will be isolated to begin with and so (with regards to the UK) "the imports of foreign corn will decrease" as will "exports of manufactured wares." A revolution, he argued, "is not the work of one day. It means a whole period, mostly lasting for several years, during which the country is in a state of effervescence." To overcome these problems he stressed the importance of reconstruction from the bottom up, organised directly by working people, with local action being the basis of wider reconstruction. The "immense problem -- the re-organisation of production, redistribution of wealth and exchange, according to new principles -- cannot be solved by . . . any kind of government. It must be a natural growth resulting from the combined efforts of all interested in it, freed from the bonds of the present institutions. It must grow naturally, proceeding from the simplest up to complex federations; and it cannot be something schemed by a few men and ordered from above. In this last shape it surely would have no chance of living at all." [**Act for Yourselves**, pp. 71-2, p. 67, pp. 72-3, pp. 25-6 and p. 26]

The Russian revolution confirmed all this. It had faced economic crisis all through 1917 and 1918. Indeed, by the spring of 1918 Russia was living through an almost total economic collapse, with a general scarcity of all resources and mass unemployment. According to Tony Cliff (the leader of the SWP) in the spring of 1918 Russia's "[w]ar-damaged industry continued to run down. 'The bony hand of hunger' . . . gripped the whole population . . . One of the causes of the famine was the breakdown of transport . . . Industry was in a state of complete collapse. Not only was there no food to feed the factory workers; there was no raw materials or fuel for industry. The oilfields of the Baku, Grozny and Emba regions came to a standstill. The situation was the same in the coalfields. The production of raw materials was in no better a state . . . The collapse of industry meant unemployment for the workers."

[**Lenin**, vol. 3, pp. 67-9] The industrial workforce dropped to 40% of its 1917 levels. The similarities to Stack's description of the situation in early 1921 is striking.

The fact is that Lenin and Trotsky had argued that revolution inevitably meant civil war, economic crisis and so exceptional and difficult circumstances. They did not, for that reason, suggest that revolution was impossible. Thus, for example, Lenin in 1917 mocked those who argued that revolution was out of the question because "*the circumstances are exceptionally complicated.*" He noted that **any** revolution, "*in its development, would give rise to exceptionally complicated circumstances*" and that it was "*the sharpest, most furious, desperate class war and civil war. Not a single great revolution in history has escaped civil war. No one who does not live in a shell could imagine that civil war is conceivable without exceptionally complicated circumstances. If there were no exceptionally complicated circumstances there would be no revolution.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 26, pp. 118-9]

Does this mean that, for Leninists, soviet democracy was impossible in early 1918? After all, then the Russian Revolution also faced a "*destroyed economy and infrastructure, a population faced with starvation and bloody war, and a hostile outside world.*" If these "*were not circumstances in which the revolution could move forward*" then it also applied in 1918 -- in 1917, in fact -- as well as in 1921. If so, then this means admitting that soviet democracy is impossible during a revolution, marked as it will always be by exceptionally difficult circumstances. Which, of course, means to defend party power and not soviet power and promote the dictatorship of the party over the working class, positions Leninists deny holding. Of course, as noted in [section H.6](#), the Bolsheviks **in practice** were making soviet democracy impossible by suppressing soviets that elected the wrong people while the Bolshevik policies aiming to address these problems -- which in 1917 Lenin had proclaimed could only be solved by revolution and placing the Bolsheviks into power -- made the problems worse by their centralised and top-down nature. To suggest that the Bolsheviks had to remain in power because the country was exhausted in part as a result of their policies is hard to take seriously.

So anarchists had predicted the problems facing the Russian Revolution decades previously and, given the lack of success of Bolshevik attempts to solve these problems via centralism, had also predicted the only way to solve them. Far from ignoring "*material reality*" anarchists have long been aware of the difficulties a revolution would face and had organised our politics around them. In contrast, Stack is arguing that these inevitable effects of a revolution create "*circumstances*" in which the revolution cannot "*move forward*". If this is so, then revolution is an impossibility as it will always face economic disruption and isolation at some stage in its development, for a longer or shorter period. If we base our politics on the "best-case scenario" then they will soon be proven to be lacking.

Ultimately, Stack's arguments (and those like it) are the ones which ignore "*material reality*" by arguing that Lenin's state was a "*revolutionary regime*" and reconstruction could be anything but to the advantage of the bureaucracy without the active participation of what was left of the working class and the independence of their class organisations -- unions, soviets and co-operatives. Indeed, the logic of his argument would mean rejecting the idea of socialist revolution **as such** as the problems he lists will affect **every** revolution and had affected the Russian Revolution from the start. So while the problems facing the Russian working class were difficult in the extreme in 1921, we should not forget that many of which were due to the results of Bolshevik economic policies which compounded economic chaos via centralisation as well as the inevitable results of monopolising political power which

meant the crushing of all independent working class organisation and initiative. They could **never** be solved by someone else bar the thousands of workers taking strike action all across Russia at the time: "*And if the proletariat was that exhausted how come it was still capable of waging virtually total general strikes in the largest and most heavily industrialised cities?*" [Ida Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 202]

The problem after October 1917 was that when the proletariat **did** organise itself, it was repressed as counterrevolutionary by the Bolsheviks. The reconstruction from below, the organisation of the proletariat, automatically came into conflict with party power. The workers and peasants could not act because soviet and trade union democracy would have ended Bolshevik dictatorship -- little wonder the country was "*exhausted*" as all the means of addressing the situation were systematically smashed by the ruling elite.

Indeed, Serge himself admitted as much when he noted that "*[t]hrough its intolerance and its arrogation of an absolute monopoly of power and initiative in all fields, the Bolshevik regime was floundering in its own toils, spreading a sort of general paralysis throughout the country . . . By freeing the State-strangled cooperatives, and inviting various associations to take over the management of different branches of economic activity, an enormous degree of recovery could have been achieved straightaway . . . [this] would have caused less inconvenience than did our stringently bureaucratic centralisation, with its muddle and paralysis . . . However, since the Bolshevik mind had already ordained other solutions, it was a vision confined to the realms of pure theory.*" [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 147-8] Serge at the time, however, did not seem to support the one part of the party, the Workers' Opposition, which did raise this idea -- albeit within the context of a party dictatorship (see [section 2](#) of the appendix on "[Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?](#)"). Trotsky dismissed this suggestion precisely because of the threat this posed to the party's position: "*we are against it. Why? . . . Because, in the first place, we want to retain the dictatorship of the Party, and, in the second place, because we think that the [democratic] way of managing important and essential plants is bound to be incompetent and prove a failure from an economic point of view.*" [quoted by James Bunyan, **The Origin of Forced Labor in the Soviet State, 1917-1921**, p. 252]

So, as far as "*material reality*" goes, it is clear that it is Stack who ignores it, not anarchists nor the Kronstadt rebels. Both recognised that the country was in dire straits and that a huge effort was required for reconstruction. The material basis at the time offered two possibilities for reconstruction -- either from above or from below. Such a reconstruction could **only** be socialist in nature if it involved the direct participation of the working masses in determining what was needed and how to do it. In other words, the process had to start **from below** and no central committee utilising a fraction of the creative powers of the country could achieve it. Such a bureaucratic, top-down re-construction would rebuild the society in a way which benefited a few. Which, of course, was what happened.

What is surprising is that any self-proclaimed socialist could think otherwise. In a country with no workers' democracy, where the masses do not have even limited control over those in power, where all power and rights are held by the administration, where workers can do nothing on their own initiative, it is naive in the extreme to believe that any social reconstruction will not reflect the interests of the ruling bureaucracy. To suggest so, as Stack does, means ignoring the class reality of the situation in favour of wishful thinking over the possibility of benevolent dictatorship. It means ignoring that by crushing Kronstadt, the Bolsheviks not only crushed the Third Revolution but also paved the way for Stalinism.

Ultimately, Stack's arguments fail to convince. As noted, his ideological gurus clearly argued that revolution without civil war and economic exhaustion was impossible. Sadly, the means to mitigate the problems of Civil War and economic crisis (namely workers' self-management and control) inevitably came into conflict with party power and a vision of socialism premised on the efficiency of centralisation and could not be encouraged. If Bolshevism cannot meet the inevitable problems of revolution and maintain the principles it pays lip-service to (i.e. soviet democracy and workers' control) then it clearly does not work and should be avoided. This argument, in short, represents the bankruptcy of Bolshevik ideology rather than a serious argument against the Kronstadt revolt.

## 13 Was there a real alternative to Kronstadt's "*Third Revolution*"?

Another Trotskyist argument against Kronstadt and in favour of Bolshevik repression is related to the country was exhausted argument we discussed in the [last section](#). It finds its clearest expression in Victor Serge's argument:

*"After many hesitations, and with unutterable anguish, my Communist friends and I finally declared ourselves on the side of the Party. This is why. Kronstadt had right on its side. Kronstadt was the beginning of a fresh, liberating revolution for popular democracy: 'The Third Revolution!' it was called by certain anarchists whose heads were stuffed with infantile illusions. However, the country was exhausted, and production practically at a standstill; there was no reserves of any kind, not even reserves of stamina in the hearts of the masses. The working-class elite that had been moulded in the struggle against the old regime was literally decimated. The Party, swollen by the influx of power-seekers, inspired little confidence . . . Soviet democracy lacked leadership, institutions and inspiration; at its back there were only masses of starving and desperate men.*

*"The popular counter-revolution translated the demand for freely-elected soviets into one for 'Soviets without Communists.' If the Bolshevik dictatorship fell, it was only a short step to chaos, and through chaos to a peasant rising, the massacre of the Communists, the return of the emigres, and in the end, through the sheer force of events, another dictatorship, this time anti-proletarian . . . In these circumstances it was the Party's duty to make concessions, recognising that the economic regime was intolerable, but not to abdicate power." [Memoirs of a Revolutionary, pp. 128-9]*

Serge is at least being honest here and not suggesting that it was a White Guard plot or a product of backward peasant recruits. Still, he supported the Bolsheviks, considering them as the only possible means of defending the revolution. Some of the more sophisticated modern day Leninists follow this line of reasoning and quote Trotsky somewhat out of context to proclaim that crushing the revolt was "*a tragic necessity*". [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 98] They want us to believe that the Bolsheviks were defending the remaining gains of the revolution and ensuring that no counter-revolution took place indirectly by allowing the Russian workers soviet democracy. The hope was that the revolution could survive until it spread internationally. As John Rees put it: "*But ultimately, without a revival of struggle in Russia or successful revolution elsewhere, the [Left] Opposition was doomed to failure. That, however, could not be known in advance.*" [Op. Cit., p. 69] This is echoed in different ways by other Leninists -- the Bolsheviks had to crush Kronstadt to secure the revolution until it

could spread to other countries, particularly advanced industrial nations. The isolation of the revolution ensured the victory of the bureaucracy and Stalin.

Let us accept Serge's argument and those who, like Rees, echo it. This means that the only alternative to the "*Third Revolution*" would have been self-reform of the party dictatorship and, therefore, of the soviet state. Such an attempt was made after 1923 by the **Left Opposition** headed by Trotsky. Given the logic of such arguments, this is the only option left for Leninists. How viable was this alternative? Could the soviet dictatorship reform itself? Was soviet democracy more of a danger than the uncontrolled dictatorship of a party within a state marked by already serious levels of corruption, bureaucracy and despotism? History provides the answer with the rise of Stalin.

However, given how widespread this infantile delusion is within the Leninists, more needs to be said. From a libertarian perspective, there are three main problems with this argument. First, it ignores the reality of the Bolshevik regime. Second, it ignores the politics of the Left Opposition. Third, it ignores how Bolshevik ideology would have impacted on any other revolution. We will discuss each in turn after making an obvious point -- libertarian socialists who defend the Kronstadt revolt and oppose the actions of the Bolsheviks are not foolish enough to argue that Kronstadt's "*Third Revolution*" would have definitely succeeded as every revolution is a gamble and may fail. Ante Ciliga put it well:

*"Let us consider, finally, one last accusation which is commonly circulated: that action such as that at Kronstadt could have **indirectly** let loose the forces of the counter-revolution. It is **possible** indeed that even by placing itself on a footing of workers' democracy the revolution might have been overthrown; but what is **certain** is that it has perished, and that it has perished on account of the policy of its leaders. The repression of Kronstadt, the suppression of the democracy of workers and soviets by the Russian Communist party, the elimination of the proletariat from the management of industry, and the introduction of the NEP, already signified the death of the Revolution."* ["*The Kronstadt Revolt*", **Op. Cit.**, p. 335]

No revolution is guaranteed to succeed. The same with Kronstadt's "*Third Revolution*." Its call for soviet democracy may have led to a return of the Whites, that is possible just as it was possible in 1917. One thing is sure, by maintaining the Bolshevik dictatorship the Russian Revolution **was** crushed and (Stalinist) counter-revolution ensued. As such, we must always remember what the alternatives were: "*Were there not real dangers in the democratic way? Was there no reason to fear reformist influences in the soviets, if democracy had been given free rein? We accept that this was a real danger. But it was no more of a danger than what inevitably followed the uncontrolled dictatorship of a single party.*" [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 204]

After all, the most obvious objection is what gains, exactly? The only gains that remained were Bolshevik party power and nationalised industry -- both of which excluded the real gains of the Russian Revolution from a socialist perspective (namely soviet power, the right to independent unions and to strike, freedom of assembly, association and speech for working people, the beginnings of workers' self-management of production and so on). Indeed, both "gains" were the basis for the Stalinist bureaucracy's power.

Unfortunately for the **Left Opposition**, the bureaucracy had gained experience in repressing working class struggles since early 1918 -- most obviously in breaking the wave of strikes in 1921 and crushing the Kronstadt rebellion itself. As such, it is incredulous to suggest as Rees

does that *"the regime was left stranded, the well-head of renewal and thorough reform -- the activity of the workers -- had dried to a trickle . . . To appeal outside the machine, as the Workers' Opposition had wanted, was impossible. This is the tragedy of Lenin's last fight and of the Left Opposition. They knew the problem but the means at their disposal was not equal to the task. Hence the paucity of the measures they advocated: self reform of the bureaucracy."* [Op. Cit., p. 68] The "well-head" of workers' struggle did not dry-up by some natural process -- it was deliberately blocked by the Bolshevik regime itself:

*"After the launch of the NEP, the state's strategy in dealing with strikes in the nationalised sector remained fairly uniform throughout the 1920s. Its priority was to compel workers to return to their jobs as quickly as possible for which the full forces of management, Party, unions, and state would be mobilised as required . . . the Bolshevik leadership . . . feared a repeat of the escalation and politicisation of worker discontent that had marked the end of War Communism . . . Hence the general strategy employed by the state when faced by a strike was to attempt to pacify the bulk of striking workers, while seeking to 'isolate' or eliminate instigators and organisers. In cases where these measures failed . . . a re-registration of the workforce, closure of the factory, or mass dismissals would be announced . . . From the start, the CheKa/OGPU played a leading role in eradicating strikes, making arrests, bringing in its special troops to deal with unrest, and using its intelligence network to monitor the shopfloor and identify activists"* [Andrew Pospelovsky, "Strikes during the NEP", pp. 1-34, **Revolutionary Russia**, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 17-8]

These techniques had all been used and perfected from 1918 onwards. Thus the strike wave of 1923 was repressed by the same methods as those in 1921 with the name of the secret police being the only difference (from Cheka to GPU):

*"Trade unions, reluctant to disturb the industrial revival, refused to press claims. Finally, 'wild' strikes broke out in many factories, spread, and were accompanied by violent explosions of discontent . . . The threat of a general strike was in the air, and the movement seemed on the point of turning into a political revolt. Not since the Kronstadt rising had there been so much tension in the working class and so much alarm in ruling circle . . . the remnants of the anti-Bolshevik parties . . . [were] thoroughly suppressed [and] had been inactive . . . the G.P.U arrested [the Workers' Group] . . . where there is much inflammable material a few sparks may produce a conflagration. The party leaders sought to stamp out the sparks. They determined to suppress the Workers' Group and the Workers' Truth . . . Trotsky . . . had no sympathy with the crude and anarchic tub-thumping. Nor was he inclined to countenance industrial unrest".* [Isaac Deutscher, **The Prophet Unarmed**, pp. 88-9]

The *"leaders of the 1923 opposition did . . . nothing to protest at the repression of dissidents . . . Trotsky, in the very letters to the politburo in which he fired his first broadsides against the 'unhealthy regime' and lack of internal party democracy, supported repressive action against the far left."* Indeed, he *"welcomed an instruction by Dzerzhinskii to party members immediately to report 'any groupings within the party', i.e. the Workers Group and Workers Truth, not only to the C[entral] C[ommittee] but also to the G.P.U., and emphasized that making such reports was 'the elementary duty of every party member'."* [Simon Pirani, **The Russian revolution in retreat, 1920-24**, p. 215] Trotsky was clear that *"it is obvious that there can be no toleration of the formation of groupings [within the party] whose ideological content is directed against the party as a whole and against the dictatorship of the*

*proletariat, as for instance the Workers' Truth and Workers' Group.*" [**Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923-25)**, p. 408] By "dictatorship of the proletariat," Trotsky meant the dictatorship of the party as both these opposition groups -- unlike the Left Opposition -- advocated genuine soviet democracy.

Rees suggests that the Stalinist bureaucracy could betray the revolution without "*an armed counter-revolutionary seizure of power*" and so "*no martial law, no curfew or street battles*" because of "*the atomisation of the working class.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 69] However, the atomisation was a product of the armed counter-revolutionary activities of Lenin and Trotsky after 1918 which reached their culmination when in 1921 they broke the strikes in Petrograd (and elsewhere) by means of martial law and curfew and crushed the sailor rebellion by battles in the streets of Kronstadt. In 1927-8, the workers had no interest in which branch of the bureaucracy would govern and exploit them and so remained passive. Rees fails to see that there **was** martial law, curfew and street battles but they occurred in 1921, not 1928. The rise of Stalinism was the victory of one side of the new bureaucratic class over another but that class had defeated the working class in March 1921.

Not that the Left Opposition's political platform could have saved the revolution: it was utopian in that it urged the party and state bureaucracy to reform itself based upon maintaining the Bolshevik party's dictatorship as well as one-man management in the workplace. As such, it did not get at the roots of the problem, namely the state-capitalist nature of the regime and Bolshevik ideology. The theoretical limitations of the "Left Opposition" are discussed in more detail in [section 3](#) of the appendix on "[Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?](#)", here we will restrict ourselves to looking at **The Platform of the Opposition** written in 1927.

While uttering many warm words about workers', trade union and soviet democracy -- for which the Kronstadt sailors and were branded "White Guardists" and "counter-revolutionary" -- it also affirmed "*the Leninist principle, inviolable for every Bolshevik, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party.*" While bemoaning that the "*growing replacement of the party by its own apparatus is promoted by a 'theory' of Stalin's which denies*" this, it repeats this principle by arguing that "*the dictatorship of the proletariat demands a single and united proletarian party as the leader of the working masses and the poor peasantry.*" ["*The Platform of the Opposition*", **The Challenge of the "Left Opposition" (1926-27)**, p. 395, p. 439 and p. 441] Any split in the party or the formation of two parties represented an enormous danger to the revolution:

*"Nobody who sincerely defends the line of Lenin can entertain the idea of 'two parties' or play with the suggestion of a split. Only those who desire to replace Lenin's course with some other can advocate a split or a movement along the two-party road.*

*"We will fight with all our power against the idea of two parties, because the dictatorship of the proletariat demands as its very core a single proletarian party. It demands a single party. It demands a proletarian party -- that is, a party whose policy is determined by the interests of the proletariat and carried out by a proletarian nucleus. Correction of the line of our party, improvement of its social composition -- that is not the two-party road, but the strengthening and guaranteeing of its unity as a revolutionary party of the proletariat." [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 440-1]*

We can note, in passing, the interesting notion of party (and so "proletarian" state) policy *"determined by the interests of the proletariat and carried out by a proletarian nucleus"* but which is **not** determined **by** the proletariat itself. Which means that the policy of the "workers' state" must be determined by some other (unspecified) group and not by the workers. What possibility can exist that this other group actually knows what is in the interests of the proletariat? None, of course, as any form of democratic decision can be ignored when those who determine the policy consider the protests of the proletariat to be not *"in the interests of the proletariat"* -- hence the pressing need for *"the Leninist principle, inviolable for every Bolshevik, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party."* Needless to say, the Platform makes no call for industrial democracy but rather proclaims that the *"appropriation of surplus value by a workers' state is not, of course, exploitation"* while also acknowledging the existence of a *"swollen and privileged administrative apparatus [which] devours a very considerable part of our surplus value"* while *"all the data testify that the growth of wages is lagging behind the growth of the productivity of labour."* [Op. Cit., pp. 347-50]

As Anton Ciliga recalled when in a Stalinist prison in the early 1930s, the imprisoned Trotskyists retained this perspective for *"the argument of freedom to choose one's party"* was *"condemned formerly by Lenin, by Trotsky, and by the **Decemists**. And even then the major part of the **Decemists** and almost all the Trotskyists continued to consider that 'freedom of party' would be 'the end of the revolution'. 'Freedom to choose one's party -- that is Menshevism,' was the Trotskyists' final verdict. 'The proletariat is socially homogenous and that is why its interests can only be represented by a single party,' the **Decemist** Davidov wrote. 'And why should not democracy within the party be coupled with its dictatorship outside?' the **Decemist** Nyura Yankovskaya wanted to know." He concluded the Trotskyists' *"outlook was not that very different from that of the Stalinist bureaucracy; they were slightly more polite and human, that was all."* [The Russian Enigma, p. 280 and p. 263] This reflects the flawed class analysis of Leninism:*

*"Trotskyism as well as Stalinism saw . . . two social orders: the proletariat versus bourgeoisie, the latter embracing the kulaks and the relics of the former ruling classes . . . I had come to the conclusion that three social systems were partaking in the struggle: State capitalism, private capitalism and socialism, and that these three systems represented three classes: the bureaucracy, the bourgeoisie (including the kulaks) and the proletariat. The difference lay in that Stalinists and Trotskyism saw State capitalism as socialism and bureaucracy as proletariat. Trotsky as well as Stalin wished to pass off the State as being the proletariat, the bureaucratic dictatorship over the proletariat as the proletarian dictatorship, the victory of State capitalism over both private capitalism and socialism as a victory of the latter. The difference between Trotsky and Stalin . . . [was that] Trotsky perceived and stressed the gaps and bureaucratic deformations of the system."* [Ciliga, Op. Cit., pp. 103-4]

The bureaucratic machine outnumbered the party -- there were over five million state officials in 1921 compared to around 730,000 party members (reduced to 515,000 in January 1922 after a purge). The grim reality was that *"those enjoying dominant positions in the State apparatus . . . had been consolidating their power and detaching themselves more and more from the workers. The bureaucracy was already assuming alarming proportions. The State machine was in the hands of a single Party, itself more and more permeated by careerist elements. A non Party worker was worth less, on the scale of everyday life, than an ex bourgeois or nobleman, who had belatedly rallied to the Party. Free criticism no longer*

existed. Any Party member could denounce as 'counter revolutionary' any worker simply defending his class rights and his dignity as a worker." [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 140]

Likewise, within the party the higher echelons held power and had been more than willing to use it against internal dissidents long before 1921. As such, it ignored the reality of the Bolshevik party to appeal to the party machine to introduce *"in deeds and not words a democratic regime. Do away with administrative pressure tactics. Stop the persecution and expulsion of those who hold independent opinions about party questions."* [Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 407] It failed to note that these tactics were used by Lenin and Trotsky against Left-wing dissidents within the party after the October revolution.

The Left-Communists in early 1918, for example, were subject to such pressure. They were ousted from leading positions in the Supreme Economic Council in March 1918 and after their views were denounced by Lenin, a *"campaign was whipped up in Leningrad which compelled **Kommunist** [their paper] to transfer publication to Moscow . . . After the appearance of the first issue of the paper a hastily convened Leningrad Party Conference produced a majority for Lenin and 'demanded that the adherents of **Kommunist** cease their separate organisational existence."* The paper lasted four issues, with the last having to be published as a private factional paper. The issue had been settled by a high pressure campaign in the Party organisation, backed by a barrage of violent invective in the Party press and in the pronouncements of the Party leaders. The Workers' Opposition three years later also experienced it. At the Tenth Party congress, Kollontai (author of their platform) stated that the circulation of her pamphlet had been deliberately impeded. *"So irregular were some of these that the Moscow Party Committee at one stage voted a resolution **publicly** censuring the Petrograd organisation 'for not observing the rules of proper controversy.'" The success of the Leninist faction in getting control of the party machine was such that *"there is serious doubt as to whether they were not achieved by fraud."* [Maurice Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, pp. 39-40, p. 75 and p. 77] Victor Serge witnessed the rigging of an election to ensure Lenin's victory in the trade union debate. [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 123] Kollontai herself mentions (in early 1921) that comrades *"who dare to disagree with decrees from above are **still** being persecuted."* [our emphasis, **The Workers' Opposition**, p. 22] As Ida Mett noted:*

*"There is no doubt that the discussion taking place within the [Communist] Party at this time [in early 1921] had profound effects on the masses. It overflowed the narrow limits the Party sought to impose on it. It spread to the working class as a whole, to the soldiers and to the sailors. Heated local criticism acted as a general catalyst. The proletariat had reasoned quite logically: if discussion and criticism were permitted to Party members, why should they not be permitted to the masses themselves who had endured all the hardships of the Civil War?"*

*"In his speech to the Tenth Congress -- published in the Congress Proceedings -- Lenin voiced his regret at having 'permitted' such a discussion. 'We have certainly committed an error,' he said, 'in having authorised this debate. Such a discussion was harmful just before the Spring months that would be loaded with such difficulties.'" [Op. Cit., p. 143]*

Unsurprisingly, the Tenth Congress voted to ban factions within the Party. The elimination of discussion in the working class led to its ban in the party. Having the rank-and-file of the Party discuss issues would give false hopes to the working class as a whole who may attempt

to influence policy by joining the party (and, of course, vote for the wrong people or policies). Equally unsurprising, we discover the Platform stating that *"the dying out of inner-party democracy leads to a dying out of workers' democracy in general -- in the trade unions, and in all other nonparty mass organisations."* ["Platform of the Joint Opposition", **Op. Cit.**, p. 395] Ignoring the awkward fact that Kronstadt was crushed precisely for demanding this, as noted the opposite causation is correct: the dying out of workers' democracy in general leads to a dying out of inner-party democracy. Power monopolised by a single party means that all dissatisfaction becomes channelled through it -- this cannot help but generate factions within the party as disagreements and interests need to be expressed somewhere. As the party dictatorship replaces the working masses, eliminating workers democracy by the dictatorship of a single party, democracy in that party must wither for if workers can join that party and influence its policies then the same problems that arose in the soviets and unions appear in the party. This necessitates a corresponding centralisation in power within the party as occurred in the soviets and unions, all to the detriment of rank and file power and control. This can be seen from the banning of factions within the party in early 1921:

*"In March 1921, in the days of the Kronstadt revolt, which attracted into its ranks no small number of Bolsheviks, the 10th Congress of the party thought it necessary to resort to a prohibition of factions -- that is, to transfer the political regime prevailing in the state to the inner life of the ruling party. This forbidding of factions was again regarded as an exceptional measure to be abandoned at the first serious improvement in the situation. At the same time, the Central Committee was extremely cautious in applying the new law, concerning itself most of all lest it lead to a strangling of the inner life of the party."* [Trotsky, **The Revolution Betrayed**, p. 96]

Yet this is, as we discuss in [section H.5.3](#), the inevitable outcome of vanguardism in practice. Trotsky, then, simply opposed the application of repressive methods used on previous dissidents onto himself and those who agreed with him. He seemed genuinely surprised that the party machine would abuse its power in its own interests. Just as those outside the party -- whether anarchists, other oppositional socialist groups or strikers -- were repressed by the bureaucracy, so the party itself was subject to a similar regime. As Victor Serge noted, in practice the faction ban *"meant the establishment within the Party of a dictatorship of the Old Bolsheviks, and the direction of disciplinary measures, not against the unprincipled careerists and conformist latecomers, but against those sections with a critical outlook."* [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 135] Originally this repression was mild but, over time, it increased in severity until Communists and even bureaucrats suffered the same fate as those without a party card.

The notion that the bureaucracy could be defeated from within was naive in the extreme. It -- like any ruling class -- could only be defended from below, by the working class. To fight the bureaucracy, the working class needed freedom: freedom to organise, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, as demanded by the Kronstadt rebels. Limiting these essential liberties to within the party as Trotsky wished would solve little given the size and power of the bureaucracy and the willingness of the ruling elite -- as shown in 1921, for example -- to repress any workers who exercised those freedoms. It is, therefore, unsurprising to discover Ciliga recounting how in his prison the strongest fraction of the Trotskyists *"hoped for reform from above . . . As to making an appeal to the people and the masses . . . this [was considered] an extremely dangerous course to follow: the peasants were 'against us'; the workers were undecided, the 'spirit of Kronstadt' pervaded the land and the 'Thermidor front might well include the working class'"* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 212] Victor Serge, likewise, noted how

**Left Opposition** "refused to appeal to workers and intellectuals who were not affiliated to the Party, because it believed that counterrevolutionary attitude, whether conscious or not, were still rife amongst them." [The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky, p. 140] As Trotsky put it: "We have never had and do not now have the intention of making nonparty people judges of our inner-party conflicts." [The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1926-27), p. 482] This is unsurprising, for it is doubtful such people would have restricted their demands to the limited inner-party reforms urged by the **Left Opposition** nor would they have forgotten Trotsky's policies when he had held power. So what else could it do? Appeal to the workers to fight, to revolt, in the name of... party dictatorship?

In terms of internal reform, this was doomed to failure in advance: the **Left Opposition** received the crop that Lenin and Trotsky sowed the seeds of in 1921. Much the same can be said for the idea that an external revolution could have regenerated the Soviet regime. In the words of Ida Mett:

*"Some claim that the Bolsheviks allowed themselves such actions (as the suppression of Kronstadt) in the hope of a forthcoming world revolution, of which they considered themselves the vanguard. But would not a revolution in another country have been influenced by the spirit of the Russian Revolution? When one considers the enormous moral authority of the Russian Revolution throughout the world one may ask oneself whether the deviations of this Revolution would not eventually have left an imprint on other countries. Many historical facts allow such a judgement. One may recognise the impossibility of genuine socialist construction in a single country, yet have doubts as to whether the bureaucratic deformations of the Bolshevik regime would have been straightened out by the winds coming from revolutions in other countries." [Op. Cit., p. 203]*

This is indeed the case -- from the start, the Bolsheviks were considered by many socialists across the globe as showing the correct path in terms of revolutionary strategy and actions. This included the dogma on the necessity of party dictatorship which had become Bolshevik orthodoxy by the start of 1919 at the latest (reflecting its practice by mid-1918). Thus we see, for example, during the Hungarian Revolution which had seen libertarians form the first workers' councils in December 1917 by 1919 they "*felt that the powers of the [Communist] Revolutionary Governing Council [of Bela Kun] were excessive . . . For the syndicalists the legitimate holders of proletarian sovereignty were the workers councils . . . It was not long before they saw their cherished ideals defeated by the united party's oligarchy. On April 7, 1919, elections were held for the Budapest Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. The syndicalist controlled Budapest Eighth district elected a slate consisting solely of syndicalist and anarchist write-in deputies in place of the single-party ticket. The Revolutionary Governing Council voided the results of the election and a week later the official slate 'won'.*" [Rudolf L. Tokes, **Bela Kun and the Hungarian Soviet Republic**, p. 38 and pp.151-2] As in Russia, the "wrong" people had been elected to the soviets and so the Communist regime simply nullified workers' democracy.

The same perspective was expressed in other countries. As another example, in Italy the pro-Bolsheviks were also raising the necessity of party dictatorship and were being opposed by the libertarians during the revolutionary crisis in 1920:

*"Up to now, whenever we said that what the socialists term **dictatorship of the proletariat** is only, in fact, the dictatorship of some men who, with the assistance of a*

*party, superimpose and impose themselves on the proletariat, they used to treat us as if we were little short of slanderers . . . Moscow had become the Mecca of the proletariat; the source of light, and . . . peremptory orders as to the ideas that those who, with permission from their betters, wished to call themselves communists ought to profess and the conduct they should observe . . . the official Italian Socialist Party daily, up to now the most authorised mouthpiece for the word from Moscow, . . . **Avanti!** of the 26th [September, 1920] . . . said:*

*"In Russia, under the soviet regime, the Party really directs all State policy and all public activities; individuals as well as groups being utterly subordinated to the decisions of the Party, so that **the dictatorship of the proletariat is really the dictatorship of the party and, as such of its central committee.**"*

*"Well now we know what we have to look forward to: the dictatorship of the Leadership of the Socialist Party, or of the as yet unborn Communist Party . . . a revolution made with an authoritarian outlook with dictatorial objectives . . . through authoritarian imposition from above." [Errico Malatesta, "At Last! What is the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'?", **Anarchistes, Socialistes et Communistes**, pp. 208-10]*

Kronstadt, likewise, was integrated into this perspective with, for example, leading German Communist Karl Radek writing on 1 April 1921 that he was "*convinced that in the light of the events at Kronstadt, the Communist elements which have so far not understood the role of the Party during the revolution, will at last learn the true value of these explanations, as well as the resolution of the 2nd Congress of the Communist International on the subject of the role of the Party.*" For "*the full benefit of this lesson*" is that "*even when that uprising bases itself on working-class discontent*" it must "*be realised that, if the Communist Party can only triumph when it has the support of the mass of workers, there will nevertheless arise situations in the West where it will have to, for a certain period, keep power using solely the forces of the vanguard.*" He noted that this was a long standing position by quoting an earlier article of his from 1919:

*"And the mass . . . may well hesitate in the days of great difficulties, defeats, and it may even despair of victory and long to capitulate. The proletarian revolution does not bring with it an immediate relief of poverty, and in certain circumstances, it may even temporarily worsen the situation of the proletariat. The adversaries of the proletarian will take advantage of this opportunity to demand the government of the workers themselves; it is for this reason that it will be necessary to have a centralised Communist Party, powerful, armed with the means of the proletarian government and determined to conserve power for a certain time, even only as the Party of the revolutionary minority, while waiting for the conditions of the struggle to improve and for the morale of the masses to rise . . . there can arise situations where the revolutionary minority of the working class must shoulder the full weight of the struggle and where the dictatorship of the proletariat can only be maintained, provisionally at least, as the dictatorship of the Communist Party."*

Events of March 1921 confirmed this position for the party's "*firm decision to retain power by all possible means*" is "*the greatest lesson of the Kronstadt events, the international lesson.* He also referenced "*our discussions with that section of Communists [in Germany] who wished to oppose the Russian dictatorship, the dictatorship of the Communist Party*" --

as also discussed by Lenin in "**Left-Wing** Communism: An Infantile Disorder (see [section H.3.3](#)) -- on *"the problem of the relationship between the Communist Party and the mass of the proletariat and the form of the dictatorship: dictatorship of the Party or dictatorship of the class"*. [**The Kronstadt Uprising**] Radek was just repeating the Bolshevik position in words with more than usual clarity and *"provisionally"* unsurprisingly came to be measured in decades and was only ended by mass revolt in 1989.

The Bolsheviks had already been manipulating foreign Communist Parties in the interests of their state for a number of years. That is part of the reason why the Council Communists around Anton Pannekoek and Herman Gorter whom Radek referred to broke with the Third International in 1921. *"We can now see why,"* Pannekoek noted *"the tactics of the Third International, laid down by Congress to apply homogeneously to all capitalist countries and to be directed from the centre, are determined not only by the needs of communist agitation in those countries, but also by the political needs of Soviet Russia"* in addition to the *"immediate economic needs which determine their policies"*. [*"World Revolution and Communist Tactics"*, **Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism**, p. 144]

Just as the influence of Lenin had been a key factor in the successful the struggle against anti-Parliamentarian tendencies in Communist Parties all across the world, so the example and influence of the Bolsheviks would have made its impact on any foreign revolution. Any successful revolutionaries would have applied such "lessons" of October such as the dictatorship of the proletariat being impossible without the dictatorship of the Communist Party, centralism, nationalisation, one-man management, militarisation of labour and so on. This would have distorted any revolution from the start as well as simply creating a new bureaucratic ruling class as had happened in Russia.

Given how obediently the Communist Parties around the world followed the insane policies of Stalinism, can we doubt this conclusion? After all, even in the 1930s, these positions were still held by Trotskyists across the globe. The first issue of the official American Trotskyist journal, for example made its position clear by seeking to refute the notion that the dictatorship of the party was an alien concept brought into Bolshevism by Stalin! It did so by *"quotations from Lenin, Trotsky and others so as to establish . . . the dictatorship of the party is Leninist"* rather than *"a Stalinist innovation"*. [Max Shachtman, *"Dictatorship of Party or Proletariat? Remarks on a Conception of the AWP ... and Others"*, **New International**, July 1934]

Thus the reality was that any Bolshevik-style revolution in Western Europe -- and least we forget, Trotskyists are convinced that only a Bolshevik-lead revolution can succeed -- would have followed the Bolshevik ideology with regards to the necessity of the dictatorship of the party as well as nationalisation and one-man management. In short, it would have also resulted in the political and economic dispossession of the working class by "its" party. As such, a successful revolution in the West would **not** have seen the Russian dictatorship over the proletariat ended but rather reinforced as the non-Russian Leninist parties would have simply repeated the "lessons" learned by the Bolsheviks and communicated internationally:

*"It was, indeed, between 1917 and 1920 that the Bolshevik party established itself so firmly in power that it no longer could have been dislodged except by force of arms. And it was from the beginning of this period that the uncertainties of its line were ironed out, the ambiguities lifted, and the contradictions resolved. In the new State, the proletariat was to work, to be mobilised, and, should the need arise, to die in*

*defence of the new power. It was to give its most 'conscious' and most 'capable' members to 'its' party, where they would become the leaders of society. It was to be 'active' and it had to 'participate' whenever it was asked to do so, but it was to do so only and exactly to the extent that the Party demanded this of the proletariat. Finally, it was to bow completely to the Party's will on all essential matters."* [Cornelius Castoriadis, **Political and Social Writings**, vol. 3, p. 99]

Simply put, democracy cannot be introduced in the soviets and unions when party dictatorship is considered essential for the "realisation" of the "proletarian" dictatorship and when there can only be **one** party. If "proletarian" dictatorship is impossible without the dictatorship of the party then, clearly, proletarian democracy becomes meaningless. All the workers would be allowed to do would be to vote for members of the same party, all of whom would be bound by party discipline to carry out the orders of the party leadership. Power would rest in the party hierarchy and definitively **not** in the working class, its unions or its soviets (both of which would remain mere fig leaves for party rule). Ultimately, the **only** guarantee that the party dictatorship would govern in the interests of the proletariat would be the good intentions of those who held power in its hierarchy. However, being unaccountable to the masses, such a guarantee would be worthless -- as history shows.

It may be objected here that this ignores that Trotsky stated in 1936 that when *"the Soviet bureaucracy is overthrown by a revolutionary party having all the attributes of the old Bolshevism"* then it *"would begin with the restoration of democracy in the trade unions and the Soviets. It would be able to, and would have to, restore freedom of Soviet parties."* Yet this ignores his suggestion that a *"restoration of the right of criticism, and a genuine freedom of elections, are necessary conditions for the further development of the country"* and this *"assumes a revival of freedom of Soviet parties, beginning with the party of Bolsheviks"*. [The **Revolution Betrayed**, p. 252 and p. 289] While in power Trotsky -- like every leading Bolshevik -- had repeatedly asserted that party dictatorship was not only completely compatible with "Soviet Democracy" but that the latter required the former. So rather than a complete introduction of Soviet democracy in the true meaning of the term, we would see the Trotskyists given freedom first but within the context of their party's dictatorship. They would then decide which other parties counted as "Soviet parties" -- we do not have to look at the fate of the Mensheviks under Lenin to see the flaws in such a position. It comes as no surprise to discover Trotsky reiterating the necessity of party dictatorship the year this work was published in English:

*"The revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party is for me not a thing that one can freely accept or reject: It is an objective necessity imposed upon us by the social realities -- the class struggle, the heterogeneity of the revolutionary class, the necessity for a selected vanguard in order to assure the victory. The dictatorship of a party belongs to the barbarian prehistory as does the state itself, but we can not jump over this chapter, which can open (not at one stroke) genuine human history . . . The revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution . . . Abstractly speaking, it would be very well if the party dictatorship could be replaced by the 'dictatorship' of the whole toiling people without any party, but this presupposes such a high level of political development among the masses that it can never be achieved under capitalist conditions. The reason for the revolution comes from the circumstance that capitalism does not permit the material and the moral development of the masses."* [Writings 1936-37, pp. 513-4]

We can agree with Trotsky on "*the crushing of Soviet democracy by an all-powerful bureaucracy*" occurred in Russia but not on the date -- it happened when Lenin held the reins of power and not after his death. Likewise, we can agree that the "*opposition parties were forbidden one after the other*" is "*obviously in conflict with the spirit of Soviet democracy*" but must reject as revisionism the claim that "*the leaders of Bolshevism regarded [this] not as a principle, but as an episodic act of self-defence.*" [**The Revolution Betrayed**, p. 278 and p. 96] The Platform of the Opposition -- to note just one example -- shows that this smacks of the re-writing of history Trotsky correctly accused Stalinism of.

As can be seen, the alternatives suggested by Trotskyists to crushing Kronstadt are the real utopian positions. The self-reform of the regime by a section of its rulers is not only impossible in the face of the size and power of the bureaucracy but it was also based on maintaining the party dictatorship and one-man management within production. Unlike the Kronstadt Platform, it was doomed to failure from the start. Any group which raised demands for a return to the principles of 1917 were, like the Kronstadt sailors, crushed by forces of the State. In terms of workers' struggles, the bureaucracy had long experience in repressing strikes and so any revolt would have undoubtedly suffered the fate of the Petrograd strikes which had inspired the solidarity of Kronstadt. Finally, the notion that a revolution elsewhere would have revitalised the Soviet regime fails to acknowledge that it would have -- if it were Leninist in nature -- been based on imposing a party dictatorship and state-capitalism as per the example of Soviet Russia under Lenin and Trotsky. As for a non-Leninist revolution, well, those who defend the Bolshevik repression of Kronstadt are Leninists and so assume that no such thing is possible...

Regardless of the suggested alternative to Kronstadt's Third Revolution, it can only be concluded that it did not exist -- the balance of forces at the time, the nature of the regime, the ideology of the ruling elite, all pointed to this during the revolt itself. The unchallenged master of the economy and society, the Bolshevik bureaucracy was the nucleus of a new ruling class -- the notion that such a machine could be controlled or appealed to by a few "pure" party members is the infantile delusion. This new bureaucratic class could only be removed by a Third Revolution and while this, possibly, could have resulted in a bourgeois counter-revolution the alternative of maintaining Bolshevik dictatorship would **inevitably** have resulted in Stalinism. When supporters of Bolshevism argue that Kronstadt would have opened the door to counter-revolution, they do not understand that the Bolsheviks **were** the counter-revolution in 1921 and that by suppressing Kronstadt the Bolsheviks not only opened the door to Stalinism but invited it in and gave it the keys to the house.

Lastly, we should draw some parallels between the fates of the Kronstadt sailors and the Left Opposition. John Rees argues that the Left Opposition had "*the whole vast propaganda machine of the bureaucracy . . . turned against them,*" a machine used by Trotsky and Lenin in 1921 against Kronstadt. Ultimately, the Left Opposition "*were exiled, imprisoned and shot,*" again like the Kronstadters and a host of revolutionaries who defended the revolution but opposed the Bolshevik dictatorship. [**Op. Cit.**, p. 68]

A Third Revolution was the only **real** alternative in Bolshevik Russia. Any struggle from below post-1921 would have raised the same problems of soviet democracy and party dictatorship which Kronstadt raised. Given that the **Left Opposition** subscribed to the "*Leninist principle*" of "*the dictatorship of the party,*" it could not appeal to the masses as its members knew that not only would they not vote for it, the masses would hardly have taken to the streets for such a pitiful set of reforms. The arguments raised against Kronstadt that

soviet democracy would lead to counter-revolution are equally applicable to movements which appealed, as Rees desires, to the Russian working class post-Kronstadt. Moreover, any mass revolt would have faced the same state machine utilised in 1921 against Petrograd and Kronstadt. Finally, any Leninist external revolution would have imposed party dictatorship and state-capitalism following Bolshevik orthodoxy -- along with the associated bureaucracy this hierarchical, centralised regime necessitated.

To conclude, the claim that Kronstadt would inevitably have led to an anti-proletarian dictatorship fails. Yes, it might have but the Bolshevik dictatorship itself was anti-proletarian (it had repressed proletarian protest, organisation, freedom and rights on numerous occasions) and it could never be reformed from within by its social position and the very logic of its own ideology. The rise of Stalinism was inevitable after the crushing of Kronstadt for there are no benevolent dictatorships, not even socialist ones headed by Trotsky. This is not hindsight -- a massive, corrupt bureaucratic machine which had crushed numerous strikes, protests and revolts by the workers and peasants before early 1921 would not have been kept "pure" by a handful of leaders elected by a self-selected party which proclaimed the necessity of its own dictatorship.

## 14 How do modern day Trotskyists misrepresent Kronstadt?

We have discussed how Trotskyists have followed their heroes Lenin and Trotsky in abusing the facts about the Kronstadt sailors and uprising in previous sections. In [section 8](#), we have indicated how they have selectively quoted from academic accounts of the uprising and suppressed evidence which contradicts their claims. In [section 7](#), we have shown how they have selectively quoted from Paul Avrich's book on the revolt to paint a false picture of the connections between the Kronstadt sailors and the Whites. In [section 10](#), we exposed how the repression against the Petrograd strikers was removed from history. Here we summarise some of the other misrepresentations of Trotskyists about the revolt.

We noted in [section 3](#) how Trotskyists fail to quote the Kronstadt demands. They often go one further by inventing them. Thus, for example, John Rees asserts that the Kronstadters were fighting for *"soviets without parties."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 63] His fellow-party member Pat Stack goes one further and asserts that the *"central demand of the Kronstadt rising though was 'soviets without Bolsheviks', in other words, the utter destruction of the workers' state."* [*"Anarchy in the UK?"*, **Socialist Review**, no. 246, November 2000] Both reference Paul Avrich's book **Kronstadt 1921** in their articles yet this is unambiguous: *"Soviets without Communists' was not, as is often maintained by both Soviet and non-Soviet writers, a Kronstadt slogan."* Nor did they agitate under the banner *"soviets without parties."* They argued for *"all power to the soviets and not to parties."* Political parties were not to be excluded from the soviets, simply stopped from dominating them and substituting themselves for them. As Avrich notes, the Kronstadt programme *"did allow a place for the Bolsheviks in the soviets, alongside the other left-wing organisations . . . Communists . . . participated in strength in the elected conference of delegate, which was the closest thing Kronstadt ever had to the free soviets of its dreams."* The index for Avrich's work handily includes this page in it, under the helpful entry *"soviets: 'without Communists.'" [Kronstadt 1921, p. 181 and p. 269]*

The central demand of the uprising was simply soviet democracy and a return to the principles that the workers and peasants had been fighting the whites for. In other words, both

Leninists have misrepresented the Kronstadt revolt's demands and so misrepresented its aims while, at the same time, claiming to have read a work which debunks their own claim.

Rees goes one step further and tries to blame the Bolshevik massacre on the sailors themselves. He argues *"in Petrograd Zinoviev had already essentially withdrawn the most detested aspects of War Communism in response to the strikes."* [Op. Cit., p. 63] Needless to say, Zinoviev did not withdraw the **political** aspects of War Communism, just some of the **economic** ones and, as the Kronstadt revolt was mainly **political**, these concessions were not enough -- indeed, the repression directed against workers' rights and opposition socialist and anarchist groups **increased**. As such, Zinoviev confirmed what Kuzmin had warned the Conference of Delegates on 2nd March in Kronstadt, namely *"that the Communists would on no account surrender power or share it with another political party or group."* [George Katkov, Op. Cit., p. 30] Rees then states the Kronstadters *"response [to these concessions] was contained in their **What We Are Fighting For**"* and quotes it as follows:

*"there is no middle ground in the struggle against the Communists . . . They give the appearance of making concessions: in Petrograd province road-block detachments have been removed and 10 million roubles have been allotted for the purchase of foodstuffs. . . But one must not be deceived . . . No there can be no middle ground. Victory or death!"* [quoted by Rees, Op. Cit., p. 63]

What Rees fails to inform the reader is that this was written on March 8th, while the Bolsheviks had started military operations on the previous evening. Moreover, the fact the *"response"* stated *"[w]ithout a single shot, without a drop of blood, the first step has been taken [of the "Third Revolution"]". The toilers do not need blood. They will shed it only at a moment of self-defence*" is not mentioned. [quoted by Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 243] In other words, the Kronstadt sailors reaffirmed their commitment to non-violent revolt. Any violence on their part was in self-defence against Bolshevik actions. Not that you would know that from Rees' work. Indeed, as another one of his sources indicates, the rebels *"had refrained from taking any communist lives. The Soviet Government, on the other hand, as early as March 3, already had executed forty-five seamen at Oranienbaum -- a quite heavy proportion of the total personnel of the men at the Naval Aviation Detachment. These men had voted for the Kronstadt resolution, but did not take arms against the government. This mass execution was merely a prelude to those that took place after the defeat of the mutineers."* These executions at Oranienbaum, it should be noted, exceeded the total of 36 seamen who had paid with their lives for the two large rebellions of the 1905 revolution at Kronstadt and Sveaborg. [D. Fedotoff-White, Op. Cit., p. 156]

Ted Grant, of the UK's **Socialist Appeal** re-writes history significantly in his work **Russia: From revolution to counter-revolution**. He asserts, without providing any references or evidence, that the *"first lie"* of anti-Bolshevik writers on the subject *"is to identify the Kronstadt mutineers of 1921 with the heroic Red sailors of 1917."* Yet this book appeared in 1997, long after the academic research we quote in [section 8](#) **proven** that over 90% of the sailors on the two battleships which started the revolt had been recruited before and during the 1917 revolution and at least three-quarters of the sailors were old hands who had served in the navy through war and revolution. So was the majority of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee. Grant also asserts that the sailors in 1917 and 1921 *"had nothing in common"* because those *"of 1917 were workers and Bolsheviks"*, so ignoring the substantial evidence which had appeared decades before which -- as we summarised in [section 9](#) -- showed that the Bolsheviks were a minority in Kronstadt during 1917 and that the demands raised in the

revolt in 1921 matched the politics dominant in 1917. For good measure, he proclaims "[t]hat there were actual counter-revolutionary elements among the sailors was shown by the slogan 'Soviets without Bolsheviks'" without apparently aware that this was never raised in Kronstadt.

Grant claims that *"almost the entire Kronstadt garrison volunteered to fight in the ranks of the Red Army during the civil war."* Are we to believe that the Bolshevik commanders left Kronstadt (and so Petrograd) defenceless during the Civil War? Or drafted the skilled and trained (and so difficult to replace) sailors away from their ships, so leaving them unusable? Of course not. Common sense refutes Grant's argument even if you were unaware, as he was, of the statistical evidence that on 1st January, 1921, at least 75.5% of the Baltic Fleet was likely to have been drafted before 1918 and over 80% were from Great Russian areas and some 10% from the Ukraine. [Gelzter, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 208] Not to be outdone, Grant then states that the *"Kronstadt garrison of 1921 was composed mainly of raw peasant levies from the Black Sea Fleet. A cursory glance at the surnames of the mutineers immediately shows that they were almost all Ukrainians."* According to Paul Avrich, *"[s]ome three or four hundred names appear in the journal of the rebel movement . . . So far as one can judge from these surnames alone . . . Great Russians are in the overwhelming majority."* Of the 15 person Provisional Revolutionary Committee, *"three . . . bore patently Ukrainian names and two others. . . Germanic names."* Of the three Ukrainians, two were sailors who *"had fought on the barricades in 1917."* [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 92-3 and p. 91] He also suggests that *"[i]t is interesting to note that members of the Workers' Opposition, a semi-anarcho-syndicalist tendency present at the Congress, also joined the attacking forces. This nails yet another lie, which attempts to establish a clumsy amalgam between Kronstadt -- anarchism -- Workers' Opposition -- three things that have absolutely nothing in common."* Ignoring the awkward fact that only Trotsky's biography Isaac Deutscher claimed Kronstadt was led by anarchists, we can simply note that it was the leadership of the Bolsheviks who sought to link the Workers' Opposition with Kronstadt at the time:

*"But I ask: Why is Shlyapnikov not prosecuted for making such statements? Are we seriously discussing discipline and unity in an organised Party, or are we at a meeting of the Kronstadt type? For his is a Kronstadt, anarchist type of statement, to which the response is a gun."* [Lenin, **Collected Works**, vol. 32, p. 206]

Alexander Shlyapnikov was a leader of the Workers' Opposition so, as Nicolas Walter noted in 1971, *"[a]ttempts to assimilate Kronstadt to the Workers' Opposition, which were made by the Leninists at the time as part of the amalgam technique of propaganda and which have been made by libertarian Marxists since then as part of a similar technique in reverse, break on the decisive fact that the Workers' Opposition . . . always retained as its fundamental principle the Communist monopoly of power -- the structure of the Bolshevik regime was to be changed, but not its basis as a party dictatorship; the fundamental principle of the Kronstadt programme, on the other hand, was precisely the removal of that dictatorship. The essential difference, however, was not in words but in deeds: when it came to a practical choice between Communism and communism, the Workers' Opposition gladly turned their guns on Kronstadt."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 149]

And **Grant** talks about the *"[m]any falsifications. . . written about this event,"* that it *"has been virtually turned into a myth"* and that *"these allegations bear no relation to the truth."* Truly amazing -- although, to be fair, he **may** have been genuinely ignorant of the research on the subject but his readers would surely have expected him to do **some** investigation of the

facts before so confidently accusing others of falsification and myth-making. The best that can be said is that he made no attempt to suggest he had read Paul Avrich's and Israel Gelzter's essential books on the subject while making his assertions.

Another SWP member, Abbie Bakan, asserts that *"more than three quarters of the sailors"* at Kronstadt *"were recent recruits of peasant origin"* but refuses to provide a source for this claim. [*"A Tragic Necessity"*, **Socialist Worker Review**, no. 136] As noted above, such a claim is false. The likely source for the assertion is Paul Avrich, who noted that more than three-quarters of the sailors were of peasant origin but Avrich does **not** say they were all recent recruits. While stating that there could be *"little doubt"* that the Civil War produced a *"high turnover"* and that *"many"* old-timers had been replaced by conscripts from rural areas, he does not indicate that all the sailors from peasant backgrounds were new recruits. He also notes that *"there had always been a large and unruly peasant element among the sailors."* [Op. Cit., pp. 89-90] It should be noted that Bakan seems ignorant of the research by Evan Mawdsley and Israel Gelzter which show beyond doubt that most of the sailors had been there in 1917. Like Grant, Bakan seems unwilling to research the subject being discussed -- unlike Grant, Bakan **is** an academic.

She asserts that anti-Semitism *"was vicious and rampant"* yet fails to provide **any** official Kronstadt proclamations expressing this perspective. Rather, we are to generalise from the memoirs of **one** sailor who was not even based in Kronstadt and the anti-Semitic remark of Vershinin, a member of the Revolutionary Committee, which was reported by Bolshevik sources. The source for these claims is Paul Avrich's book but, as Nicolas Walter points out, *"he offers very little evidence for this. He quotes some hair-raising passages from the manuscript memoirs of a sailor who was serving in Petrograd, and refers to the sailor's claim that his views were widely shared by his colleagues in the fleet . . . That isn't much of an argument, and the only other piece of evidence -- the Bolshevik story that one of the first Kronstadt rebels they caught shouted to his captors to 'join us and beat the Jews' -- is derisory. In view of the powerful tradition of antisemitism in Russia . . . the remarkable thing is that there seems to have been virtually no breath of antisemitism during the Kronstadt rising."* [Op. Cit., pp. 147-8] Nor should we forget that the opinions of the single sailor whose testimony is verifiable (who, let us stress, was not even in Kronstadt) were irrelevant to the Bolsheviks when they drafted him in the first place. More importantly, this *"vicious and rampant"* anti-Semitism failed to be expressed in the demands raised nor the Kronstadt rebels' newspaper or their radio broadcasts. Needless to say, the Bolsheviks failed to mention it at the time.

Yes, it is true that as Bakan (echoing Avrich) noted that the *"worse venom of the Kronstadt rebels was levelled against Trotsky and Zinoviev"* but it was **not** because, as Bakan asserts, they were *"treated as Jewish scapegoats."* Their ethnic background was not mentioned by the Kronstadt sailors and they were strong **political** reasons for attacking them. As Paul Avrich wrote, *"Trotsky in particular was the living symbol of War Communism, of everything the sailors had rebelled against. His name was associated with centralisation and militarisation, with iron discipline and regimentation."* As for Zinoviev, he had *"incurred the sailors' loathing as the party boss who had suppressed the striking workers and who had stooped to taking their own families as hostages."* [Op. Cit., p. 178 and p. 176] Good reasons to attack them and nothing to do with them being Jewish. Needless to say, Bakan seems selective in her concern over anti-Semitism and makes no mention of Emma Goldman's comment:

*"To be sure, the former commissar assures us that 'the peasants reconciled themselves to the requisition as a temporary evil,' and that 'the peasants approved of the Bolsheviki, but became increasingly hostile to the "Communists".' But these contentions are mere fiction . . . In point of historic truth, the peasants hated the regime almost from the start, certainly from the moment when Lenin's slogan, 'Rob the robbers,' was turned into 'Rob the peasants for the glory of the Communist Dictatorship.' That is why they were in constant ferment against the Bolshevik Dictatorship. A case in point was the uprising of the Karelian Peasants drowned in blood by the Tsarist General Slastchev-Krimsky . . . [who] had fought against the Revolution from its very beginning and had led some of the Wrangel forces in the Crimea. He was guilty of fiendish barbarities to war prisoners and infamous as a maker of pogroms. Now Slastchev-Krimsky recanted and he returned to 'his Fatherland.' This arch-counter revolutionist and Jew-baiter, together with several Tsarist generals and White Guardists, was received by the Bolsheviki with military honours. No doubt it was just retribution that the anti-Semite had to salute the Jew, Trotsky, his military superior. But to the Revolution and the Russian people the triumphal return of the imperialist was an outrage." ["Trotsky Protests Too Much", **Op. Cit.**, pp. 259-60]*

Bakan states that the *"demands of the Kronstadt sailors reflected the ideas of the most backward section of the peasantry."* As can be seen from [section 3](#), such a comment cannot be matched with the actual demands raised (demands, of course, which are not provided). So which ideas reflected the *"most backward section of the peasantry"*? Free elections to the Soviets, freedom of speech and of the press for workers and peasants, right of assembly, freedom for trade union and peasant organisations, a conference of workers, soldiers and sailors, liberation of all political, worker and peasant prisoners, equalisation of rations, freedom for peasants as long as they do not employ hired labour, and so on? All these could, indeed should, be included in most socialist parties programmes and were, in fact, key elements of Bolshevik rhetoric in 1917 and reflected key aspects of the Soviet Constitution. Moreover, these *"backward"* peasants send a radio message marking International Woman's Day, hoping that women would *"soon accomplish" their "liberation from every form of violence and oppression."* [quoted by Alexander Berkman, *"The Kronstadt Rebellion,"* **Op. Cit.**, p. 85] How *"backward"* can you get!

Bakan pathetically acknowledges that their demands included *"calls for greater freedoms"* yet looks at the *"main economic target"* (not mentioning they were points 8 and 11 of the 15 demands, the bulk of the rest are political). These, apparently, were aimed at *"the programme of forced requisitioning of peasant produce and the roadblock detachments that halted the black market in grain."* Given that she admits that the Bolshevik leadership was *"already discussing"* the end of these features (due to their lack of success) it must be the case that the likes of Lenin, Zinoviev and Trotsky also *"reflected the ideas of the most backward section of the peasantry"*. Moreover, the demand to end the roadblocks was also raised by the Petrograd and Moscow workers during their strikes, as were most of the other demands raised by Kronstadt. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 42] The *"most backward section of the peasantry"* was getting around in those days, appearing as they were in the highest echelons of the Bolshevik party bureaucracy and the factories of Petrograd and other major cities!

In reality, of course, the opposition to the forced requisitioning of food and the roadblocks between town and countryside was a combination of ethical and practical considerations -- not least, being counterproductive. As the striking workers show, you did not have to be a

peasant to see this. Victor Serge, for example, recollected he would *"have died without the sordid manipulations of the black market."* [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 79] He was a government official, think how much worse it would have been for an ordinary worker. These policies harmed everyone, including industrial workers -- little wonder they struck for their end and little wonder the sailors expressed solidarity with them and included it in their demands. Therefore, **nothing** can be drawn from these demands about the class nature of the revolt.

In an interesting example of double-think, Bakan then states that the sailors *"called for the abolition of Bolshevik authority in the army, factories and mills."* What the resolution demanded was, in fact, *"the abolition Party combat detachments in all military groups"* as well as *"Party guards in factories and enterprises"* (point 10). In other words, to end the intimidation of workers and soldiers by armed communist units in their midst. Needless to say, we discover Leninists denounce this when Stalinists do it, arguing that *"people who seriously believe that workers at the height of revolution need a police guard to stop them handing their factories over to capitalists certainly have no real faith in the possibilities of a socialist future."* [Chris Harman, **Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**, p. 144]

Likewise, when Bakan states that *"the real character of the rebellion"* can be seen from the opening declaration that *"the present soviets do not express the will of the workers and peasants"* she could not have made a truer comment. The Kronstadt rebellion was a revolt for soviet democracy and against party dictatorship -- so soviet democracy would only have led to *"abolition of Bolshevik authority"* if the existing soviets, as the resolution argued, did not express the will of their electors. Ignoring the reality of the situation in terms of lack of genuine soviet democracy under the Bolshevik dictatorship, she asserts that the Provisional Revolutionary Committee was *"non-elected"* and so contradicts every historian who acknowledges it was elected by the Conference of Delegates on March 2nd and expanded by the next conference a few days later. She even considers the fact the delegate meeting's *"denial of party members' usual role in chairing the proceedings"* as one of many *"irregularities"* while, of course, the **real** irregularity was the fact that **one** party (the government party) had such a *"usual role"* in the first place! Moreover, given that that Petrograd soviet meeting to discuss the revolt had Cheka guards (Lenin's political police) on it, her notion that sailors guarded the Conference of Delegates meeting (a meeting held in opposition to the ruling party) was *"irregular"* seems ironic.

Lastly, the issue of the Memorandum of the White National Centre is raised and used as evidence that *"Lenin's suspicion of an international conspiracy linked up with the Kronstadt events has been vindicated."* Needless to say, she fails to mention that the historian who discovered the document rejected the notion that it proved that Kronstadt was linked to such a conspiracy (see [section 6](#) for a full discussion). Much is made of the claim that *"[t]wo weeks after the Kronstadt rebellion the ice was due to melt"* and that *"[h]olding out until the ice melted was identified as critical in the memorandum,"* but this is not true. The Memorandum in fact, as Paul Avrich notes, *"assumes that the rising will occur after the ice has melted."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 237fn] No other interpretation can be gathered from the document.

To conclude, these writings shows how deeply the supporters of Leninism will sink to when attempting to discuss the Kronstadt rebellion. Sadly, as we have indicated many, many times, these are not isolated occurrences. Long refuted claims are repeated by those who seem to think doing research on a subject before writing about it is as counter-revolutionary as accurately reflecting the facts and arguments in any book they do deem fit to consult.

## 15 What does Kronstadt tell us about Bolshevism?

The rationales used by Lenin, Trotsky and their followers are significant aids to getting to the core of the Bolshevik Myth. These rationales and the various bad faith activities (selective quoting, invention, cherry-picking, deliberately ignoring relevant facts, etc.) utilised to create them allow us to understand the limitations of Bolshevik ideology and how it contributed to the degeneration of the revolution. However, the Kronstadt revolt should not be viewed in isolation -- it was the climax of a process which had started as soon as the Bolsheviks had seized power in 1917. As Nicolas Walter suggests:

*"Each side in every conflict, after all, behaves in accordance with its own particular goals and aspirations. It is action, more than anything else, which reveals the true nature of human beings. This in fact is the basis for our total condemnation of the Bolsheviks. We are not concerned with the possibility that the success of Kronstadt might have led to chaos, civil war, or counter-revolution, but with the certainty that the failure of Kronstadt did lead to dictatorship, purges, and counter-revolution. The suppression of real communists calling for real soviet power by people who described themselves as the Communist Party and the Soviet Government destroyed the Bolsheviks' credentials and should have destroyed their credibility. Kronstadt was not an isolated phenomenon . . . The importance of Kronstadt is not that it was a 'betrayal of the revolution', a sudden disease which afflicted Russia in 1921, but that it was indeed a 'tragic necessity', a symptom of the underlying chronic illness of authoritarian socialism -- the fact that it is objectively, practically, essentially counter-revolutionary."* [Op. Cit., pp. 152-3]

Moreover, it shows the links between Leninism and Stalinism. Thus the Stalinist officially approved history of the Russian Communist Party repeats the same myths as the Trotskyists do -- *"Whiteguards, in complicity with Socialist-Revolutionaries, Mensheviks and representatives of foreign states, assumed the lead of the mutiny"*, the rebels *"raised the cry: 'Soviets without Communists!'"* while *"counter-revolutionaries tried to exploit the discontent of the petty bourgeois masses in order to overthrow the power of the Soviets under a pseudo-Soviet slogan"* for *"[n]early all the old sailors who had taken part in the October Revolution were at the front, heroically fighting in the ranks of the Red Army"* and replaced by *"new men, who had not been schooled in the revolution"* who *"were a perfectly raw peasant mass who gave expression to the peasantry's discontent"*. [C.P.S.U. (B), **History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)**, p. 250] To be fair to the Trotskyists, they do not claim the Mensheviks were involved and so can at least claim to be less dishonest than the Stalinists -- faint praise indeed.

The various arguments used to justify the Bolshevik dictatorship crushing the rebellion are, in the main, weak or factually incorrect as we have indicated above. There is only one which had any real traction and it gets to the heart of the problem as it exposes the counter-revolutionary nature of Bolshevism from a socialist perspective. It was expressed by Trotsky in 1938:

*"the Kronstadt uprising was nothing but an armed reaction of the petty bourgeoisie against the hardships of social revolution and the severity of the proletarian dictatorship."*

*"That was exactly the significance of the Kronstadt slogan, 'Soviets without Communists,' which was immediately seized upon, not only by the SRs but by the bourgeois liberals as well. As a rather far-sighted representative of capital, Professor Miliukov understood that to free the soviets from the leadership of the Bolsheviks would have meant within a short time to demolish the soviets themselves. The experience of the Russian soviets during the period of Menshevik and SR domination and, even more clearly, the experience of the German and Austrian soviets under the domination of the Social Democrats, proved this. Social Revolutionary-anarchist soviets could only serve as a bridge from the proletarian dictatorship. They could play no other role, regardless of the 'ideas' of their participants. The Kronstadt uprising thus had a counterrevolutionary character."* [Lenin and Trotsky, "Hue and Cry Over Kronstadt", **Kronstadt**, p. 90]

Interesting logic. Let us assume that the result of free elections would have been the end of Bolshevik "leadership" (i.e. dictatorship), as seems likely. What Trotsky is arguing is that to allow workers to vote for their representatives would "only serve as a bridge from the proletarian dictatorship". This argument was made (in 1938) as a **general point** and is **not** phrased in terms of the problems facing the Russian Revolution in 1921. In other words Trotsky is clearly arguing for the dictatorship of the party and contrasting it to soviet democracy. So much for "All Power to the Soviets" or "workers' power" -- Trotsky is unambiguously calling for party power and, ultimately, party dictatorship. As he put it around the same time as the Kronstadt rebellion:

*"The Workers' Opposition came out with dangerous slogans, in that they have made a fetish of democratic principles. They have placed the workers' rights to elect representatives for workers' organizations above the Party, as though the Party had no right to assert its dictatorship even in cases when that dictatorship clashes temporarily with the passing mood of the workers' democracy . . . It is essential that we should become aware of the revolutionary-historical birthright of the Party, which is in duty bound to retain its dictatorship, regardless of the temporary vacillations of the amorphous masses, regardless of the temporary vacillations even of the working class . . . At any given moment, the dictatorship does not rest upon the formal principle of workers' democracy . . . over and above the formal aspect [of workers' democracy] is the Party dictatorship which safeguards the basic interests of the working class even when the moods of that class are temporarily vacillating."* [quoted by Bunyan, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 251-2]

It should -- but unfortunately probably will not -- cause Trotskyists some concern that in 1957, after crushing the previous year's workers' revolution, the Hungarian Stalinists argued along **exactly** the same lines as Trotsky had after the Bolsheviks had crushed Kronstadt: "the regime is aware that the people do not always know what is good for them. It is therefore the duty of the leadership to act, not according to the **will** of the people, but according to what the leadership knows to be in the best **interests** of the people." [quoted by Andy Anderson, **Hungary '56**, p. 101]

Along with Trotsky, Lenin made the same point at the same Congress in March 1921 by arguing that "the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of that class, because in all capitalist countries (and not only over here, in one of the most backward) the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts (by imperialism in some countries) that an organisation taking in the whole

*proletariat cannot directly exercise proletarian dictatorship. It can be exercised only by a vanguard that has absorbed the revolutionary energy of the class. The whole is like an arrangement of cogwheels. Such is the basic mechanism of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and of the essentials of transition from capitalism to communism.*" So in *"the transition to socialism the dictatorship of the proletariat is inevitable, but it is not exercised by an organisation which takes in all industrial workers . . . the Party, shall we say, absorbs the vanguard of the proletariat, and this vanguard exercises the dictatorship of the proletariat."* [Collected Works, vol. 32, p. 21 and p. 20] Yet what happens if there is a clash between the vanguard and the class? Lenin had explained the grim reality the previous year at a conference of the Cheka:

*"Without revolutionary coercion directed against the avowed enemies of the workers and peasants, it is impossible to break down the resistance of these exploiters. On the other hand, revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves."* [Op. Cit., vol. 42, p. 170]

It must be remembered that Lenin, according to Trotsky, had privately confessed the following in early 1921: *"If we perish, it is all the more important to preserve our ideological line and give a lesson to our continuators. This should never be forgotten, even in hopeless circumstances"*. [quoted by Maurice Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. 79] Trotsky repeated this lesson then as well as nearly 20 years later:

*"But the masses are by no means identical: there are revolutionary masses, there are passive masses, there are reactionary masses. The very same masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralized organization of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves. To invest the mass with traits of sanctity and to reduce one's program to amorphous 'democracy', is to dissolve oneself in the class as it is, to turn from a vanguard into a rearguard, and by this very thing, to renounce revolutionary tasks. On the other hand, if the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that the vanguard of the class is armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself. All this is elementary; all this has been demonstrated by the experience of Russia, and confirmed by the experience of Spain."* ["The Moralists and Sycophants against Marxism", **Their Morals and Ours**, p. 59]

Yet, by definition, everyone is "backward" compared to the vanguard. Lenin and Trotsky are clearly arguing that the working class, as a class, is incapable of making a revolution or managing society itself -- hence the party must step in on its behalf and, if necessary, ignore the wishes of the very people the party claims to represent. This requires a state in the normal sense of the word, an instrument of minority rule based on special bodies of armed people separate from the people itself -- the Red Army and Cheka used to crush the Petrograd strikes and Kronstadt revolt of 1921. To recall Lenin's words from 1917:

*"And the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the organisation of the vanguard of the oppressed as the ruling class for the purpose of suppressing the oppressors, cannot result merely in an expansion of democracy. **Simultaneously** with an immense expansion of democracy, which **for the first time** becomes democracy for the poor, democracy for the people, and not democracy for the money-bags, the dictatorship of*

*the proletariat imposes a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists. We must suppress them in order to free humanity from wage slavery, their resistance must be crushed by force; it is clear that there is no freedom and no democracy where there is suppression and where there is violence."* ["*The State and Revolution*", **Collected Works**, vol. 25, pp. 466-7]

As the dissident (working class) Communist Gavriii Miasnokov argued in 1921 against Lenin's defence of the regime and its authoritarianism:

*"The trouble is that, while you raise your hand against the capitalist, you deal a blow to the worker. You know very well that for such words as I am now uttering hundreds, perhaps thousands, of workers are languishing in prison. That I myself remain at liberty is only because I am a veteran Communist, have suffered for my beliefs, and am known among the mass of workers. Were it not for this, were I just an ordinary mechanic from the same factory, where would I be now? In a Cheka prison or, more likely, made to 'escape,' just as I made Mikhail Romanov 'escape.' Once more I say: You raise your hand against the bourgeoisie, but it is I who am spitting blood, and it is we, the workers, whose jaws are being cracked."* [quoted by Paul Avrich, "*Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin: G. T. Miasnikov and the Workers' Group*", **The Russian Review**, Vol. 43, No. 1, p. 11]

So, if this vanguard is suppressing the proletariat itself, crushing its resistance by force, then by Lenin's own logic "*where there is suppression and where there is violence*" then for the working class "*there is no freedom and no democracy*". And, indeed, this was in fact the situation post-October. Likewise, in 1905, Lenin had argued (and used Engels as an authority) that "*the principle, 'only from below' is an anarchist principle.*" For Lenin, Marxists must be in favour of "*From above as well as from below*" and "*renunciation of pressure also from above is anarchism*" as "*[p]ressure from below is pressure by the citizens on the revolutionary government. Pressure from above is pressure by the revolutionary government on the citizens.*" [Lenin, **Op. Cit.**, vol. 8, p. 477, p. 474, p. 481 and p. 474] Yet, as Kronstadt shows, "*pressure from above*" has an advantage over "*pressure from below*" as it has the full power of the state apparatus to use against the citizens. In other words, the seeds for degeneration of the revolution and the repression of Kronstadt lie at the heart of the Bolshevik ideology -- and in Marxism itself:

*"The workers . . . must not only strive for a single and indivisible German republic, but also within this republic for the most determined centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority. They must not allow themselves to be misguided by the democratic talk of freedom for the communities, of self-government, etc. . . . it must under no circumstances be permitted that every village, every town and every province should put a new obstacle in the path of revolutionary activity, which can proceed with full force only from the centre . . . As in France in 1793 so today in Germany, it is the task of the really revolutionary party to carry through the strictest centralisation."* [Marx, **Marx-Engels Collected Works**, vol. 10, p. 285]

Such a perspective cannot help having disastrous consequences for a revolution as this centralisation of power would soon undermine the democracy it claimed to embody. The Russian Revolution showed that Bakunin had been right to argue against Marx that the "workers' state" would not remain controlled by the workers for long and would soon become a dictatorship **over** the proletariat by an elite which claimed to know the interests of the

working class better than they did themselves. The logic of the centralisation favoured by Marxism clearly implies that when the party suppressed Kronstadt, when it disbanded non-Bolshevik soviets in early 1918 and robbed the workers and soviets of their power, the Bolsheviks were acting in the best interests of masses. The notion that Leninism is a revolutionary theory is invalidated by these arguments and practices they reflected. Rather than aim for a society based on workers' power, they aim for a "workers' state" in which workers **delegate** their power to the leaders of the party who then use that very same power to retain its social position in the face of popular dissent (the localities placing new obstacles in the way of the centralised state authority). Such an approach is doomed to failure -- it cannot produce a socialist society as such a society (as Bakunin stressed) can only be built from below by the working class itself. As Vernon Richards argues:

*"The distinction between the libertarian and authoritarian revolutionary movements in their struggle to establish the free society, is the means which each proposes should be used to this end. The libertarian maintains that the initiative must come from below, that the free society must be the result of the will to freedom of a large section of the population. The authoritarian . . . believes that the will to freedom can only emerge once the existing economic and political system has been replaced by a dictatorship of the proletariat [i.e., the dictatorship of the party] which, as the awareness and sense of responsibility of the people grows, will wither away and the free society emerge.*

*"There can be no common ground between such approaches. For the authoritarian argues that the libertarian approach is noble but 'utopian' and doomed to failure from the start, while the libertarian argues on the evidence of history, that the authoritarian **methods** will simply replace one coercive state by another, equally despotic and remote from the people, and which will no more 'wither away' than its capitalist predecessor." [Lessons of the Spanish Revolution, p. 206]*

Thus the reality of the Bolshevik regime confirmed Bakunin's prediction that Marxism meant *"the highly despotic government of the masses by a new and very small aristocracy of real or pretended scholars. The people are not learned, so they will be liberated from the cares of government and included in entirety in the governed herd."* [Statism and Anarchy, pp. 178-9] True, while modern day Leninists follow Trotsky's arguments they rarely acknowledge where they logically led or that their heroes explicitly acknowledged this conclusion and justified it. They do not state this position as honestly as did Lenin and Trotsky -- although we do see echoes of it in their attempts to justify the repression of Kronstadt -- as can be seen when Chris Bambery of the British SWP argues that *"in Lenin's concept of the party, democracy is balanced by centralism" for the "working class is fragmented. There are always those who wish to fight, those who will scab and those in between. Even in the soviets those divisions will be apparent. Revolutionary organisation does not aspire to represent the working class as a whole. It bases itself on those workers who want to challenge capitalism, and seeks to organise those to win the majority of workers to the need to take power."* ["Leninism in the 21st century", Socialist Review, no. 248]

Anarchists, as discussed in [section J.3.6](#), recognise that the truth of this description of the working class but we draw radically different conclusions in terms of the relationship of socialists to that class and its divisions. We also argue that the Leninist assumptions lead to anti-socialist conclusions (see [section H.5](#)) and this can be seen from how Bambery's comments have **exactly** the same basis of Trotsky's defence of the need of party dictatorship

and why Kronstadt was counterrevolutionary. Bambery notes that even *"in the soviets"* there will be *"divisions"* and so we have the basic assumption which, combined with centralisation, vanguardism and other aspects of Bolshevism, leads to events like Kronstadt and the destruction of soviet power by party power. The arguments for centralisation mean, in practice, the concentration of power in the centre, in the hands of a few party leaders, as the working masses cannot be trusted to make the correct ("revolutionary") decisions. This centralised power is then used to impose the will of the leaders, who use state power against the against whoever protests against the dictatorship of the party, including the very class they claim to represent. Thus the transformation of the *"dictatorship of the proletariat"* into the dictatorship **over** the proletariat under the Bolsheviks came as no surprise to anarchists.

Of course, it will be replied that the Bolshevik dictatorship used its power to crush the resistance of the bosses (and *"backward workers"* -- that is, any workers who disagreed with the vanguard). Sadly, this is not the case. Lenin's argument is flawed as it confuses the defence of the revolution with the defence of the party in power. These are two totally different things. The *"revolutionary coercion"* Lenin speaks of is, apparently, directed against one part of the working class. However, this will also intimidate the rest (just as bourgeois repression not only intimidates those who strike but those who may think of striking). As a policy, it can have but one effect -- to eliminate **all** workers' power and freedom. It is the violence of an oppressive minority against the oppressed majority, not vice versa. Ending free speech harmed working class people. Eliminating soviet democracy and union independence did not affect the bourgeoisie -- neither did the militarisation of labour and the repression of strikes. Unsurprisingly, of the 17 000 camp detainees on whom statistical information was available on 1 November 1920, peasants and workers constituted the largest groups, at 39% and 34% respectively. Similarly, of the 40 913 prisoners held in December 1921 (of whom 44% had been committed by the Cheka) nearly 84% were illiterate or minimally educated, clearly, therefore, either peasants or workers. [George Leggett, **The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police**, p. 178] Ironically, the same Bolshevik ideology which proclaimed this dictatorship over the proletariat a "proletarian" regime deemed the proletariat itself to be "petty-bourgeois" in order to justify this repression.

This can be seen all through the history of Bolshevism. Bambery states (correctly) that *"Lenin and the Bolsheviks initially opposed"* the spontaneously formed soviets of 1905 but then, incredulously, assigns this opposition to the assertion that their *"model of revolution was still shaped by that of the greatest previous revolution in France in 1789."* [Op. Cit.] In reality, it was because they considered, in the words of a leading Bolshevik, that *"only a strong party along class lines can guide the proletarian political movement and preserve the integrity of its program, rather than a political mixture of this kind, an indeterminate and vacillating political organisation such as the workers council represents and cannot help but represent."* [quoted by Oskar Anweiler, **The Soviets**, p. 77] The soviet, in other words, could not represent the interests of the working class because it was elected by them! The Bolsheviks saw the soviets as a rival to their party and demanded it either accept their political programme or simply become a trade-union like organisation. They feared that it pushed aside the party committee and thus led to the subordination of consciousness to spontaneity, following Lenin in **What is to be Done?** when he had argued that the *"spontaneous development of the labour movement leads to it being subordinated to bourgeois ideology."* [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 82]

This perspective is at the root of all Bolshevik justifications for party power after the October revolution. With the perception that spontaneous developments inevitably leads to bourgeois

domination, any attempt to revoke Bolshevik delegates and elect others to soviets **must** represent counter-revolutionary tendencies. As the working class is divided and subject to "vacillations" due to "wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves," working class people simply cannot manage society themselves. Hence "the Leninist principle, inviolable for every Bolshevik, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party." [Trotsky, "The Platform of the Opposition", **The Challenge of the "Left Opposition" (1926-27)**, p. 395] And, equally logically, to events like Kronstadt. Thus Cornelius Castoriadis:

*"To manage the work of others -- this is the beginning and the end of the whole cycle of exploitation. The 'need' for a specific social category to manage the work of others in production (and the activity of others in politics and in society), the 'need' for a separate business management and for a Party to rule the State -- this is what Bolshevism proclaimed as soon as it seized power, and this is what it zealously laboured to impose. We know that it achieved its ends. Insofar as ideas play a role in the development of history -- and, **in the final analysis**, they play an enormous role -- the Bolshevik ideology (and with it, the Marxist ideology lying behind it) was a decisive factor in the birth of the Russian bureaucracy."* [**Political and Social Writings**, vol. 3, p. 104]

Moreover, the logic of the Bolshevik argument is flawed:

*"Besides, if one wants a government which has to educate the masses and put them on the road to anarchy, one must also indicate what will be the background, and the way of forming this government.*

*"Will it be the dictatorship of the best people? But who are the best? And who will recognise these qualities in them? . . . by whom and with what criterion will the choice be made to put the social forces at the[ir] disposal . . . ? Will it be instead a government elected by universal suffrage, and thus the more or less sincere expression of the wishes of the majority? But if you consider these worthy electors as unable to look after their own interests themselves, how is it that they will know how to choose for themselves the shepherds who must guide them? And how will they be able to solve this problem of social alchemy, of producing a genius from the votes of a mass of fools? And what will happen to the minorities which are still the most intelligent, most active and radical part of a society?"* [Malatesta, **Anarchy**, pp. 53-4]

Hence the need for federalism, workers' democracy and socio-economic self-management, for the demands of the Kronstadt revolt. As Malatesta put it: "Only freedom or the struggle for freedom can be the school for freedom." [Errico Malatesta: **His Life and Ideas**, p. 59] The "epic of Kronstadt" proves "conclusively that what belongs really to **the workers and peasants can be neither governmental nor statist**, and what is **governmental and statist can belong neither to the workers nor the peasants.**" [Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 503] Kronstadt, in the words of Alexander Berkman, "proves once more that government, the State -- whatever its name or form -- is ever the mortal enemy of liberty and self-determination. The state has no soul, no principles. It has but one aim -- to secure power and hold it, at any cost. That is the political lesson of Kronstadt." ["The Kronstadt Rebellion", **Op. Cit.**, p. 89]

Anarchists are well aware that differences in political perspective exist within the working class. We are also aware of the importance of revolutionaries organising together to influence the class struggle, raising the need for revolution and the creation of working class organisations which can smash and replace the state with a system of self-managed communes and workers' councils. We are well aware that revolutions take time to develop, that (libertarian) socialism cannot be created overnight, that revolutions need defending a revolution, that expropriating the power and wealth of the ruling class is just the first stage of a social revolution. Our opposition to Bolshevism is based on **how** a revolution does all this - we reject the Bolshevik conclusion for centralised power (i.e. into the hands of a few party leaders) as doomed to failure. Rather, we agree with Bakunin who argued that revolutionary groups must *"not seek anything for themselves, neither privilege nor honour nor power"* and reject *"any idea of dictatorship and custodial control."* The *"revolution everywhere must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations . . . organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegations . . . [who] will set out to administer public services, not to rule over peoples."* [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 172]

Anarchists seek to influence working people directly, via their natural influence in working class organisations like workers' councils, unions and so on. Only by discussion, debate and self-activity can the political perspectives develop and change. This is impossible in a centralised system based on party dictatorship for debate and discussion are pointless if they have no effect on the process of the revolution nor if working people cannot elect, mandate and recall their own delegates. Nor can self-activity be developed if the government uses *"revolutionary coercion"* against *"waving or unstable elements"* (i.e. those who do not unquestioningly follow the orders of the government). Such a regime would hinder the popular initiative required to solve the many problems a social revolution inevitable experiences -- with, as Bolshevik Russia showed, terrible consequences for building genuine -- self-managed -- socialism.

In other words, the fact Bolshevism uses to justify its support for party power is, in fact, the strongest argument against it. By concentrating power in the hands of a few, the political development of the bulk of the population is hindered. No longer in control of their fate, of **their** revolution, they will become prey to counter-revolutionary tendencies. Nor was the libertarian approach impossible to implement during a revolution or civil war. Anarchists applied their ideas very successfully in the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine -- as we discuss in more detail in the appendix ["Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?"](#), within the areas they protected, the Makhnovists refused to dictate to the workers and peasants what to do and instead encouraged free soviets and workers' control. In contrast, the Bolsheviks tried to **ban** congresses of workers', peasants' and soldiers' delegates called by the Makhnovists. This should make the reader ponder if the elimination of workers' democracy during the civil war can be fully explained by the objective conditions facing Lenin's government or whether Leninist ideology played an important role in it.

The terrible objective circumstances facing the revolution obviously played a key role in the degeneration of the revolution. However, this is not the whole story. The **ideas** of the Bolsheviks played a key role as well -- not least in often making those terrible objective circumstances worse by policies which centralised decision making and so produced wasteful, inefficient, ever-growing and corrupt bureaucracy. The circumstances the Bolsheviks faced may have shaped certain aspects of their actions, but it cannot be denied

that the impulse for these actions were rooted in Bolshevik theory. In regards to this type of analysis, the Trotskyist Pierre Frank argues that anarchists think that bureaucratic conceptions "*beget bureaucracy*" and that "*it is ideas, or deviations from them, that determine the character of revolutions. The most simplistic kind of philosophical idealism has laid low historical materialism.*" This means, apparently, that anarchists ignore objective factors in the rise of the bureaucracy such as "*the country's backwardness, low cultural level, and the isolation of the revolution.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 22-3] Yet nothing could be further from the truth -- what anarchists argue (like Lenin before the October revolution) is that **every** revolution will suffer from isolation, uneven political development, economic problems and so on (i.e. "*exceptional circumstances,*" see the appendix "[What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?](#)"). The question is whether your revolution can survive them and whether your political ideas can meet these challenges without producing bureaucratic deformations. As can be seen from the Russian Revolution, Leninism fails that test.

Moreover, Frank is being incredulous. If we take his argument seriously then we have to conclude that Bolshevik ideology played **no** role in how the revolution developed. In other words, he subscribes to the contradictory position that Bolshevik politics were essential to the success of the revolution and yet played no role in its outcome. The facts of the matter is that people are faced with choices, choices that arise from the objective conditions they face. What decisions they make will be influenced by the ideas they hold -- they will not occur automatically, as if people were on auto-pilot -- and their decisions are also shaped by the social relationships they experience. Thus, someone placed into a position of power over others will act in certain ways, have a certain world view, which would be alien to someone subject to egalitarian social relations. Likewise, someone who favoured working class self-activity and did not view it as "petty-bourgeois" would not, as Zinoviev did in the summer of 1920, issue "*a decree forbidding any kind of commercial transaction. The few small shops still open were closed and their doors sealed. However, the State apparatus was in no position to supply the towns. From this moment on, famine could no longer be attenuated by the initiative of the population. It became extreme.*" [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 144]

So, obviously "ideas" matter, particularly during a revolution. Someone in favour of centralisation, nationalisation and who equates party rule with class rule (like Zinoviev, Lenin and Trotsky), will act in ways (and create structures) totally different from someone who believes in decentralisation, federalism and self-management. In other words, political ideas do matter in society. Nor do anarchists leave our analysis at this obvious fact, we also argue that the types of organisation people create and work in shapes the way they think and act. This is because specific kinds of organisation have specific authority relations and so generate specific social relationships. These obviously affect those subject to them -- a centralised, hierarchical system will create authoritarian social relationships which shape those within it in totally different ways than a federal, egalitarian system. That Frank seems to deny this obvious fact suggests he knows nothing of materialist philosophy and subscribes to the distinctly lobotomised (and bourgeois) "historical materialism" of Lenin (see Anton Pannekoek's **Lenin as Philosopher** for details).

All in all, the attitude of Leninists to the Kronstadt event shows quite clearly that, for all their lip-service to history from below, they are just as fixated with leaders as is bourgeois history. As Cornelius Castoriadis argues:

*"Now, we should point out that it is not workers who write history. It is always the **others**. And these others, whoever they may be, have a historical existence only insofar as the masses are passive, or active simply to support them, and this is precisely what 'the others' will tell us at every opportunity. Most of the time these others will not even possess eyes to see and ears to hear the gestures and utterances that express people's autonomous activity. In the best of instances, they will sing the praises of this activity so long as it **miraculously** coincides with their own line, but they will radically condemn it, and impute to it the basest motives, as soon as it strays therefrom. Thus Trotsky describes in grandiose terms the anonymous workers of Petrograd moving ahead of the Bolshevik party or mobilising themselves during the Civil War, but later on he was to characterise the Kronstadt rebels as 'stool pigeons' and 'hirelings of the French High Command.' They lack the categories of thought -- the brain cells, we might dare say -- necessary to understand, or even to record, this activity as it really occurs: to them, an activity that is not instituted, that has neither boss nor program, has no status; it is not even clearly perceivable, except perhaps in the mode of 'disorder' and 'troubles.' The autonomous activity of the masses belongs by definition to what is **repressed** in history." [Op. Cit., p. 91]*

The Trotskyist accounts of the Kronstadt revolt, with their continual attempts to portray it as a White conspiracy, proves this analysis is correct. Instead it was labelled the work of "backward peasants" being misled by SRs, a White General and spies -- indeed, the possibility that the revolt was a spontaneous mass revolt with political aims was dismissed by one of them as "absurd". [Wright, "The Truth about Kronstadt", Op. Cit., p. 111] Like the capitalist who considers a strike the work of "outside agitators" and "communists" misleading their workers, the Trotskyists present an analysis of Kronstadt reeking of elitism and ideological incomprehension. Independent self-activity by the working class is dismissed as "backward" and to be corrected by the "proletarian dictatorship" by any means necessary. Clearly Bolshevik ideology played a key role in the rise of Stalinism along with the regime built by Lenin and Trotsky which the Kronstadt sailors rebelled against. As Emma Goldman summarised:

*"I see no marked difference between the two protagonists of the benevolent system of the dictatorship except that Leon Trotsky is no longer in power to enforce its blessings, and Josef Stalin is. No, I hold no brief for the present ruler of Russia. I must, however, point out that Stalin did not come down as a gift from heaven to the hapless Russian people. He is merely continuing the Bolshevik traditions, even if in a more relentless manner.*

*"The process of alienating the Russian masses from the Revolution had begun almost immediately after Lenin and his party had ascended to power. Crass discrimination in rations and housing, suppression of every political right, continued persecution and arrests, early became the order of the day. True, the purges undertaken at that time did not include party members . . . But all the other political opponents, among them Mensheviks, Social Revolutionists, Anarchists, many of the Liberal intelligentsia and workers as well as peasants, were given short shrift in the cellars of the Cheka, or exiled to slow death in distant parts of Russia and Siberia. In other words, Stalin has not originated the theory or methods that have crushed the Russian Revolution and have forged new chains for the Russian people.*

*"I admit, the dictatorship under Stalin's rule has become monstrous. That does not, however, lessen the guilt of Leon Trotsky as one of the actors in the revolutionary drama of which Kronstadt was one of the bloodiest scenes."* ["Trotsky Protests Too Much", **Op. Cit.**, pp. 251-2]

Lastly, the supporters of Bolshevism argue that in suppressing the revolt *"the Bolsheviks only did their duty. They defended the conquests of the revolution against the assaults of the counterrevolution."* [Wright, *"The Truth about Kronstadt"*, **Op. Cit.**, p. 123] In other words, we can expect more Kronstadts if these "revolutionaries" gain power -- no clearer condemnation of Bolshevism as a socialist current is required. More, that is how Kronstadt is used in Leninist circles to this day, namely to steel the revolutionary cadres for the same task in the future by justifying repression in the past. For no matter how much Leninists may say otherwise, the ease with which the Bolsheviks embraced policies which are alleged to be the antithesis of what their ideology is claimed to stand for is of note -- as is the lack of regret and the willingness of their followers to still justify them. As Samuel Farber reminds us, *"there is no evidence indicating that Lenin or any of the mainstream Bolshevik leaders lamented the loss of workers' control or of democracy in the soviets, or at least referred to these losses as a retreat, as Lenin declared with the replacement of War Communism by NEP in 1921."* [**Before Stalinism**, p. 44] It is the practice of Bolshevism -- and acts such as the repression of the Kronstadt revolt -- which shows that it is fundamentally a "socialism from above" ideology (see [section H.3.3](#)) and so to be avoided.

And, we must ask, what, exactly, **were** these "conquests" of the revolution that must be defended? The suppression of strikes, independent political and labour organisations, elimination of freedom of speech, assembly and press and, of course, the elimination of soviet and union democracy in favour of party power? Which, of course, for all Leninists, is the **real** revolutionary conquest and **anyone** who questions that is a counter-revolutionary: *"The sailors had dared to stand by the discontented workers. They had dared to demand that the promise of the Revolution -- all Power in the Soviets -- should be fulfilled. The political dictatorship had slain the dictatorship of the proletariat. That and that alone was their unforgivable offense against the holy spirit of Bolshevism."* [Emma Goldman, *"Trotsky Protests Too Much"*, **Op. Cit.**, p. 266]

The issue is simple -- either socialism means the self-emancipation of the working class or it does not. Leninist justifications for the suppression of the Kronstadt revolt simply mean that for the followers of Bolshevism, when necessary, the party will paternalistically repress the working class for its own good. The clear implication of this Leninist support of the suppression of Kronstadt is that, for Leninism, it is dangerous to allow working class people to manage society and transform it as they see fit as they will make wrong decisions (like vote for the wrong party or, worse, take the management of their lives into their own hands). If the party leaders decide a decision by the masses is incorrect, then the masses are overridden (and repressed). So much for *"all power to the soviets"* or *"workers' power."*

Ultimately, Wright's comments (and those like it) show that Bolshevism's commitment to workers' power and democracy is non-existent. What is there left of workers' self-emancipation, power or democracy when the "workers state" represses the workers for trying to practice these essential features of any real form of socialism? How will the State machine required to do this "wither away"? It is the experience of Bolshevism in power that best refutes the Marxist claim that the workers' state "will be democratic and participatory." The suppression of Kronstadt was just one of a series of actions by the Bolsheviks which began

**before** the start of the Civil War, with them abolishing soviets which elected non-Bolshevik majorities, abolishing elected officers and soldiers soviets in the Red Army and Navy and replacing workers' self-management of production by state-appointed managers with "dictatorial" powers (see [section H.6](#)).

As anarchists predicted, the "workers' state" did not, could not, be "participatory" as it was still a state. It spawned a new class system based on the bureaucracy oppressing and exploiting the working classes. Kronstadt is part of the empirical evidence which proves Bakunin's predictions on the authoritarian nature of Marxism (see [section H.1.1](#)). This warning by Bakunin was confirmed by the Kronstadt rebellion and the justifications made at the time and afterwards by the supporters of Bolshevism:

*"What does it mean, 'the proletariat raised to a governing class?' Will the entire proletariat head the government? The Germans number about 40 million. Will all 40 million be members of the government? The entire nation will rule, but no one would be ruled. Then there will be no government, there will be no state; but if there is a state, there will also be those who are ruled, there will be slaves.*

*"In the Marxists' theory this dilemma is resolved in a simple fashion. By popular government they mean government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people. So-called popular representatives and rulers of the state elected by the entire nation on the basis of universal suffrage -- the last word of the Marxists, as well as the democratic school -- is a lie behind which the despotism of a ruling minority is concealed, a lie all the more dangerous in that it represents itself as the expression of a sham popular will.*

*"So . . . it always comes down to the same dismal result: government of the vast majority of the people by a privileged minority. But this minority, the Marxists say, will consist of workers. Yes, perhaps, of **former** workers, who, as soon as they become rulers or representatives of the people will cease to be workers and will begin to look upon the whole workers' world from the heights of the state. They will no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people . . .*

*"They say that this state yoke, this dictatorship, is a necessary transitional device for achieving the total liberation of the people: anarchy, or freedom, is the goal, and the state, or dictatorship, the means. Thus, for the masses to be liberated they must first be enslaved . . . They claim that only a dictatorship (theirs, of course) can create popular freedom. We reply that no dictatorship can have any other objective than to perpetuate itself, and that it can engender and nurture only slavery in the people who endure it. Liberty can only be created by liberty, by an insurrection of all the people and the voluntary organisation of the workers from below upward." [Statism and Anarchy, pp. 178-9]*

The tragedy of Kronstadt is a product of an ideology which did not -- could not -- understand how its strategy as well as the socio-economic structures it favoured and built created a new class and armed it both ideologically and physically to secure its position in the new social hierarchy. If, as Marx suggested, history repeats itself first as tragedy and then as farce, the antics of Leninists since 1921 -- the lying, the selective quoting, the cherry-picking, the ignoring of awkward facts, the replacing of research by the repeating of orthodoxy, etc. -- to

justify the repression are definitely farcical. All in all, Kronstadt should be remembered by all genuine socialists for it exposed the reality of the Bolshevik regime like no other event and so marked the definitive end of the Russian Revolution: its demands were the minimum needed to save the revolution from bureaucratic degeneration, party dictatorship and state-capitalism.