Beyond Kronstadt

written by Paul Le Blanc | October 12, 2021



Trotsky, Lenin, and Kamenev.

[On the 100th anniversary of the Kronstadt events, New Politics is hosting a symposium on the historic tragedy, its meaning and significance, and its implications for today's socialists. We are posting articles by Alexei Gusev, Samuel Clarke, Paul Le Blanc, Daniel Fischer, and Tom Harrison. - Eds.]

One must go beyond Kronstadt to understand Kronstadt. One must grasp, first of all, the struggle for human liberation and the hope of Communism.[i]

From revolutionary Russia in October 1917, John Reed, sent a cable back to his socialist comrades in the United States: "The rank and file of the Workmen's, Soldiers' and Peasants' Councils are in control, with Lenin and Trotsky leading. Their program is to give the land to the peasants, to socialize natural resources and industry and for an armistice and democratic peace conference.… No one is with the Bolsheviki except the proletariat, but that is solidly with them. All the bourgeoisie and appendages are relentlessly hostile." Two years later, Reed's classic account *Ten Days That Shook the World* explained: "The only reason for Bolshevik success lay in their accomplishing the vast and simple desires of the most profound strata of the people, calling them to the work of tearing down and destroying the old, and afterward, in the smoke of falling ruins, cooperating with them to erect the frame-work of the new."[ii]

The Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP), led by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Leon Trotsky, was only one component within the revolutionary movement that had been struggling against the oppressive Tsarist autocracy. They contended in the Marxist RSDLP with rivals of the more moderate Menshevik wing. Also on the scene was the peasant-focused Socialist-Revolutionary Party (similarly divided between Left SRs and Right SRs), as well as a rich variety of anarchist groups, plus pro-capitalist liberals, the Constitutional Democrats (dubbed Cadets).

But it was the Bolsheviks – soon to self-identify as Communists – that Reed, and a majority of Russia's insurgent working class took most seriously in 1917. This was also true of the great Polish-German Marxist, Rosa Luxemburg, as she crafted her critical analysis *The Russian Revolution*, shortly before being murdered in that abortive revolutionary upsurge of 1918-1919. "The Bolsheviks have shown that they are capable of everything that a genuine revolutionary party can contribute within the limits of the historical possibilities," she concluded, adding: "In the present period, when we face decisive final struggles in all the world, the most important problem of socialism was and is

the burning question of our time. It is not a matter of this or that secondary question of tactics, but of the capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such. In this, Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the first, those who went ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world."[iii]

The revolutionary-democratic hopes associated with the heroic insurgency of early Communism eventually culminated in the opposite of what the revolutionaries had been reaching for. A sharp question about whether this was as inevitable as many claim is raised by the fact that there was a vital and life-giving interlude. After the "war communism" and Red Terror of the horrific Russian Civil War (1918-1921) there were multiple improvements in the quality of life in the Soviet Republic, with an expansion of human rights reflected in a significant degree of cultural freedom and innovation, during the New Economic Policy of 1921-1928. Yet all of this gave way, with the consolidation of the regime of Joseph Stalin, to one of the worst dictatorships in human history, with which Communism became associated in the minds of millions.[iv]

Symbol and Reality

I first learned about Kronstadt in my early teens, when I read Louis Fischer's contribution to the anti-Communist classic of 1949, *The God That Failed*, a collection of ex-Communist memoirs. This was "must reading" (certainly in the United States) during the decades-long global power struggle between U.S. capitalism and Communist Russia. The way Fischer described it, Kronstadt was symbolic of whichever turning-point transformed someone from a supporter of Communism into an anti-Communist. To ask "what was your Kronstadt" meant: which Communist atrocity finally transformed Communism, in your mind and heart, from an idealistic dream into a horrific tyranny?[v]

The "first Kronstadt" of 1921, involved a majority of the sailors and workers at a key naval base outside of Petrograd—impatient with economic shortages and dictatorial restrictions—rising up, arms in hand, calling on the workers and peasants of Russia to carry out a new revolution that would reestablish soviet democracy, which some interpreted as "soviets without Communists." In an appeal to "the laboring masses of the East and of the West," the Kronstadt rebels declared there was "no middle ground in the struggle against the Communists and the new serfdom that they have erected," elaborating: "Here is raised the banner of rebellion against the three-year-old violence and oppression of Communist rule, which has put in the shade the three-hundred-year yoke of monarchism. Here in Kronstadt has been laid the first stone of the third revolution, striking the last fetters from the laboring masses and opening a broad new road for socialist creativity."

The Kronstadt rebels were able to count on Menshevik, Socialist Revolutionary, and anarchist support—and far more conservative anti-Communist forces and governments watched expectantly from abroad. The uprising was brutally suppressed by the Bolshevik regime. This would not have been possible without a substantial residue of loyalty to that regime among the workers, peasants, and others — soldiers, sailors, civilians — who went into battle against the Kronstadt rebels: about fifty thousand participated in the assault on Kronstadt, of whom an estimated ten thousand were killed or wounded.[vi]

One eyewitness who was sympathetic to the rebels, Victor Serge, explained why he and others like him finally supported the Bolshevik side in this tragic dispute:

> 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 émigrés, and in the end, through the sheer force of events, another dictatorship, this time anti-proletarian. Dispatches from Stockholm and Tallinn testified that the émigrés had these very

> perspectives in mind; dispatches which, incidentally, strengthened the Bolshevik leaders' intention of subduing Kronstadt speedily and at whatever cost. We were not reasoning in the abstract. We knew that in European Russia alone there were at least fifty centers of peasant insurrection. To the south of Moscow, in the region of Tambov, Antonov, the Right Social-Revolutionary school-teacher, who proclaimed the abolition of the Soviet system and the re-establishment of the Constituent Assembly, had under his command a superbly organized peasant army, numbering several tens of thousands. He had conducted negotiations with the Whites. (Tukhachevsky [famed Red Army general] suppressed this Vendée around the middle of 1921.)[vii]

Serge's account corresponds with perceptions articulated by Menshevik leader Julius Martov, a militant anti-Bolshevik who nonetheless commented, some months after the Kronstadt repression, "history had made the Bolshevik party the defender of the foundations of the revolution against the armed forces of the domestic and foreign counter-revolution."[viii]

Working Class and Revolutionary Struggle

If we are to understand the class realities of this period, there is another key point that must be grasped. The Russian working class was a multifaceted and diverse reality. "There will always be a number of different demands and disagreements within the working class," scholar Mary McAuley tells us. "At times they may cluster together to create a relatively unified set. In October [1917], with its program of a Soviet government, an end to war, an attack on privilege and wealth, the Bolshevik party did express just such a set." The working class in its great majority cohered into a powerful force to make the Bolshevik revolution. But with the profound change in the political, social, and economic realities, "the [working-class] demands no longer formed the same set as they had in October."[ix]

In fact, there tended to be different "sets" for different fractions and layers. "Throughout 1917–1920, worker activists in the factories differed significantly from ordinary workers," observes historian William Husband. "Even among the most advanced workers of Petrograd, those who served on the factory committees and held trade union offices were more sophisticated politically than the worker on the factory floor." He adds that "outside Petrograd and in industries in which unskilled workers predominated, this gap became critical" under changing conditions. (Husband goes on to make the interesting point that while many of the more skilled and politically confident "conscious workers" of Petrograd may have desired less centralized forms of workers' control, which would give them greater authority, other layers of the working class—lacking such expertise and confidence – preferred greater centralization, for which the state and party provided direction.)[x]

The cadres who assumed responsibility in the Bolshevik regime were in many cases the kind of worker activists Husband describes. At what point can we decide that they were no longer part of the working class? Perhaps such people, after a period of enjoying privilege and power in a stabilized and consolidated new social order, could be said to have become transformed from dedicated worker activists into a social layer of ex-workers who have risen above their class. But we are dealing, in 1920–21, with an intense and incredibly fluid situation, in which what is ostensibly a proletarian state is fighting for its life, in which the mobilization of working-class support is crucial for its survival, and in which the "worker activists" in question — still fired by socialist ideals and revolutionary enthusiasm, and not more than three years away from the workbench — are themselves making great sacrifices and often taking incredible risks. This doesn't mean that all of them are necessarily free from narrowness, arrogance, pettiness, selfishness, and various other faults that crop up in human groups (whether workers, capitalists, bureaucrats, or whatever). But it is still too soon in 1921 to decide that they have passed, as a group, from the ranks of the proletariat

to the ranks of a self-interested bureaucracy. In fact, it was from this layer of worker activists that many prominent members of the Workers' Opposition arose. Other such worker activists disagreed with that opposition—and among these, some would evolve into bureaucrats while others would evolve into opponents of bureaucratic privilege.

It is hardly the case that Kronstadt represented the Russian working class and the Russian Communist Party turning against each other. Closer to the truth is the perception that members of a decimated, fragmented, demoralized working class were swept into a violent conflict with each other over the question of whether the existence of the Bolshevik regime continued to be in their interests. The evaporation of the proletarian unity of 1917 ended what one historian termed the "historic partnership" of the working class as a whole with the Bolshevik Party. In what remained of the Russian working class in 1921, however, enough men and women were prepared to accept the Bolshevik regime (and enough were prepared even to fight and die for it) that its survival was ensured. Over the next few years, as the country recovered from the triple curse of civil war, foreign hostilities, and economic collapse, the regime was able to bring important benefits to the reviving working class, and "the historic alliance began to re-form on a tentative basis."[xi]

Isaac Deutscher offers a striking imagery of oppositional Bolsheviks of the 1920s as they increasingly "clashed with the party 'apparatus' as the apparatus grew independent of the party and subjected party and state to itself." He emphasizes a growing cleavage between "the power and the dream"—and the deepening contradiction felt by the Bolsheviks who had created a machine of power to make the dream a reality. "They could not dispense with power if they were to strive for the fulfillment of their ideals; but now their power came to oppress and overshadow their ideals."[xii]

"Why did the proletariat lose power and, therewith, lose the indispensable instrument for constructing socialism?" asked Max Shachtman in the same year that *The God That Failed* was published. "Exactly ninety-nine percent of the critics of Bolshevism answer the question in this way, at bottom: The Russian workers lost power because they took power. Stalinism (the destruction of workers' power) followed ineluctably from the seizure of power by the proletariat and Lenin's refusal to surrender this power to the bourgeois democracy." That is certainly the way a majority of readers understood the meaning of "Kronstadt" in *The God That Failed*. But the Shachtman of 1949 pushed back: "Exactly ninety-nine percent of the revolutionary Marxists answer the question in this way at bottom: The Russian workers lost power because the workers of other countries failed to take power."[xiii]

This is precisely the conclusion drawn by Rosa Luxemburg in her sharp yet comradely criticisms of the Bolsheviks. Confiding to co-thinker Julian Marchlewski as early as 1918 that the Red Terror of Lenin and Trotsky created a "disastrous situation" that "only discredits socialism," she emphasized that "being caught in the pincers of imperialist powers from all sides" created a situation in which "neither socialism nor the dictatorship of the proletariat can become a reality, but at most a caricature of both." In the same period, she wrote to another comrade, Adolf Warski, that "the use of terror indicates great weakness, certainly, but it is directed against internal enemies who base their hopes on the existence of capitalism outside of Russia, receiving support and encouragement from it." She reasoned that with "the coming of the European revolution, the Russian counter-revolutionaries will lose not only support [from abroad] but also – what's more important – their courage. Thus the Bolshevik use of terror is above all an expression of the weakness of the European proletariat." The problem could be overcome only through the spread of socialist revolution in the more industrially advanced regions of Europe. She added hopefully: "It is coming!"[xiv]

Victor Serge, like Luxemburg, could not close his eyes to "mistakes and abuses," yet also insisted: "the Bolshevik Party is at present the supremely organized, intelligent, and stable force that, despite everything, deserves our confidence. The Revolution has no other mainstay, and is no longer capable

of any thorough-going regeneration."[xv]

Beyond Kronstadt

One must go beyond Kronstadt to make sense of Kronstadt – for it has, as a symbol, been given an inflated importance when compared to the violence and terror that became inseparable from revolutionary Bolshevism well before the 1921 events. It was a significant incident, but hardly the most salient, in a tragic panorama explored in Arno J. Mayer's truly magisterial study, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions*.

Mayer's apt comment that of all the parties on the scene in 1917, "the Bolshevik party was by far the best organized and disciplined, as well as the most adaptable," is balanced by his observation that "the Bolshevik project was an inconstant amalgam of ideology and circumstance, of intention and improvisation, of necessity and choice, of fate and chance." He emphasizes that "the way the Bolsheviks took power was consistent with their credo of direct and defiant action, and their authoritarian rule following Red October was bound to provoke resistances which they were, of course, determined to counter and repress." Their initial intention was to help lead the way to socialist revolution, anticipating partnership with other political forces on the working-class and peasant left prepared to follow this course — though some (certainly Lenin) were prepared to go it alone if need be. The fact remains, however, that Lenin's Bolsheviks were not prepared (perhaps no party could have been prepared) for the tidal waves that would hit them. As Mayer puts it, "Just as they were unprepared for the enormity of the crisis, so they were caught unawares by its Furies, which they were not alone to quicken."[xvi]

That Red Terror was largely generated in reaction to White Terror, however, cannot blind us to the fact that it overflowed class boundaries, impacting on workers well before 1921, and certainly afterward – which included the violation of inner-party democracy and systematic undermining of a variety of oppositional groups that were absolutely loyal to the ideals of October 1917 described so eloquently by John Reed. With an unrelenting firmness born of profound insecurity in these frightening times, Lenin, Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders moved to intimidate, persecute, and silence the dissidents of the Workers Opposition, the Democratic Centralists, and others. The leader of the Workers Opposition, Alexander

Shlyapnikov, warned: "Do not go too far in the direction of struggle with us. Here, perhaps, you will suppress and smash us, but from this you will only lose." That these oppositionists had been vanquished, demoralized and dispersed by the early 1920s made it more difficult for Lenin, Trotsky and others to be effective when they themselves sought to push back against the bureaucratic-authoritarianism that was eroding the revolution.[xvii]

There is much more to be said, independently of the Kronstadt tragedy, about the tragic, often horrific, sometimes criminal mistakes made by revolutionaries overwhelmed by the tidal waves and immense undertows that came in the wake of October 1917. Too often ignored – but of far greater weight than what happened at Kronstadt – are problematical policies and often brutal conflicts regarding the great majority of people in the Russian Empire, the peasantry.[xviii]

All such things have been used by weary and despairing activists as an excuse to become reconciled to the status quo. One can overtly abandon the revolutionary cause, or maintain a revolutionary posture while simply restricting one's self to study and discussion.

If one remains committed to the revolutionary Marxist project of actually building organizations, movements, and struggles that can change the world for the better, then to "go beyond Kronstadt" will have an additional meaning: learning from the accomplishments, the mistakes and the tragedies

of comrades who came before us, with a commitment to do better in advancing and winning the struggle for a better world.

[i] This is adapted from my study *October Song: Bolshevik Triumph, Communist Tragedy, 1917-1924* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

[ii] John Reed, "The First Proletarian Republic Greets American Workers," *New York Call*, November 22, 1917, reprinted in Philip S. Foner,ed., *The Bolshevik Revolution: Its Impact on American Radicals, Liberals and Labor, A Documentary Study* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 54; John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, in *The Collected Works of John Reed* (New York: Modern Library, 1995), p 834.

[iii] *Socialism or Barbarism: The Selected Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. by Paul Le Blanc and Helen C. Scott (London: Pluto Press, 2010), p. 237.

[iv] This is discussed at length in *October Song*, particularly on pp. 293-326.

[v] Richard Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1959), pp. 183-185, 191, 197, 199-202.

[vi] Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt, 1921* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), pp. 202, 211, 242, 243.

[vii] Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2012), pp. 150-151. Avrich's scholarship lends credence to this analysis, as does that in Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy* (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 184, 189-195.

[viii] Quoted in Max Shachtman, *In Defense of Bolshevism*, ed. by Sean Matgamna (London: Phoenix Press, 2018), p. 175.

[ix] Mary McAuley, "Party and Society in Petrograd during the Civil War," *SBONIK: Study*

Group on the Russian Revolution, no. 10 (1984), p. 53.

[x] William Husband, *Workers' Control and Centralization in the Russian Revolution: The Textile Industry of the Central Industrial Region, 1917–1920* (Pittsburgh: The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and Eastern European Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1985), p. 8.

[xi] William J. Chase, *Workers, Society, and the Soviet State: Labor and Life in Moscow, 1918-1929* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), pp. 294-297.

[xii] Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky 1921-1929* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), pp. 53, 73.

[xiii] Shachtman, 177.

[xiv] *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. by George Adler, Peter Hudis and Annelies Laschitza (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 474-474, 484-485.

[xv] Serge, p. 151.

[xvi] Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 230-231.

[xvii] Barbara C. Allen, *Alexander Shlyapnikov 1885-1937: Life of an Old Bolshevik* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), p. 183. Also see Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-1924: Soviet Workers and the New Communist Elite* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[xviii] This is discussed at length in *October Song*, particularly on pp. 255-292.