Beyond Tragedy: Postscript on Kronstadt at 100

written by Dan Fischer | October 17, 2021

[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. We welcome further responses. -Eds.]



Red Army troops attack Kronstadt.

Any honest socialist must admit that the repression of the March 1921 Kronstadt uprising in Soviet Russia, a century ago, does not rank among the Bolshevik Party's finest moments. "You will be shot down like grouse," warned the Red Army's leaflets dropped by plane over the Kronstadt naval base. Despite approving the assault, Lenin described it at the time as "our own Thermidor," meaning counterrevolution. "We must liquidate Kronstadt in the next few days at any cost," Trotsky ordered and reportedly added, "Don't spare the bullets."[1] He even went so far as to approve the use of chemical weapons against the rebels, and, historian Paul Avrich explains, "if Kronstadt had resisted much longer, a plan to launch a gas attack with shells and balloons, devised by cadets of the Higher Military Chemical School, would have been carried out."[2]

Despite Bolshevik propagandists' slander that the Kronstadt rebellion was led by a Tsarist general and orchestrated by foreign powers, the government's internal documents would, when revealed years later, prove the contrary. A 5 April 1921 report commissioned by the Cheka found the "uprising was entirely spontaneous in origin." Moreover, "the investigation failed to show the outbreak of the mutiny was preceded by the activity of any counter-revolutionary organisation at work among the fortresses' command or that it was the work of agents of the *entente*."[3]

The rebels' demands were clearly leftist and democratic: free elections of soviets (councils of workers, peasants, and soldiers and sailors), freedom of expression, release of leftist political prisoners, equal rations for all, peasants' autonomy from "war-communist" exploitation.[4] In fact, their program closely resembled several of the guarantees provided by the Constitution adopted at the Fifth All-Russia Congress of Soviets held in 1918. As Russian Anarchist Ida Mett emphasized, "The central demand of the Kronstadt insurrection — all power to the Soviets and not to the Party — was in fact based on an article of the Constitution. This proclaimed that all central and local power would henceforth be precisely in the hands of the soviets!"[5]

Before the government attacked Kronstadt, Anarchists including Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman approached the Bolsheviks with an offer to mediate a peaceful resolution.[6] Lenin and Trotsky rejected the offer,[7] choosing the path of bloodshed and planting seeds for Stalin's later "harvests of sorrows."[8]

We at *New Politics* discussed how to commemorate the Kronstadt tragedy's centennial. Despite frequently being mislabeled as "Trotskyist," our editorial board has sharply divergent opinions on Trotsky and on Kronstadt. You can find in our pages, on the one hand, Stephen Shalom condemning the Kronstadt repression as a sign of the Soviet Union becoming unambiguously repressive, and on the other hand, Tom Harrison defending the Bolshevik policy on the grounds that "Conceding to the sailors' demands would mean relinquishing power at a moment when (a) workers' revolution in Europe was still a real possibility, and (b) there was no other organized political force in Russia capable of preventing a bloody triumph of the counter-revolution."[9] For this symposium, we decided to solicit different perspectives, inviting contributors to go beyond rehashing the century-old debate. We were impressed with the articles we received from Alexei Gusev, Samuel Clarke, and Paul Le Blanc, which offered fresh perspectives based on newly available, previously obscure, and Russian-language sources.

Gusev, in "The Kronstadt Revolt of 1921 as a part of the Great Russian Revolution," positions the Kronstadt revolt within a broader, and potentially successful, "revolutionary situation." Pointing to many uprisings across Russia in early 1921—generally in alignment with the Makhnovist movement's demand of "Land for the Peasants and Factories for the Workers"[10]—Gusev describes a spontaneous coalition of rebellious peasants, industrial workers, soldiers, and sailors. Had it not been for Bolshevik repression, and had the rebellion persisted or waited until the ice around the naval base melted,[11] there might have been a viable chance of achieving what the rebels declared a "third revolution, striking the last fetters from the laboring masses and opening a broad new road for socialist creativity."

Clarke, in "Kronstadt, A Tragic Necessity?," addresses Trotsky's famous contention that "what the Soviet government did reluctantly at Kronstadt was a tragic necessity."[12] Clarke argues that the repression was only made necessary by the imperatives of centralized revolutionary methods. His conclusion echoes Emma Goldman's 1924 reflection that "[n]o revolution can ever succeed as a factor of liberation unless the MEANS used to further it be identical in spirit and tendency with the PURPOSES to be achieved."[13]

Le Blanc in "Beyond Kronstadt," warns that an excessive focus on the Russian Revolution's repressive side can easily from "an excuse to become reconciled to the status quo." Le Blanc describes Kronstadt as being among many "mistakes and tragedies" of the Bolshevik project, although not the only one nor a fully discrediting one. Without shying away from criticizing the Red Terror and the "violation of inner-party democracy," LeBlanc urges a focus on objective factors such as continental isolation and imperialist encirclement. He approvingly quotes American Marxist Max Shachtman:

> "Why did the proletariat lose power and, therewith, lose the indispensable instrument for constructing socialism? 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 […] Exactly ninety-nine 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."

Juxtaposing these three analyses reveals both tensions and overlaps. Partially corroborating Gusev's assertion of widespread revolt, LeBlanc quotes the Bolshevik thinker Victor Serge that "in European Russia alone there were at least fifty centers of peasant insurrection." However, while Gusev convincingly attributes a liberatory quality to the peasant uprisings, including Tambov's Green movement that had popular peasant support and collaborated with Left-Social Revolutionaries and Anarchists,[14] Le Blanc further quotes Serge denouncing the Tambov uprising as a reactionary "Vendée."

At the risk of committing multiple heresies, I want to propose a synthesis of the rebels' "third revolution" and Trotsky's "permanent revolution," combining the former's anti-authoritarianism and the latter's transnationalism.[15] Such a project, drawing on unorthodox Marxist and Anarchist traditions, might be something that the Kronstadt rebels themselves would support. With all the rebels' vitriol against the Bolshevik government, they did not advocate, as Bolsheviks alleged, "Soviets without Communists." In fact, Communists comprised the fortress's largest pro-uprising tendency, outnumbering the Mensheviks, Maximalists, or Anarchists.[16]

If we agree that France's *enragés* were justified in demanding a "third revolution" after the

incomplete successes of 1789 and 1792, then we could likewise sympathize with the Kronstadt rebels' demand for a third revolution after the first and second revolutions in February and October 1917.[17] The Bolsheviks' very willingness to suppress the Kronstadt uprising, rather than pursue Goldman and Berkman's offer to attempt a peaceful negotiation, pointed to the necessity for a radical democratization in Russia in 1921. Besides being morally justified, the uprising had an actual chance of sparking a liberatory transformation. As Gusev reminds us, even the high-ranking Chekist Vasilii Sevei acknowledged that the sailors "could well form the basis for a possible third revolution."

Yet, there is also much power in Trotsky's assertion, contained in his theory of "permanent revolution," and subsequently proven by the USSR's disastrous trajectory, that "[t]he completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable." A "permanent revolution," for Trotsky, would push a struggle for liberal democracy into a struggle for socialism, and would spread a nationwide revolution into other countries.[18] Kronstadt's sailors shared aspects of this internationalism when they issued a broadcast "To the Workers of the World," declaring, "Comrades, we need your moral support. Protest against the oppressor commissarocrats."[19] However, in addition to moral support, a successful third revolution would have needed *material* support from workers abroad. LeBlanc's Shachtman quote, then, becomes very relevant: "The Russian workers lost power because the workers of other countries failed to take power."

We can debate what it means to "take power," whether it necessarily means taking state power or whether it can mean establishing local control by workers and communities. We should also scrutinize the specifics of Trotsky's theory and reject his condescending assertion that peasants must follow the leadership of the proletariat.[20] Moreover, we can argue that Trotsky betrayed his professed internationalism when he approved the 1918 Brest-Litovsk Treaty which abandoned Ukraine's peasants to the German and Austrian empires and, as Rosa Luxemburg argued, "signified an enormous strengthening of the imperialist Pan-German policy and thus a lessening of the chances for a revolutionary rising in Germany."[21]

Still, Trotsky's worldwide focus offers an important emphasis that was sometimes missing from the anti-authoritarian elements. Avrich notes of the Kronstadt rebels, "Although self-proclaimed internationalists, the sailors showed little concern for the worldwide revolutionary movement." Moreover, in contrast to Trotsky's militant opposition to antisemitism and conspiracy theories, a number of the rebels succumbed to such parochialism: "Although the rebels, in the same breath, denied any anti-Semitic prejudice, there is no question that feelings against the Jews ran high among the Baltic sailors, many of whom came from the Ukraine and the western borderlands, the classic regions of virulent anti-Semitism in Russia."[22]

With an aim to synthesize insights from both the "permanent" and "third" revolutionary concepts, we could conclude with the Russian Anarchist writer Voline that while a transnational revolutionary spread was necessary, the Bolshevik leaders deserve much of the responsibility for its failure: "[T]he weakness of the foreign workers and the spreading of the reaction were, to a large extent, the natural consequences of the false route on which they themselves had put the Revolution."[23] Had the Bolsheviks allowed soviet democracy, as the rebels demanded, they might have avoided the

Kronstadt bloodshed and strengthened prospects for world socialism. Yes, it would have meant sharing power with the other pro-soviet factions that helped launch the October revolution, if such a prospect were still possible after Brest-Litovsk wrecked relations between the Bolsheviks and Left Social Revolutionaries. It was a highly necessary and justified risk. Even if, as Bolsheviks warned at the time, sharing power with other tendencies would have destabilized the revolution, the results were very unlikely to be worse than what actually followed. The Soviet Union's descent into Stalinism, going far beyond Lenin's existing authoritarianism, would lead to the slaughter of millions and would discredit socialist revolution until the present day.

Avoiding a repeat of the twentieth century's tragedies will require a commitment to the mutually reinforcing principles of radical democracy and transnational solidarity, and to supporting revolutionary processes and leftist dissidents worldwide. In turn, organizing along these lines will necessitate, as Howard Zinn advocated, avoiding the burying of historical atrocities (emphasis added):

> "[T]he easy acceptance of atrocities as a deplorable but necessary price to pay for progress (Hiroshima and Vietnam, to save Western civilization; ***Kronstadt and Hungary, to save socialism***; nuclear proliferation, to save us all)–that is still with us. One reason these atrocities are still with us is that we have learned to bury them in a mass of other facts, as radioactive wastes are buried in containers in the earth."[24]

A Left that buries the history of Kronstadt, that refuses to reckon with its uncomfortable lessons for the present, will also bury today's repression by so-called "anti-imperialist" and "Communist" governments. In chilling echoes of 1921's Red Army propaganda, we see much of 2021's mainstream Left defending massacres in Syria and mass incarceration in China based on oft-misleading claims that the victims are foreign-backed reactionaries. This year, *New Politics* has proudly been a venue for combating such apologetics, for example by hosting the English-language version of "Erasing People through Disinformation: Syria and the 'Anti-Imperialism' of Fools," and publishing criticisms of self-declared Left parties in Cuba, Ecuador, China, and elsewhere.

Socialists committed to moving beyond tragedy will need to unbury Kronstadt and address its causes, its impact, and its suppression from the local to transnational levels. An open-minded reading of the symposium's diverse contributions may help us build a non-sectarian Left that will, as Le Blanc suggests, learn from the "mistakes and the tragedies of comrades who came before us, with a commitment to do better." To avoid repeating the Kronstadt tragedy, and to build toward principled world revolution, we can commit to organizing transnational solidarity and speaking out against all forms of authoritarian repression.

1*Kronstadt Izvestia #4*, 6 March 1921, trans. Scott Zenkatsu Parker; Israel Getzler, "The Communist leaders' role in the kronstadt tragedy of 1921 in the light of recently published archival documents in the kronstadt tragedy of 1921

in the light of recently published archival documents," *Revolutionary Russia 15* (2002): 22-44; *Kronstadt Izvestia #5*, 7 March 1921, trans. Scott Zenkatsu Parker; Victor Serge, "Kronstadt '21," 1945.

2Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970), 211-212.

3Getzler, "The Communist leaders' role."

4The demand for peasants' control of land was more leftist than both the Bolsheviks' later market-oriented "New Economic Policy" and the existing "war communism" which Lenin described in the following terms, quoted by Avrich, *Kronstadt*, 9: "The essence of 'War Communism,' was that we actually took from the peasant all his surpluses and sometimes not only the surpluses but part of the grain the peasant needed for food. We took this in order to meet the requirements of the army and to sustain the workers."

5Ida Mett, "The Kronstadt Commune," 1938.

6Emma Goldman, *My Further Disillusionment in Russia* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1924), ch. 6.

7Michael Löwy reasonably contends that responsibility for the Kronstadt tragedy "lies with the Bolsheviks, by their refusal of the mediation proposal put forward by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman." "Sans révolte, la politique devient vide de sens," *Ballast*, 29 December 2014.

8 Such harvests were not limited to the Holodomor genocide that is the subject of the Robert Conquest's 1986 book of this title.

9Bennett Muraskin, Norman Epstein, and Thomas Harrison, "Russian Revolution," *New Politics 17*, no. 2 (2019).

10Murray Bookchin, *The Third Revolution, Volume Three* (London: Cassell, 2004), 315.

11Waiting for the ice to melt would have given the sailors an important military advantage. The fact that the sailors didn't wait confirms the rebellion's spontaneity.

12Trotsky, "A Tragic Necessity" in *Kronstadt*, ed. Barbara Mutnick (New York: Pathfinder, 1979), 127.

13Goldman, *My Further Disillusionment in Russia*, ch. 12.

14See Nick Heath, "The third revolution? Peasant resistance to the Bolshevik government," *Libcom*, 21 October 2005.

15I build here on previous anti-authoritarian concepts of permanent revolution. Ron Tabor, "In Defense of Anarchism," 1996; Javier Sethness and Daniel Fischer, "Revolution in Permanence, in Syria After the Uprisings," *Transnational Solidarity Network*, 15 March 2020.

16Andrey Kalyonov, "Who Were the Kronstadt Rebels?," *Crimethinc*, 16 March 2021.

17In *The Third Revolution, Volume One* (London: Cassell, 1996), Murray Bookchin asserts that the Kronstadt rebels were not familiar with the French revolutionaries' use of the term, and they remarkably recreated the concept on their own.

18Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution* (1931), chs. 8, 10.

19*Kronstadt Izvestia #11*, 13 March 1921, trans. Scott Zenkatsu Parker.

20His condescension toward peasants manifested itself in the crackdown against the Makhnovshchina, and later, the Greens.

21Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russia Tragedy," 1918.

22Avrich, *Kronstadt*, 173, 179; Enzo Traverso, "Trotsky and the 'Jewish Question,'" 1 July 1990, *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*.

23Voline, *The Unknown Revolution, Book Two: Bolshevism and Anarchism*, 1947.

24Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2003), 9.