Kronstadt, an Unavoidable Tragedy?

written by Samuel Clarke | October 8, 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. - Eds.]

In March 1921, a commune of sailors known as the "pride and glory" of the Russian Revolution, turned against the Bolsheviks they had helped into power some four years earlier. Despite having only lasted 16 days before being crushed quite easily by the Red Army, their defeat has had an enduring legacy. In the ensuing debates over that legacy, two primary questions come to the fore:

"*Were the sailors right to rebel against Bolshevik rule?*'

And:

"*Were the Bolsheviks right to suppress the sailors in order to maintain order?*"

My controversial answer to both questions is **yes**. Not because of any moral considerations, but a consideration of the group-interest of both sides of the conflict, and the material relations which govern that interest. As the historian of the Kronstadt rebellion Paul Avrich puts it:

"Throughout the conflict each side behaved in accordance with its own particular goals and aspirations. To say this is not to deny the necessity of moral judgement. Yet Kronstadt presents a situation in which the historian can sympathize with the rebels and still concede that the Bolsheviks were justified in subduing them. To recognize this, indeed, is to grasp the full tragedy of Kronstadt."[i]

Kronstadt should not be seen as Lenin's tragedy, nor Trotsky's or the sailors'. No, it should be seen as a tragedy *of the revolution itself* and the hierarchical relations that it created. It is a tragedy of structures and systems of power, not one of individuals and personalities. The same relations that beset any centralized structure or state, and which make suppression of some kind inevitable when people dissent, and especially in times of war or hardship.

In this article, I will place Kronstadt within the context of revolt in the Soviet Union's early days before outlining the decisions that led the Bolsheviks to suppress them. I will then pose that, as socialists, we must devise forms of organization than can capably handle dissent and revolt without collapsing or resorting to suppression. If we do not and decide to continue statist and centralized

attempts at revolution, then we are condemned to repeat the tragedy of Kronstadt in the future.

Discontent Spilling Over into Rebellion

Rather than viewing the Kronstadt rebellion as an isolated incident, it is best to place it within the context of Russia in 1921, and of the general resistance to the Bolshevik's "war communism," a period during the civil war in which the State heavily interfered with economic life and the "organs of active, collective democracy"[ii] present in the 1917 Soviets. Suffering from unemployment and shortages caused by the general collapse of the nation's economy, the Bolsheviks were threatened with open revolt, strikes, and peasant uprisings[iii]. Some of these movements were held in solidarity with Kronstadt, whilst others simply expressed discontentment with Bolshevik rule – usually due to poor rationing. In the summer of 1920, tram workers held the largest strike in Moscow until managers were instructed to isolate and fire 'counterrevolutionary persons'[iv]. In the textile industry around the countryside of the same city, large-scale strikes totaling 4500 workers led to 15 soviet-official sanctioned arrests[v]. In October 1920, workers at the Gustav List factory in Moscow staged a sit-in after two of their fellow workers were arrested by the Cheka under claims of counterrevolution. In Petrograd in 1921, a month before the Kronstadt revolt, a serious wave of industrial action broke out and developed into political opposition against the Government. The Bolsheviks reacted by denouncing them as being controlled by the Mensheviks before the workers were broken by lockouts and military force[vi]. In mentioning such incidents of worker revolt in key Bolshevik cities, I wish to highlight the general feeling of resentment at the time. Kronstadt was not an isolated movement.

It was however, a more politically direct one. Though, as mentioned, direct action against the Bolsheviks had been taking in support of Kronstadt, in general it was directed towards achieving economic concessions and had varying political influences. In Kronstadt this same discontentment for the economic state of the nation fueled a direct challenge to Bolshevik rule. The crew of the battleship Petropavlovsk, who had spent the last four years serving the Bolsheviks, passed a resolution demanding fresh elections to the soviets. One of the movement's leaders commented:

"If the soviets are re-elected on the basis of the constitution, i.e, by secret ballot, then, we believe, the Communists will fail to come through and the conquest of the October Revolution will triumph."[vii]

Note the distinction that this speaker draws between the Communists, to mean the Bolsheviks, and the October Revolution, whose principles they believe the Bolsheviks had violated. Thus, Lenin and his party were faced with a revolt in the ranks of their "pride and glory," who, dissatisfied as they were with restrictions to their political freedom and livelihoods, stood at the forefront of a growing mass rebellion. Soviet Russia of the 1920s was young, weak, and beset by war and economic crises. This is an environment that will face any revolutionary movement, and is very likely to cause confusion, discontentment, and ultimately dissent amongst its participants. The popular promise of "peace, land, and bread," was not being wholly achieved.

The details of Kronstadt itself have not been discussed here. This is because Kronstadt serves better as a frame for discussion, as a symbol of the wider social crisis leading out of war communism and into the New Economic Policy[viii]. This latter stage will be discussed in the next segment.

So, were the sailors right to rebel against Soviet rule? Well, let's rephrase that question: "Are those who suffer hardship outside of their control right to rebel against the political forces that do control it?" If this were any other scenario, the answer would be **yes**, and the case is the same here.

State Panic and Political Suppression

As has already been expressed, the Soviet State of the civil war was not the leviathan that it would come to be seen as in later decades[ix]. Economic crisis spurred on by war had an effect of the wellbeing of the people, leading to unrest. This is to be expected. But what should also be expected is the political crisis in the center caused by this mixture of war, lack of resources, and discontent amongst the population. If you are at the center of commanding not just a potentially deteriorating state but are responsible for guiding it through a destructive war, then your decisions are going to be less concerned with the individual wellbeing of the population than they are the health of the state *as a whole*.

This is the problem which faced Lenin and the Bolsheviks during the Kronstadt rebellion. From their perspective, the Soviet State was faced with a revolt in a key strategic location: Kronstadt, which was not just a key naval base, but one which held the key to the West. If the sailors were to switch sides to the Whites, then that same base could become a staging ground and supply route for their enemies[x]. This presented two options, either to grant political and economic concessions to the sailors in the hopes that they may stay on side, or to suppress them. By this time, however, Moscow was not only too disconnected from Kronstadt to understand the sailors' intentions, but had adopted a bureaucratized, centralized, government, for which devolving power to them would be a blow to its authority[xi]. To immediately denounce the movement as counterrevolutionary may seem harsh, but it is not wholly surprising. As Lenin himself noted, Kronstadt "lit up reality better than anything else," turning a broad resistance to economic hardship into a political demand[xii]. A well-trained, well-fortified revolt arising as the State verged on mass rebellion triggered expected anxieties. As the Bolshevik's power threatened to waiver, it is no surprise that such an urgent suppression was enacted. Panic can do many things.

What came after was a mixture of political suppression and economic concession. Convinced by the possible political fallout of the rebellion, the 10th Party Congress in March 1921 instituted a series of economic measures known as the NEP, or the New Economic Policy. This policy reintroduced money back into the economy in 1922, and returned most agriculture, retail trade, and small-scale light industry back into private ownership. The peasantry, who formed a considerable part of the rebellions during war communism, were then allowed to own and cultivate their own land. Though only viewed as a temporary measure (and later dissolved in 1931), the NEP was introduced to help alleviate the damage caused to the economy during the war[xiii]. In the political sphere, Lenin used Kronstadt to justify the stamping out of opposition in government, claiming that "the time has come to put an end to opposition, to put the lid on it, we have had enough opposition"[xiv]. Not a single demand of the Kronstadt sailors had been fulfilled, instead, the ranks were closed, and freedom of speech, press, and assembly continued to be controlled. Furthermore, socialist and anarchist opposition who had been imprisoned for their political crimes were going to stay imprisoned[xv].

The Inevitability of Coercion in a State

In the two sections above I have written very little about the actual events of Kronstadt and its suppression. This was purposeful, as I am highlighting not the moments themselves but the social relations of power in which they exist in and are molded by. We shouldn't view Kronstadt as the result of heroic or evil deeds, but rather a predictable set of factors. The rebellion was the result of popular discontent and economic hardship faced with a political system that afforded the rebels little autonomy to change either of those things, and the suppression the result of civil war, growing unrest, and a political system which relied on centralized authority and command.

The harshest critics of the USSR might try to paint Lenin as a devil figure, but what is really the cause of tragedy here is not his individual convictions, but the revolution of which he (as one figure) helped create. Various authors have commented upon Lenin and the Bolsheviks' insistence on

centralized rule. Gregory Claeys in his book *Marx and Marxism*, for example, shows how on multiple occasions they emphasized the necessity of centralized, even dictatorial power, in the facilitation of a revolution. Such as in a 1903 conference in Brussels in which he stated that the party must embrace "as much centralism as possible," giving the central committee of said party the ability to override local autonomy[xvi]. On another occasion in March 1918, much closer to the revolution, he made it clear that he saw "absolutely no contradiction" "between Soviet democratism and the use of dictatorial power by single individuals." The strictest unity necessary for revolution can only be achieved, in his mind, "by the subordination of the will of thousands to the will of one"[xvii]. In his famed *State and Revolution*, written in 1917, Lenin stated that the "socialist revolution" needs "people who cannot dispense with subordination" and control, just that, in a revolutionary society, that subordination will be to "the armed vanguard of all the exploded and working people"[xviii]. Or in other words, the party. This means retaining parts of the old bureaucratic machine to maintain the subordination of the people to the needs of the vanguard.

As much as this might paint a picture of the Soviet Union as uniquely despotic, it is simply following the logic which plagues all states. Even western nations, which are pitted as pariahs of freedom by liberal commentators, subordinate people to the will of the state through coercive apparatuses, and each have histories of violently suppressing rebellions. Take, for example, the Haymarket affair of 1886, or Thatcher's police putting down miners' strikes in the 1980s. When Max Weber famously defined the state as a 'monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'[xix], he highlighted the dependence the state has on coercion to maintain control. Without police, prisons, armies, and borders, states would simply fall apart. No ideological control can realistically manufacture consent without being able to utilize force when ideology is not suitable. How is it, otherwise, that the centralized apparatus of the state can maintain control of a population that will at times harbor deep resentment for it.

For the Soviet Union, dissent caused by economic hardship threatened what we might call the "ideology of revolution," or the revolutionary spirit that drove people during the revolution. Growing discontent problematized communist values and created unrest, threatening the rule of the center which, as has been established, was deemed vital for the success of the revolutionaries' efforts. The Bolsheviks therefore did what any state would do when met with armed revolt: it suppressed it. This is the method through which states retain their grip on power when all else fails.

A Lesson?

Krontstadt is not a tragedy resulting from evil, but from the inevitable practices of states and hierarchical leadership structures, insofar as the state must maintain its own order if its central governance system is to survive. In the capitalist states and the so-called communist states, we see how this manifests itself: in systems of control such as the police, prisons, borders, and regulations on worker's rights and political organizing.

What is important here, and what causes these tragedies when people challenge order, is the lack of *autonomy* and *free association*. Expressed in the simplest of ways, autonomy is 'the freedom to make decisions, and then act out those decisions without asking permission from a higher power.'[xx] Anarchists make heavy use of the word when communicating their own definition of freedom, a freedom unlike the one espoused by liberals which usually assumes some connection to bourgeois property rights. Instead, it is the individual or the collective's freedom to participate in bottom-up forms of decision making which gives them control over their own lives[xxi]. This is integral to the anarchist vision of socialism, and was not achieved by the Soviet Union, reliant as it was on top-down command.

Free association, meanwhile, is tied up with autonomy but has a different meaning. In both the

Marxist and anarchist literature, free association appears as a central component of a future anarchist society. In Marx's *The German Ideology*, he states that:

"The reality, which communism is creating, is precisely the true basis for rendering it impossible that anything should exist independently of individuals, insofar as reality is only a produce of the preceding intercourse of individuals themselves."[xxii]

In short, Marx is stating that communism will fully realize the individual as a part of the collective process, thereby giving them the autonomy to freely associate with other individuals as they find it necessary to do so. This is opposed to treating the individual as subordinate to the collective process and overriding their autonomy. In anarchist theory, free association gives the individual the full right to start a collective and join others should they desire to. This is unlike any society we see today. We are born into states which take our obedience to laws for granted and throw up borders that do not let people in or out. This was also the case in the Soviet Union, whose own members, although originally participating in Soviets which better embodied this ideal, were bound into the authority of the newly formed state. So, when discontent brewed in Kronstadt, as elsewhere, rebellion became the only suitable form of resistance when autonomy was taken away from them, and when they could not freely leave the union without facing repercussion. The Kronstadt demand to re-elect the soviets and return their political control was their way of trying to reestablish their autonomy in the system.

We must therefore strive to reestablish autonomy and free association as a central tenet of our organizing principles, something which can only be realistically achieved outside of the state and through decentralized organizations. This means, in turn, utilizing our principles from the beginning and making them a part of our wider political strategy. As discussed, the morality of the individual actors is not cause of the tragic event, but the process of social relations leading up to it. Therefore, we cannot expect to achieve an autonomous way of life when the very nature of our revolution reproduces hierarchical social relations through centralized systems. We need a synthesis of the means and ends, to accept that only by reforging social relations in the lead up to revolution can we secure a proper future after it. As Zoe Baker stated in her article "Means and Ends":

"in order to achieve a communist society the majority of the population has to engage in activities during the struggle against capitalism itself that transform them into people who want to and are able to self-direct their lives and community through local councils and federations of councils."[xxiii]

This is what would otherwise be called prefigurative politics, the act of experimenting with revolutionary forms of practice as a part of the revolution itself. In this case, it would entail the development and experimentation with forms of commune and council-based structures that we can create prior to revolution and which can be utilized during it. As Thomas Swann puts it:

"If we want to create, for instance, a future society governed through some form of participatory democracy in which everyone can have a fair say in decision making, then the organizations we build to achieve this should be structured so as to enact that end goal, reflecting it."[xxiv]

Now the Soviet Union did indeed create a movement on the back of democratic organization, the Soviets, but its intention (as made clear by Lenin's own statements) was not to maintain their autonomy or decentralized freedom. Instead, the Soviets were subjected to party and bureaucratic rule. This act of centralization simply forced the Soviets into a state structure and made the maintenance of central command a top priority. A decentralized network of communes, meanwhile, must command no authority but that which is genuinely granted at the behest of its members through consensus-making and participatory democratic systems.

In practical terms, this means looking at our own organizations and changing them to better reflect

the future that we wish to create. It means maximizing the autonomy and free association amongst our members and reducing hierarchical relations. It means making space for dissenting opinion within our own morality but within the systems that we are creating. It means looking at participatory democracy, consensus-building, transformative justice, all these ways of changing the way human beings relate to one another. At the center of all of this, the commune, a word so poignant in the radical world, autonomy and free association will thrive. Not immediately, but with time, experimentation, and hope.

When examining modern attempts at socialism, it is therefore integral to be critical of their organizational structure and how they handle dissent. Recent events in Cuba, for example, alongside the coercive suppression of dissent in countries like China and Vietnam, throw up further questions about how systems handle protest. As is the case with Cuba, it is vital to understand the wider global context (such as imperialism), and not jump onto the imperialists' bandwagon in supporting regime changes that serve their ends. However, it is too simple and shortsighted to simply claim dissidents are counter revolutionary. Dissent is a constant reality in a state system, it is a form of protest inflamed when political participation cannot fully address people's concerns. When our solution to it involves coercive apparatus, such as police or prisons, we are heading in a dangerous direction.

Kronstadt was truly an unavoidable tragedy, a course of events set in place by the dynamics of a centralized revolution and a state at war. If we are to learn our lesson, we will build a social system that can incorporate dissent, and one which can function with decentralized command. And if we are to truly learn our lesson, we will get to it right now.

[i] Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 2021*, (New York: Norton Library, 1974), p.6.

[ii] Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24: Soviet Works and the New Communist Elite*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp.8-9

[iii] Robert V. Daniels, 'The Kronstadt Rebellion of 1921: A study in the Dynamics of Revolution', in *The American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. X, pp.241-254.

[iv] Pirani, pp.32-3.

[v] Pirani, p.43.

[vi] Daniels, p.241.

[vii] Daniels, p.242.

[viii] Avrich, p.228.

[ix] Avrich, p.4.

[x] Avrich, p.5.

[xi] Daniels, p.246.

[xii] Avrich, p.221-2.

[xiii] Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'New Economic Policy,' Available at: https://www.britannica.com/event/New-Economic-Policy-Soviet-history.

[xiv] Avrich, p.227.

[xv] Avrich, p.225-6.

[xvi] Gregory Claeys, *Marx and Marxism*, (London: Pelican, 2018), p.307.

[xvii] Claeys, p.312.

[xviii] Vladimir Lenin, *State and Revolution*, Lenin Internet Archive. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/.

[xix] Max Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', (1918).

[xx] Sub.media (2016), 'What is Autonomy?', Available at: https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/sub-media-what-is-autonomy.

[xxi] Sub.media.

[xxii] Karl Marx (1845), *The German Ideology*, Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm.

[xxiii] Zoe Baker (2019), *Means and Ends, The Anarchist Critique of Seizing State Power*, Available at: https://usa.anarchistlibraries.net/library/anarchopac-means-and-ends.

[xxiv] Thomas Swann, *Anarchist Cybernetics: Control and Communication in Radical Politics*, (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020, p.69.