The Kronstadt Revolt of 1921 as a part of the Great Russian Revolution

written by Alexei Gusev | October 4, 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.]

On March 8th 1921 "Izvestia of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee of Kronstadt's sailors, Red Army soldiers and workers" published the declaration "What we are fighting for?", where the nature of Kronstadt revolt against Communist party dictatorship was defined in the following way: "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. This new revolution will also rouse the laboring masses of the East and of the West, by serving as an example of the new socialist construction as opposed to the bureaucratic Communist 'creativity'[1]. Thus, the March revolution of 1921, initiated by "Red Kronstadt", had to complete the cause of the February and October revolutions of 1917.

But not only rebels used the notion of the "third revolution". A day before, on March 7th, a representative of the opposite side, Plenipotentiary of the Special Section of the All-Russian Cheka Vasilii Sevei reported to War Commissar Leon Trotsky: "These sailors [of the Baltic Fleet] were and still are professional revolutionaries and could well form the basis for a possible third revolution"[2].

Was the "third revolution" just a rhetorical phrase, or had any real foundations in 1921?

If revolution is understood as a process of social transformations developing under an influence of mass popular actions and involving changes of political regimes,

then events from 1917 to 1921 constitute the *Great Russian revolution* that consisted of several phases. It was caused by the objective need to resolve a number of key problems and contradictions of social modernization in Russia – mainly, two most important ones: the land question (meaning redistribution of agricultural land from big landowners to peasants) and the political question (democratization of the state). This was expressed in the most popular slogan of the Russian revolutionary movement: *Land and Freedom!* The revolution – including confrontation of various social and political forces in the form of civil war – continued after the downfall of Tsarist regime till stabilization of the new, Bolshevik political regime on the basis of the partial resolution of the land question and cessation of the mass popular struggles.

In this context, the Kronstadt revolt of 1921 appears as an integral part of the revolutionary process that took several years. In order to define its historical place and significance, it is necessary to describe the main phases of the Great Russian revolution.

During the first, February-March 1917 phase the Tsarist autocracy was destroyed, and systemic social transformation began. However, main question of the revolution had not been solved: peasants did not receive land, and a democratic political system was not consolidated, since the Provisional government delayed a convocation of the Constituent Assembly.

The second phase lasted from Summer 1917 to the beginning of 1918. It was a time of the new upsurge of the mass social movements – both urban and countryside. Growing disillusionment in the Provisional government led masses to rely on Soviets as a basis of a new political system. This created conditions for the taking power by the Bolshevik party in October 1917. Though Bolsheviks had not popular majority support, they also at first did not face mass resistance. The principal content of this "October phase" was agrarian revolution in the countryside, so called "black repartition" of land among peasants sanctioned by the new authorities.

The third phase – from Summer 1918 to the end of 1920 – was a period of the large-scale civil war. The pre-condition of it became mass disillusionment in Bolsheviks, who also proved unable to resolve main questions of the revolution: in place of Soviet power they established an authoritarian Communist party rule, in place of freedom for peasantry came the "food dictatorship", system of grain requisitions. This enabled consolidation of the anti-Bolshevik right-wing, counter-revolutionary forces – the White movement with its large armies, supported by foreign states. During the large-scale military confrontation between Reds and Whites the popular mass movement for land and freedom manifested itself mostly in the form of resistance to both dictatorships, local uprisings, guerilla warfare, and so on. In general, this stage can be called the "defensive phase" of the revolution. Under its

conditions, popular movements had to act carefully, since struggle against one of the combatting dictatorships could play to the hands of the other. But finally Whites, with their restorationist aspirations, proved to be worse for majority of the population than Reds, and that explains defeat of the former by the end of 1920. However, the main questions of the revolution still remained unresolved, leading to the new rise of popular struggles – the fourth phase of the revolutionary process' development.

This period of the new revolutionary upsurge lasted from the end of 1920 to March 1921. And one of its most important episodes became the revolt of Kronstadt sailors. It should be seen in the closest relation with the other events of this phase. Firstly, the Winter of 1920-1921 marked the highest point of the Peasant war in Russia – mass peasant uprisings engulfed all grain-producing regions; at least 165 large insurgent detachments with more than one hundred thousand fighters operated in the country. In Tambov region "United guerilla army" led by a Socialist Revolutionary Alexander Antonov counted about 50000. The same number of insurgents fought in "popular armies" of Western Siberia, that under the slogan "Down with Communism! Long live Soviets!" took several towns[3]. Most of the countryside territory all over the country went out of control of the Moscow government.

Secondly, there was an upsurge of the industrial workers protest movement everywhere. In all main industrial centers of Russia workers went on strikes, that very often involved putting forward political demands. In Petrograd the protest movement had reached by the end of February 1921 such a scale that Bolshevik authorities called it "mutiny at factories" and declared martial law in the city[4]. It was the February mighty strike wave in both capitals, Petrograd and Moscow, that directly provoked the Kronstadt revolt.

Thirdly, a whole series of protest actions, including armed rebellions, took place in the Red Army, that consisted of the same peasants and workers. In the Volga region, the rebellious division commander Alexander Sapozhkov formed "The 1st Red Army of Truth". In Ukraine, rebelled a commander of cavalry brigade Grigoriy Maslakov, who with his men joined "Revolutionary Insurgent Army" led by anarchist Nestor Makhno. And there were others.

From the standpoint of political theory, the situation of the early 1921 could be described as a *revolutionary situation*. This notion was introduced by Vladimir Lenin, but before him a set of conditions for beginning of revolutions have been characterized by such historians as Adolphe Thiers and Francois Mignet. They also identified these conditions in the episodes of revolutionary process' activization in the framework of the Great French revolution of 1789-1795.

Another French historian, Alexis de Toqueville looking at the situations of revolutionary upsurges, noted that they develop when masses feel their growing expectations for improvements betrayed. It was exactly the case after the defeat of the last large White Army of Peter Wrangel in November 1920. The civil war front came to an end, and people hoped for the liquidation of War Communism – the regime of *prodrazvyorstka* (food requisitioning), suppression of trade, militarization of economy and compulsory labor. The policy of War Communism obviously came to a deadlock blocking any development of ruined economy and generating hunger. But the Communist authorities, instead of abandoning this policy, tried to tighten screws of War Communism more and more. This caused a rise in protest activities, stimulated by popular understanding that there was no more direct threat of armed White counter-revolution that could use such actions for its advantage.

Lenin defined a revolutionary situation as a situation of general crisis, when "the suffering and want" of the masses "have grown more acute than usual", and they considerably increase their activity. In other words, the principal factor leading to a revolution is that "the lower classes do not want to live in the old way".

The modern theories of revolution, developed by such authors as Olivier Filleieule, Michel Dobry and others, concretize this property of the revolutionary situation by identifying its three characteristics:

1. *Active protests involved a significant percentage of the population*. As we have seen, this feature was present in Russia in early 1921.

2. *Large inter-class coalitions are formed which lead to the spread of the protest movement*. In the case of Russia 1921, there was a spontaneous forming coalition between insurgent peasants, striking workers and rebelling soldiers and sailors.

3. *Universalization of basic demands of the protesting masses*. In 1921 such common demands put forwards in protests of all social groups were "three freedoms": of labor, of trade and political freedom. People demanded free disposal of their labor power, free trade unions, free exchange between cities and countryside, free speech, press, meetings and associations. They wanted free elections of workers, peasants and soldiers' Soviets, that from the mid-1918 had been tightly controlled by the ruling Communist party that determined their results. In the Leninist conception of "proletarian dictatorship", that equated it with the dictatorship of Communist party, Soviets (as well as unions and other public organizations) were seen as nothing but mere "transmission belts" from the ruling party to masses. Their independence or possibility of oppositional behavior was totally excluded. As Leon Kamenev

> declared in 1920, commenting on the results of elections to Moscow Soviet over which he presided, the Socialist political opposition (he meant Mensheviks in particular) would not be allowed to get even "a particle of power"[5]. As Lenin himself put it, no "slightest shift of power" from Bolsheviks was tolerable[6]. But many workers and peasants did not forget that the October 1917 Bolshevik slogan was "All power to Soviets!", not "All power to the Bolshevik party!" – and demanded practical fulfillment of that principle. The "15-point resolution" adopted on March 1st 1921 by the general meeting of sailors and workers of Kronstadt, just summarized the above-mentioned common political, social and economic popular demands – and became the beginning of the rebellion[7].

The next property of a revolutionary situation is a crisis "of the tops", among ruling elite. In Lenin's words, "the upper classes should be unable to rule in the old way". In the language of contemporary political science: "divisions or defections within the central bodies of the state; divisions or defections within security forces"[8].

In 1921 the ruling Bolshevik party experienced a profound crisis – both on the leadership and rank-and-file levels. Attempts to find a way out of the dead-end of war communism led to the bitter "discussion on trade unions" that divided even Central Committee and Politbureau of theRussian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), or RCP(b), into rival factions. The "Workers Opposition" and "Democratic Centralism Group" attacked the party tops for being out of touch with the proletarian masses[9].

The factional struggle engulfed also Communist party organization of the Baltic Fleet. Petrograd party leaders around Grigory Zinoviev and Fleet's political commissar Nikolay Kuzmin, who supported Lenin's faction, came against the Fleet's commander Theodor Raskolnikov, who belonged to Trotsky's faction and had to resign. Party leaders' credibility among communist sailors diminished, there were talks about possible formation of the new opposition grouping – "the fleet opposition". Influence of the fleet's party cells had fallen, sailors were leaving the RCP(b) en masse: before the rebellion the Kronstadt party organization lost about 40% of its members.

In the course of rebellion itself, only one third of Kronstadt communists came out it, one third supported it, and one third stood neutral. The newly elected Provisional Bureau of Kronstadt organization of the RCP(b) called for co-operation with the rebels' Revolutionary Committee (its members had to be shot by Cheka). And a number of rebellion's leaders, including head of the Revolutionary Committee Stepan Petrichenko, were former Communist party members themselves. They understood their struggle as the struggle for the case of October 1917 with its proclaimed, but not realized goals.

Later, Rafail Abramovich, Menshevik leader in emigration, characterized Kronstadt rebellion as an uprising against Bolshevik dictatorship "by a part of the Bolshevism itself". It is not an accident that the leading role at the beginning of uprising was played by old sailors from battleships "Sebastopol" and "Petropavlovsk", many of whom participated in revolutionary events of 1917, when Kronstadt served as a main stronghold of Bolshevism. These old sailors were joined by younger conscripts from Southern Russia and Ukraine with fresh experiences of War Communism and the associated repressions.

The outcome of the Kronstadt rebellion proved once again that not every revolutionary situation leads to revolution. But had the 1921 uprising any chances to win?

Two and a half years earlier quite similar events took place not far away from Kronstadt – in German Baltic Sea port Kiel. In November 1918 sailors revolt there led to formation of the soldiers and workers council, similar to the Kronstadt Provisional Revolutionary Committee. The Council adopted the "14-point resolution", the first paragraphs of which resembled those in the "15-point resolution" of Kronstadt: demands of freedom of speech, press and release of political prisoners[10]. German government troops tried to suppress Kiel sailors, but failed. Rebels were joined by other soldiers and supported by workers. The movement spread to other cities all over the country – and that sparked a victorious November 1918 democratic revolution in Germany.

As in Kiel in 1918, Kronstadt rebels in 1921 had widespread sympathies among Petrograd workers and sailors. And Communist leaders understood a grave danger that workers-sailors coalition constituted for their rule. Nikolay Bukharin even told delegates of the Xth Party congress that the mutiny in Kronstadt was not so dangerous in comparison with workers' protests in Petrograd and Moscow, where "petty-bourgeois virus infected a part of the working class with gangrene". On March 5th Trotsky wrote: "Only seizure of Kronstadt would end political crisis in Petrograd". Zinoviev sent panic letters to Moscow saying that the only reliable forces in Petrograd were five thousand military cadets and armed communists. On March 10th Michail Tukhachevsky, commander of the 7th army directed against Kronstadt, also urged about a possible workers uprising in Petrograd and stressed a necessity to move more troops into Northern capital to prevent it.

Many Red army soldiers refused to fight against the Kronstadt rebels. It was the main reason why the first assault on Kronstadt on March 8th failed. Some units, such as the 561st Regiment, did not obey orders to attack; others, as it was reported, stopped when they saw red flags over Kronstadt (communist propaganda told that the naval base was in the hands of counter-revolutionaries, White generals

and Black hundreds[11]).

Then the military command brought against rebels one of the best rifle divisions of the Red Army – the 27th Omsk division. It distinguished itself as a force that played an important role in defeating White army of Alexander Kolchak in Siberia. But now this veteran unit proved to be unreliable: several of its regiments adopted resolutions stating that they would not "go against our brothers in Kronstadt". These units have been disarmed, those who protested arrested. "Extraordinary Troikas" (courts of three judges) were formed to issue death sentences for those who refused to attack Kronstadt. Only in two days, March 14th and 15th, about 80 Red Army soldiers were shot by decisions of this troikas. During the Great Terror of the 1930s this institute of "troika" was used on mass scale by Stalin. So, Wendelin Thomas, who in November 1918 took part in the sailors' revolt in Germany and in 1937 participated in the international "Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials", had good reasons to point at the link between Kronstadt's suppression and the development of the Stalinist regime's repressive practices.

Thus, in March 1921 it was very difficult to prevent spreading the uprising out of Kronstadt. And the soon expected melting of ice around Kronstadt could have make it an impregnable fortress [12]. Linking together with Baltic Fleet sailors, striking workers and insurgent peasants could have transformed the political regime in Russia . Their victory would have meant democratization of the country's political system and giving peasants "full freedom of action in regard to their land", as the "15-point resolution" put it. That would have meant final resolution of both main questions of the Great Russian revolution – agrarian and political.

But that did not happen – the Kronstadt revolt of 1921 suffered defeat. Several factors contributed into such outcome. Among them the spontaneous character of the rebellion, that had not been organizationally or politically prepared in advance, and mostly defensive tactics of rebels, who for too long time believed in a possibility of peaceful compromise with the Communist party leaders. At the same time, political forces that could have supported sailors' rebellion in Petrograd, were neutralized by the pre-emptive repression: literally a couple of days before the beginning of the revolt, several hundreds of members of Socialist parties and activists of the independent workers movement had been arrested by Petrograd Cheka.

However, the Kronstadt revolt, though defeated, played an important role – together with other popular uprisings and protests – by forcing Bolsheviks to put an end to War Communism and introduce the New Economic Policy (NEP) in March 1921. Concessions to peasants (transition from food requisitioning to tax system, restoration of trade, etc.) and general loosening of government control over

economy improved the economic situation in the country and led to decline in mass protest activity. The revolutionary process in Russia entered its final, downward phase. In Summer 1921 all main centers of peasant insurgency – in Volga region, Western Siberia and Ukraine – were finally suppressed. At the same time, a scale of industrial workers struggles diminished. This signified the end of the Great Russian revolution of 1917-1921. Its objective tasks had been resolved only partially. Peasant majority of the population got real social achievements, but with no political guaranties. The revolution totally failed in its political, democratic aspect, leading to the consolidation of new, "red" form of authoritarianism. Simultaneously with certain economic liberalization, political regime of the Communist party rule hardened. Communist leaders were threatened by what they called a "spirit of Kronstadt", which could have led to new rebellions. Therefore by 1922 they not only purged all Soviets of tiny remnants of legal non-Communist opposition (Mensheviks, Maximalists, Anarchists) but outlawed factions and "unbusinesslike and factional criticism" inside the ruling Communist party itself[13]. Lenin said that 1921 marked "self-Thermidorization" of the Bolshevik regime[14]. If *Thermidor* is understood as a combination of relative economic liberalization with consolidation of oligarchic rule and final suppression of popular movements, he had a point.

The 1921 Kronstadt revolt, with its revolutionary democratic aspirations, was in fact a last serious attempt to revive initial program and slogans of October 1917. Its failure opened a historically known road from Thermidor to Bonapartism, that in the XXth Century took a form of totalitarianism. As Ante Ciliga, active participant of the left anti-Stalinist resistance and Soviet political prisoner in the 1930s, wrote in 1936: "everything that happened after [the suppression of Kronstadt and workers' strikes movement in 1921] was, from the social point of view, no more than evolution, movement from step to step down"[15]. Victor Serge, who had more positive view of Lenin and Trotsky, tended to see in the suppression of Kronstadt revolt a tragic necessity and argued about it with Ciliga, nevertheless admitted: "It is the Kronstadt tragedy that we have to look at in order to see how the revolution's image changed. Kronstadt meant the first bloody victory of the bureaucratic state over laboring masses. This state was still led by great Bolsheviks, ardent and far-sighted Socialists; but in fact, the machine has already overpowered them, and a habit of unlimited rule, without democratic control, changed their mentality"[16].

The fate of defeated Kronstadt was sad: more than 2000 people were shot and more than 6000 imprisoned, and the remaining population ("kronmutineers and their families") deported. But Bolshevik "victors" fared not much better: Zinoviev and Kamenev were shot by Stalin in 1936, Tukhachevsky in 1937, Kuzmin and Bukharin in 1938. Raskolnikov was in 1938 declared "enemy of people", refused to return from France to the USSR and a year later died under suspicious circumstances. Trotsky was in 1940 assassinated in Mexican exile by Stalin's agent. By that time, Trotsky, who in 1921 led military suppression of sailors' revolt, has put forward a

program, that, as Ciliga pointed out, “in fact reproduced, though in timid form, main demands of Kronstadt”[17]. All of these leading Communists eventually became victims of their own 1921 victory that proved to be Pyrrhic. History once again demonstrated: those who attempt to defend or develop revolution by betraying its basic principles of self-liberation could only bury the revolutionary project – and often share its fate too.

1 Izvestiya Vremennogo revolyucionnogo komiteta matrosov, krasnoarmejcev i rabochih goroda Kronshtadta. No.6. 8 March 1921.

2 Cited in: Getzler I. The Communist Leaders’ Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents// Revolutionary Russia. 2002. Vol.15. No.1. P. 32-33.

3 Fates of Russian peasantry [Sud’by rossijskogo krest’yanstva] M., 1996. P. 142; Shishkin V.I. For Soviets without Communists: peasant revolt in Tyumen region 1921 [Za sovety bez kommunistov: krest’yanskoe vosstanie v Tyumenskoj gubernii 1921] Novosibirsk, 2000. P. 324 et al.

4 Kronstadt 1921. Documents on events in Kronstadt in Spring 1921 [Kronshtadt 1921. Dokumenty o sobytiyah v Kronshtadte vesnoj 1921 goda] M., 1997. P. 8, 32.

5 Central State Archive of Moscow Region [Central’nyj gosudarstvennyj arhiv Moskovskoj oblasti], fond 66, opis 14, delo 26, list 7.

6 Protocols of the Xth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) [Protokoly X s”ezda RKP(b)]. M.,1933. P.35-36.

7 Kronstadt 1921. Documents on events in Kronstadt in Spring 1921 P. 50-51.

8 Bennani-Chraïbi M., Filleieule O. Towards a sociology of revolutionary situations. Reflections on the Arab uprising // Revue Francaise de science politique (English). 2012. Vol. 62. No 5-6. P. 14.

9 Democratic Centralists, in particular, stated that the Party’s Central Committee “persists with policy of bureaucratic centralization, bureaucratic secrecy, disdain for local organizations, resulting in aggravation of moral corruption,weakening of party and Soviet apparatuses, gangrene of formalism”. They demanded to abandon “unrestrained movement to bureaucratic autocracy”. (Political parties and movements of Russia. Documents and materials. Vol. II. The Communist party (1917-1985). Part 1. [Politicheskie partii i dvizheniya Rossii. Dokumenty i materialy. T. 2. Kommunisticheskaya partiya (1917-1985). Kniga 1.] M., 2008. P. 156-157)

10 Lutz R.H. The German Revolution, 1918-1919. Stanford, California, 1922. P. 31.

11 Kronstadt 1921. Documents on events in Kronstadt in Spring 1921 P. 59-60.

12 On 10 March Trotsky wrote to Politbureau: “Kronstadt could be seized only before thaw begins. As soon as the bay opens for navigation, Kronstadt would establish connections with abroad. At the same time, the island would become inaccessible for us […] It is necessary to liquidate Kronstadt at any cost in the next few days” (Kronstadt tragedy of 1921. Documents [Kronshtadtskaya tragediya 1921 goda. Dokumenty] Vol. 1. M., 1999. P. 349).

13 Resolution on Party Unity, adopted by the Xth Congress of the RCP(B) on 16 March 1921// Protocols of the Xth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks). P. 586.

14 Izvestia. 1 February 1924.

15 Ciliga A. La Révolution russe et les raisons de sa degenerescence // La Révolution prolétarienne: revue mensuelle syndicaliste communiste. 1936. No. 235. P. 16 (364).

16 Victor Serge. Le souvenir de Cronstadt 1921 // La Wallonie. 1 Avril 1940.

17 Ciliga A. L’insurrection de Cronstadt et la destinée de la Révolution russe // La Révolution prolétarienne: revue mensuelle syndicaliste communiste. 1938. No. 278. P. 2 (274).