

The Kronstadt Rebellion

Alexander Berkman

1922

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| I. Labor Disturbances in Petrograd | 3 |
| II. The Kronstadt Movement | 5 |
| III. Bolsheviks campaign against Kronstadt | 10 |
| IV. The Aims of Kronstadt | 14 |
| V. Bolshevik Ultimatum to Kronstadt | 22 |
| VI. The First Shot | 27 |
| VII. The Defeat of Kronstadt | 28 |
| Author's Afterword: Lessons and Significance of Kronstadt | 31 |

I. Labor Disturbances in Petrograd

It was early in 1921. Long years of war, revolution, and civil struggle had bled Russia to exhaustion and brought her people to the brink of despair. But at last civil war was at an end: the numerous fronts were liquidated, and Wrangel — the last hope of Entente intervention and Russian counter-revolution — was defeated and his military activities within Russia terminated. The people now confidently looked forward to the mitigation of the severe Bolshevik régime. It was expected that with the end of civil war the Communists would lighten the burdens, abolish war-time restrictions, introduce some fundamental liberties, and begin the organisation of a more normal life. Though far from being popular the Bolshevik Government had the support of the workers in its oft announced plan of taking up the economic reconstruction of the country as soon as military operations should cease. The people were eager to coöperate, to put their initiative and creative efforts to the reconstruction of the ruined land.

Most unfortunately, these expectations were doomed to disappointment. The Communist State showed no intention of loosening the yoke. The same policies continued, with labor militarisation still further enslaving the people, embittering them with added oppression and tyranny, and in consequence paralysing every possibility of industrial revival. The last hope of the proletariat was perishing: the conviction grew that the Communist Party was more interested in retaining political power than in saving the Revolution.

The most revolutionary elements of Russia, the workers of Petrograd, were the first to speak out. They 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. Many factories and mills of Petrograd had been closed, and the workers were literally starving. They called meetings to consider the situation. The meetings were suppressed by the Government. The Petrograd proletariat, who had borne the brunt of the revolutionary struggles and whose great sacrifices and heroism alone had saved the city from Yudenitch, resented the action of the Government. Feeling against the methods employed by the Bolsheviks continued to grow. More meetings were called, with the same result. The Communists 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 workers were indignant — they became aroused. To compel the Government to consider their demands, strikes were called in the Patronny munition works, the Trubotchny and Baltiyski mills, and in the Laferm factory. Instead of talking matters over with the dissatisfied workers, the “Workers’ and Peasants’ Government” created a war-time *Komitet Oborony* (Committee

of Defense) with Zinoviev, the most hated man in Petrograd, as Chairman. The avowed purpose of that Committee was to suppress the strike movement.

It was on February 24 that the strikes were declared. The same day the Bolsheviks sent the *kursanti*, the Communist students of the military academy (training officers for the Army and Navy), to disperse the workers who had gathered on Vassilevsky Ostrov, the labor district of Petrograd. The next day, February 25, the indignant strikers of Vassilevsky Ostrov visited the Admiralty shops and the Galernaya docks, and induced the workers there to join their protest against the autocratic attitude of the Government. The attempted street demonstration of the strikers was dispersed by armed soldiery.

On February 26 the Petrograd Soviet held a session at which the prominent Communist Lashevitch, member of the Committee of Defense and of the Revolutionary Military Soviet of the Republic, denounced the strike movement in sharpest terms. He charged the workers of the Trubotchny factory with inciting dissatisfaction, accused them of being "self-seeking labor skimmers (*shkurniki*) and counterrevolutionists", and proposed that the Trubotchny factory be closed. The Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet (Zinoviev, Chairman) accepted the suggestion. The Trubotchny strikers were *locked out* and thus automatically deprived of their rations

These methods of the Bolshevik Government served still further to embitter and antagonise the workers.

Strikers' proclamations now began to appear on the streets of Petrograd. Some of them assumed a distinctly political character, the most significant of them, posted on the walls of the city February 27, reading:

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 Bolshevik: they want to control their own destinies.

Comrades, preserve a revolutionary order! Determinedly and in an organized manner demand:

Liberation of all arrested socialist 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 (*zavkomi*), of labor union and soviet representatives.

Call meetings, pass resolutions, send your delegates to the authorities and work for the realisation of your demands.

The government replied to the demands of the strikers by making numerous arrests and suppressing several labor organizations. The action resulted in popular temper growing more anti-Bolshevik; reactionary slogans began to be heard. Thus on February 28 there appeared a proclamation of the “Socialist Workers of the Nevsky District”, which concluded with a call for the Constituent Assembly:

We know who is afraid of the Constituent Assembly. It is they who will no longer be able to rob the people. Instead they will have to answer before the representatives of the people for their deceit, their robberies, and their crimes.

Down with the hated Communists!

Down with the Soviet Government!

Long live the Constituent Assembly!

Meanwhile the Bolsheviki concentrated in Petrograd large military forces from the provinces and also ordered to the city its most trusted Communist regiments from the front. Petrograd was put under “extraordinary martial law”. The strikers were overawed, and the labor unrest crushed with an iron hand.

II. The Kronstadt Movement

The Kronstadt sailors were much disturbed by what happened in Petrograd. They did not look with friendly eyes upon the Government’s drastic treatment of the strikers. They knew what the revolutionary proletariat of the capital had had to bear since the first phase of the revolution, how heroically they had fought against Yudenitch, and how patiently they were suffering privation and misery. But Kronstadt was far from favoring the Constituent Assembly or the demand for free trade which made itself heard in Petrograd. The sailors were thoroughly revolutionary in spirit and action. They were the staunchest supporters of the Soviet system, but they were opposed to the dictatorship of any political party.

The sympathetic movement with the Petrograd strikers first began among the sailors of the warships *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol* — the ships that in 1917 had been the main support of the Bolsheviki. The movement spread to the whole fleet of Kronstadt, then to the Red Army regiment stationed there. On February 28th the men of *Petropavlovsk* passed a irresolution which was also concurred in by the sailors of *Sevastopol*. The resolution demanded, among other things, free reëlection to the Kronstadt Soviet, as the tenure of office of the latter was about to expire. At the same time a committee of sailors was sent to Petrograd to learn the situation there.

On March 1 a public meeting was held on the Yakorny Square in Kronstadt, which was officially called by the crews of the First and Second Squadrons of the Baltic fleet. 16,000 sailors, Red Army men, and workers attended the gathering. It was presided over by the chairman of the Executive Committee of the Kronstadt Soviet, the Communist Vassiliev. The President of the Russian Socialist Federated Republic, Kalinin, and the Commissar of the Baltic Fleet, Kuzmin, were present and addressed the audience. It may be mentioned, as indicative of the friendly attitude of the sailors to the Bolshevik Government, that Kalinin was met on his arrival in Kronstadt with military honors, music, and banners.

At this meeting the Sailors' Committee that had been sent to Petrograd on February 28 made its report. It corroborated the worst fears of Kronstadt. The audience was outspoken in its indignation at the methods used by the Communists to crush the modest demands of the Petrograd workers. The resolution which had been passed by *Petropavlovsk* on February 28th was then submitted to the meeting. President Kalinin and Commissar Kuzmin bitterly attacked the resolution and denounced the Petrograd strikers as well as the Kronstadt sailors. But the arguments failed to impress the audience, and the *Petropavlovsk* resolution was passed unanimously. The historic document read:

RESOLUTION OF THE GENERAL MEETING
OF THE CREWS OF THE FIRST AND SECOND SQUADRONS
OF THE BALTIC FLEET
HELD MARCH 1, 1921

Having heard the report of the representatives sent by the General Meeting of the Ship Crews to Petrograd to investigate the situation there, Resolved:

1. In view of the fact that the present Soviets do not express the will of the workers and peasants, immediately to hold new elections by secret ballot, the pre-election campaign to have full freedom of agitation among the workers and peasants;
2. To establish freedom of speech and press for workers and peasants, for Anarchists and left Socialist parties;
3. To secure freedom of assembly for labor unions and peasant organizations;
4. To call a non-partisan Conference of the workers, Red Army soldiers and sailors of Petrograd, Kronstadt, and of Petrograd Province, no later than March 10th, 1921;

5. To liberate all political prisoners of socialist parties, as well as all workers, peasants, soldiers, and sailors imprisoned in connection with the labor and peasant movements;
6. To elect a commission to review the cases of those held in prisons and concentration camps;
7. To abolish all politotdeli (political bureaus) because no party should be given special privileges in the propagation of its ideas or receive the financial support of the government for such purposes. Instead there should be established educational and cultural commissions, locally elected and financed by the government;
8. To abolish immediately all *zagryaditelniye otryadi*;¹
9. To equalize the rations of all who work, with the exception of those employed in trades is detrimental to health;
10. To abolish the Communist fighting detachments in all branches of the Army, as well as the Communist guards kept on duty in mills and factories. Should such guards or military detachments be found necessary, they are to be appointed in the army from the ranks, and in the factories according to the judgment of the workers;
11. To give the peasants full freedom of action in regard to their land, and also the right to keep cattle, on condition that the peasants manage with their own means; that is, without employing hired labor;
12. To request all branches of the army, as well as our comrades the military kursanti, to concur in our resolutions;
13. To demand that the press give the fullest publicity to resolutions;
14. To appoint a Travelling Commission of Control;
15. To permit free *kustarnoye* (Individuals small scale) production by one's own efforts.

Resolution passed unanimously by a brigade in meeting, two persons refraining from voting.

¹ Armed units organized by the Bolsheviks for the purpose of suppressing traffic and confiscating foodstuffs and other products. The irresponsibility and arbitrariness of their methods were proverbial throughout the country. The government abolished them in the Petrograd Province on the eve of its attack against Kronstadt — a bribe to the Petrograd proletariat. A. B.

PETRICHENKO

Chairman Brigade Meeting

PEREPELKIN

Secretary

Resolution passed by an overwhelming majority of the Kronstadt garrison.

VASSILIEV

Chariman

Together with comrade Kalinin Vassiliev votes against the resolution.

This resolution, strenuously opposed — as already mentioned — by Kalinin and Kuzmin, was passed over their protest. After the meeting Kalinin was permitted to return to Petrograd unmolested.

At the same Brigade Meeting it was also decided to send a Committee to Petrograd to explain to the workers and the garrison there the demands of Kronstadt and to request that nonpartisan delegates be sent by the Petrograd proletariat to Kronstadt to learn the actual state of affairs and the demands of the sailors. This Committee, which consisted of thirty members, was arrested by the Bolsheviki in Petrograd. It was the first blow struck by the Communist government against Kronstadt. The fate of the Committee remained a mystery.

As the term of office of the members of the Kronstadt Soviet was about to expire, the Brigade Meeting also decided to call a Conference of delegates on March 2, to discuss the manner in which the new elections were to be held. The Conference was to consist of representatives of the ships, the garrison, the various Soviet institutions, the labor unions and factories, each organisation to be represented by two delegates.

The Conference of March 2 took place in the House of Education (the former Kronstadt school of Engineering) and was attended by over 300 delegates, among whom were also Communists. The meeting was opened by the sailor Petrichenko, and a Presidium (Executive Committee) of five members of was elected *viva voce*. The main question before the delegates was the approaching new elections to the Kronstadt Soviet to be based on more equitable principles than heretofore. The meeting was also to take action on the resolutions of March 1, and to consider ways and means of helping the country out of the desperate condition created by famine and fuel shortage.

The spirit of the Conference 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.

Kuzmin, Commissar of the Baltic Fleet, was the first to address the Conference. A man of more energy than judgment, he entirely failed to grasp the great significance of the moment. He was not equal to the situation: he did not know how to reach the hearts and minds of those simple men, the sailors and workers who had sacrificed so much for the Revolution and were now exhausted to the point of desperation. The delegates had gathered to take counsel with the representatives of the government. Instead Kuzmin's speech proved a firebrand thrown into gunpowder. He insensated the Conference by his arrogance and insolence. He denied the labor disorders in Petrograd, declaring that the city was quiet and the workers satisfied. He praised the work of the Commissars, questioned the revolutionary motives of Kronstadt, and warned against danger from Poland.

He stooped to unworthy insinuations and thundered threats. "If you want to open warfare", Kuzmin concluded, "you shall have it, for the Communists will not give up the reins of government. We will fight to the bitter end."

This tactless and provoking speech of the Commissar of the Baltic Fleet served to insult and outrage the delegates. The address of the Chairman of the Kronstadt Soviet, the Communist Vassiliev, who was the next speaker, made no impression on the audience: the man was colorless and indefinite. As the meeting progressed, the general attitude became more clearly anti-Bolshevik. Still the delegates were hoping to reach some friendly understanding with the representatives of the government. But presently it became apparent, states the official report,² that "we could not trust comrades Kuzmin and Vassiliev anymore, and that it was necessary to detain them temporarily, especially because the Communists were in possession of arms, and we had no access to the telephones. The soldiers stood in fear of the Commissars, as proved by the letter read at the meeting, and the Communists did not permit gatherings of the garrison to take place."

Kuzmin and Vassiliev were therefore removed from the meeting and placed under arrest. It is characteristic of the spirit of the Conference that the motion to detain the other Communists present was voted down by an overwhelming majority. The delegates held the Communists must be considered on equal footing with the representatives of other organizations and accorded the same rights and treatment. Kronstadt still was determined to find some bond of agreement with the Communist Party and the Bolshevik Government.

² *Izvestia of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee of Kronstadt*, No. 9, March 11, 1921.

The resolutions of March 1 were read and enthusiastically passed. At that moment the Conference was thrown into great excitement by the declaration of a delegate that the Bolsheviki were about to attack the meeting and that fifteen carloads of soldiers and Communists, armed with rifles and machine guns, had been dispatched for that purpose. "This information", the *Izvestia* report continues, "produced passionate resentment among the delegates. Investigation soon proved the report groundless, but rumors persisted that a regiment of *kursanti*, headed by the notorious Tchekist Dukiss, was already marching in the direction of the Fort Krasnaia Gorka". In view of these new developments, and remembering the threats of Kuzmin and Kalinin, the Conference at once took up the question of organising the defense of Kronstadt against Bolshevik attack. Time pressing, it was decided to turn the Presidium of the Conference into a Provisional Revolutionary Committee, which was charged with the duty of preserving the order and safety of the city. That committee was also to make the necessary preparations for holding the new elections to the Kronstadt Soviet.

III. Bolsheviks campaign against Kronstadt

Petrograd was in a state of high nervous tension. New strikes had broken out and there were persistent rumors of labor disorders in Moscow, of peasant uprisings in the East and in Siberia. For lack of a reliable public press the people gave credence to the most exaggerated and even to obviously false reports. All eyes were on Kronstadt in expectation of momentous developments.

The Bolsheviki lost no time in organizing their attack against Kronstadt. Already on March 2 the Government issued a *prikaz* (order) signed by Lenin and Trotsky, which denounced the Kronstadt movement as in mutiny against the Communist authorities. In that document the sailors were charged with being "the tools of former Tsarist generals who together with Socialist -Revolutionary traitors staged a counter-revolutionary conspiracy against the proletarian Republic". The Kronstadt movement for free Soviets was characterized by Lenin and Trotsky as "the work of Entente interventionists and French spies". "On February 28", the *prikaz* read, "there were passed by the men of the *Petropavlovsk* resolutions breathing the spirit of the Black Hundreds. Then there appeared on the scene the group of the former general, Kozlovsky. He and three of his officers, whose names we have not yet ascertained, have openly assumed the rôle of rebellion. Thus the meaning of recent events has become evident. Behind the Socialist-Revolutionists again stands a Tsarist general. In view of all this the Council of Labor and Defense orders:

1. To declare the former general Kozlovsky and his aides outlawed;

2. To put the City of Petrograd and the Petrograd Province under martial law;
3. To place supreme power over the whole Petrograd District into the hands of the Petrograd Committee of Defense.”

There was indeed a former general, Kozlovsky, in Kronstadt. It was Trotsky who had placed him there as an Artillery specialist. He played no rôle whatever in the Kronstadt events, but the Bolsheviki clearly exploited his name to denounce the sailors as enemies of the Soviet Republic and their movement as counterrevolutionary. The official Bolshevik press now began its campaign of calumny and defamation of Kronstadt as a hotbed of “White conspiracy headed by General Kozlovsky”, and Communist agitators were sent among the workers in the mills and factories of Petrograd and Moscow to call upon the proletariat “to rally to the support and defense of the Workers and Peasants Government against the counter-revolutionary uprising in Kronstadt”.

Far from having anything to do with generals and counterrevolutionists, the Kronstadt sailors refused to accept aid even from the Socialist-Revolutionist Party. Its leader, Victor Tchernov, then in Reval, attempted to influence the sailors in favor of his Party and its demands, but received no encouragement from the Provisional Revolutionary Committee. Tchernov sent to Kronstadt the following radio message:³

The Chairman of the Constituent Assembly, Victor Tchernov, sends his fraternal greetings to the heroic comrades-sailors, the Red Army men and workers, who for the third time since 1905 are throwing off the yoke of tyranny. He offers to aid with men and to provision Kronstadt through the Russian coöperatives abroad. Inform what and how much is needed. Am prepared to come in person and give my energies and authority to the service of the people’s revolution. I have faith in the final victory of the laboring masses. *** Hail to the first to raise the banner of the People’s Liberation! Down with despotism from the left and right!

At the same time the Socialist-Revolutionist Party sent the following message to Kronstadt:

The Socialist-Revolutionist delegation abroad *** now that cup of the People’s wrath is overflowing, offers to help with all means in its

³ Published in *Revolutsionnaya Rossiya* (Socialist-Revolutionist journal) No. 8, May, 1921. See also *Moscow Izvestia* (Communist) NO. 154, JULY 13, 1922.

power in the struggle for liberty and popular government. Inform in what ways help is desired. Long live the people's revolution! Long live free Soviets and the Constituent Assembly!

The Kronstadt Revolutionary Committee declined the Socialist-Revolutionist offers. It sent the following reply to Victor Tchernov:

The provisional Revolutionary Committee of Kronstadt expresses to all our brothers abroad its deep gratitude for their sympathy. The Provisional Revolutionary Committee is thankful for the offer of Comrade Tchernov, but refrains for the present: that is, till further developments become clarified. Meantime everything will be taken into consideration

PETRICHENKO

Chairman provisional Revolutionary Committee

Moscow, however, continued its campaign of misrepresentation. On March 3 the Bolshevik radio station sent out the following message to the world (certain parts undecipherable owing to interference from another station):

*** That the armed uprising of the former general Kozlovsky has been organized by the spies of the Entente, like many similar previous plots, is evident from the bourgeois French newspaper *Matin*, which two weeks prior to the Kozlovsky rebellion published the following telegram from Helsingfors: "As a result of the recent Kronstadt uprising the Bolshevik military authorities have taken steps to isolate Kronstadt and to prevent the sailors and soldiers of Kronstadt from entering Petrograd." *** it is clear that the Kronstadt uprising was made in Paris and organized by the French secret service. *** The Socialist-Revolutionists, also controlled and directed from Paris, have been preparing rebellions against the Soviet Government, and no sooner were their preparations made than there appeared the real master, the Tsarist general.

The character of the numerous other messages sent by Moscow can be judged by the following radio:

Petrograd is orderly and quiet, and even a few factories where accusations against the Soviet Government were recently voiced now understand that it is the work of provocators. They realise where the agents of the Entente and of counter-revolution are leading them to.

*** Just at this moment, when in America a new Republican régime is assuming the reins of government and showing inclination to take up business relations with Soviet Russia, the spreading of lying rumors and the organization 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 rumors must influence also the Turkish delegation and make it more submissive to the demands of the Entente. The rebellion of the *Petropavlovsk* crew is undoubtedly part of a great conspiracy to create trouble within Soviet Russia and to injure our international position. *** This plan is being carried out within Russia by a Tsarist general and former officers, and their activities are supported by the Mensheviki and Socialist-Revolutionists.

The Petrograd committee of defense, 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 defense took up the systematic "cleaning of the city". Numerous workers, soldiers and sailors suspected of sympathizing with Kronstadt, were 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 Committee of Defense notified Kronstadt of its action by proclamation scattered over the city from an aeroplane on March 4, which stated: "The Committee of Defense declares that the arrested are held as hostages for the Commissar of the Baltic Fleet, N. N. Kuzmin, the Chairman of the Kronstadt Soviet, T. Vassiliev, and other Communists. If the least harm be suffered by our detained comrades, the hostages will pay with their lives".

"We do not want bloodshed. Not a single Communist has been shot by us", was Kronstadt's reply.

IV. The Aims of Kronstadt

Kronstadt revived with the new life. Revolutionary enthusiasm rose to a level of the October days when the heroism and devotion of the sailors played such a decisive rôle. Now for the first time since the Communist Party assumed exclusive control of the Revolution and the fate of Russia, Kronstadt felt itself free. A new spirit of solidarity and brotherhood brought the sailors, the soldiers of the garrison, the factory workers, and the nonpartisan elements together in united effort for their common cause. Even Communists were affected by the fraternalisation of the whole city and joined in the work preparatory to the approaching elections to the Kronstadt Soviet.

Among the first steps taken by the Provisional Revolutionary Committee was the preservation of revolutionary order in Kronstadt and the publication of the Committee's official organ, the daily *Izvestia*. Its first appeal to the people of Kronstadt (issue No. 1, March 3, 1921) was thoroughly characteristic of the attitude and temper of the sailors. "The revolutionary committee", it read, "is most concerned that no blood be shed. It has exerted its best efforts to organize revolutionary order in the city, the fortress and the forts. Comrades and citizens, do not suspend work! Workers, remain at your machines; sailors and soldiers, be on your posts. All Soviet employees and institutions should continue their labors. The Provisional Revolutionary Committee calls upon you all, comrades and citizens, to give it your support and aid. Its mission is to organize, the fraternal cooperation with you, the conditions necessary for honest and just elections to the new Soviet".

The pages of the *Izvestia* bear abundant witness to the deep faith of the Revolutionary Committee in the people of Kronstadt and their aspirations towards the free Soviets as the true road of liberation from the oppression of Communist bureaucracy. In its daily organ and radio messages the Revolutionary Committee indignantly resented the Bolshevik campaign of calumny and repeatedly appealed to the proletariat of Russia and of the world for understanding, sympathy, and help. The radio of March 6 sounds the keynote of Kronstadt's call:

Our cause is just: we stand for the power of Soviets, not parties. We stand for freely elected representatives of the laboring masses. The substitutes Soviets manipulated by the Communist Party have always been deaf to our needs and demands; the only reply we have ever received was shooting. *** Comrades! They not only deceive you: they deliberately pervert the truth and resort to most despicable defamation. *** In Kronstadt the whole power is exclusively in the hands of the revolutionary sailors, soldiers and workers — not with the counter-revolutionists led by some Kozlovsky, as the lying Moscow Radio tries

to make you believe. *** Do not delay, comrades! Join us, get in touch with us: demand admission to Kronstadt for your delegates. Only they will tell you the whole truth and expose the fiendish calumny about Finnish bread and Entente offers.

Long live the revolutionary proletariat and the peasantry!

Long live the power of freely elected Soviets!

The Provisional Revolutionary Committee first had its headquarters on the flagship *Petropavlovsk*, but within a few days it removed to the “People’s Home”, in the center of Kronstadt, in order to be, as the *Izvestia* states, “in closer touch with the people and make access to the Committee easier than on the ship”. Although the Communist press continued its turbulent denunciation of Kronstadt as “the counter-revolutionary rebellion of the General Kozlovsky”, the truth of the matter was that the Revolutionary Committee was exclusively proletarian, consisting for the most part of workers of known revolutionary record. The Committee comprised of following 15 members:

1. Petrichenko, senior clerk, flagship *Petropavlovsk*;
2. Yakovenko, telephone operator, Kronstadt district;
3. Ossossov, machinist, *Sevastopol*;
4. Arkhipov, engineer;
5. Perepelkin, mechanic, *Sevastopol*;
6. Patrushev, head mechanic , *Petropavlovsk*;
7. Kupolov, senior medical assistant;
8. Vershinin, sailor *Sevastopol*;
9. Tugin, electrical mechanic;
10. Romanenko, caretaker of aviation docks;
11. Oreshin, manager of the Third Industrial School;
12. Valk, lumber mill worker;
13. Pavlov, Naval mining worker;
14. Baikov, carter;

15. Kilgast, deep sea sailor.

Not without a sense of humor to the Kronstadt *Izvestia* remark in this connection: “These are *our* generals, Messrs. Trotsky and Zinoviev, while the Brussilovs, the Kamenevs, the Tukhachevskis, and the other celebrities of the Tsar’s régime are on *your* side.”

The Provisional Revolutionary Committee enjoyed the confidence of the whole population of Kronstadt. It won general respect by establishing and firmly adhering to the principle of “equal rights for all, privileges to none”. The *pahyok* (food ration) was equalised. The sailors, who under Bolshevik rule always received rations far in excess of those allotted to the workers, themselves voted to accept no more than the average citizen and toiler. Special rations and delicacies were given only to hospitals and children’s homes.

The just and generous attitude of the Revolutionary Committee towards the Kronstadt members of the Communist Party — few of whom had been arrested in spite of Bolshevik repressions and all holding of sailors’ families as hostages — won the respect even of the Communists. The pages of *Izvestia* contain numerous communications from Communist groups and organizations of Kronstadt, condemning the attitude of the Central Government and indorsing the stand and measures of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee. Many Kronstadt Communists publicly announced their withdrawal from the Party as a protest against its despotism and bureaucratic corruption. In various issues of the *Izvestia* there are to be found hundreds of names of Communists whose conscience made it impossible for them to “remain in the Party of the executioner Trotsky”, as some of them expressed it. Resignations from the Communist Party soon became so numerous as to resemble a general exodus.⁴ The following letters, taken at random from a large batch, sufficiently characterize the sentiment of the Kronstadt Communists:

I have come to realise that the policies of the Communist Party have brought the country into a hopeless blind alley from which there is no exit. The Party has become bureaucratic, it has learned nothing and it does not want to learn. It refuses to listen to the voice of a 115 million peasants; it does not want to consider that only freedom of speech and opportunity to participate in the reconstruction of the country, by means of altered election methods, can bring our country out of its lethargy.

⁴ The Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Russia considered its Kronstadt Section so “demoralized” that after the defeat of the Kronstadt it ordered a complete re-registration of all Kronstadt Communists. A. B.

I refused henceforth to consider myself a member of the Russian Communist Party. I wholly approve of the resolution passed by the all-city meeting on March 1, and I hereby place my energies and abilities at the disposal of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee.

HERMAN KANEV

KRASNIY KOMANDIR (Red Army Officer)

Son of the political exile in the Trial of 193⁵

Izvestia, No. 3, March 5, 1921

COMRADES, MY PUPILS OF THE INDUSTRIAL,
RED ARMY, AND NAVAL SCHOOLS!

Almost thirty years I have lived in deep love for the people, and have carried light and knowledge, so far as lay in my power, to all who thirsted for it, up to the present moment.

The Revolution of 1917 gave greater scope to my work, increased my activities, and I devoted myself with greater energy to the service of my ideal.

The communist slogan, "All for the people", inspired me with its nobility and beauty, and in February, 1920, I entered the Russian Communist Party as a candidate. But the "first shot" fired at the peaceful population, at my dearly beloved children of which there are about seven thousand in Kronstadt, fills me with horror that I may be considered as sharing responsibility for the blood of the innocents thus shed. I feel that I can no longer believe in and propagate that which has disgraced itself by fiendish act. Therefore with the first shot I have ceased to regard myself as a member of the Communist Party.

MARIA NIKOLAYEVNA SHATEL

(Teacher)

Izvestia, No. 6, March 8, 1921

Such communications appeared in almost every issue of the *Izvestia*. Most significant was the declaration of the Provisional Bureau of the Kronstadt Section of the Communist Party, whose Manifesto to its members was published in the *Izvestia*, No. 2, March 4th:

⁵ The celebrated Trial of 193 in the early days of the revolutionary movement of Russia. It began in the latter part of 1877, closing in the first months of 1878. A.B.

*** Let every comrade of our Party realize the importance of the present hour.

Give no credence to the false rumors that Communists are being shot, and that the Kronstadt Communists are about to rise up in arms. Such rumors are spread to cause bloodshed.

We declare that our Party has always been defending the conquests of the working-class against all known and secret enemies of the power of the workers' and peasants' Soviets, and will continue to do so.

The Provisional Bureau of the Kronstadt Communist Party recognizes the necessity for elections to the Soviet and calls upon the members of the Communist Party to take part in the elections.

The Provisional Bureau of the Communist Party directs all members of the Party to remain at their posts and in no way to obstruct or interfere with the measures of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee.

Long live the power of the Soviets!

Long live the international union of workers!

PROVISIONAL BUREAU OF THE KRONSTADT SECTION OF THE
RUSSIAN COMMUNIST PARTY:

F. PERVUSHIN

Y.YLYIN

A. KABANOV

Similarly various other organizations, civil and military, expressed their opposition to the Moscow régime and their entire agreement with the demands of the Kronstadt sailors. Many resolutions to that effect were also passed by Red Army regiments stationed in Kronstadt and on duty in the forts. The following is expressive of their general spirit and tendency:

We, Red Army soldiers of the Fort "Krasnoarmeetz", stand wholly with the Provisional Revolutionary Committee, and to the last moment we will defend the Revolutionary Committee, the workers and peasants.

*** Let no one believe the lies of the Communist proclamations thrown from aeroplanes. We have no generals here and no Tsarist officers. Kronstadt has always been the city of workers and peasants, and so it will remain. The generals are in the service of the Communists.

*** At this moment, when the fate of the country is in the balance, we who have taken power into our own hands and who have entrusted

the Revolutionary Committee with leadership in the fight — we declare to the whole garrison and to the workers that we are prepared to die for the liberty of the laboring masses. Freed from the three-year old Communist yoke and terror we shall die rather than recede a single step. Long live Free Russia of the Working People!

CREW OF THE FORT “KRASNOARMEETZ”

Izvestia, No. 5, March 7, 1921

Kronstadt was inspired by passionate love of a Free Russia and unbounded faith in true Soviets. It was confident of gaining the support of the whole of Russia, of Petrograd in particular, thus bringing about the final liberation of the country. The Kronstadt *Izvestia* reiterates this attitude and hope, and in the numerous articles and appeals it seeks to clarify its position towards the Bolsheviki and its aspiration to lay the foundation of a new, free life for itself and the rest of Russia. This great aspiration, the purity of its motives, and its fervent hope of liberation stand out in striking relief on the pages of the official organ of the Kronstadt Provisional Revolutionary Committee and thoroughly express the spirit of the soldiers, sailors and workers. The virulent attacks of the Bolshevik press, the infamous lies sent broadcast by the Moscow radio station accusing Kronstadt of counter-revolution and White conspiracy, the Revolutionary Committee replied to in a dignified manner. It often reproduced in its organ the Moscow proclamations in order to show to the people of Kronstadt to what depths the Bolsheviki had sunk. Occasionally the Communist methods were exposed and characterized by the *Izvestia* with just indignation, as in its issue of March 8, (No. 6), under the heading “We and They”:

Not knowing how to retain the power that is falling from their hands, the Communists resort to the vilest provocative means. Their contemptible press has mobilized all its forces to incite the masses and put the Kronstadt movement in the light of White guard conspiracy. Now a clique of shameless villains has sent word to the world that “Kronstadt has sold itself to Finland”. Their newspapers spit fire and poison, and because they have failed to persuade the proletariat that Kronstadt is in the hands of counter-revolutionists, they are now trying to play on the nationalistic feelings.

The whole world already knows from our radios what the Kronstadt garrison and workers are fighting for. But the Communists are striving to pervert the meaning of events and thus mislead our Petrograd brothers.

Petrograd is surrounded by the bayonets of the *kursanti* and the Party “guards”, and Maliuta Skuratov – Trotsky – does not permit the delegates of the nonpartisan workers and soldiers to go to Kronstadt. He fears they would learn the whole truth there, and that truth would immediately sweep the Communists away and thus enlightened laboring masses would take the power into their own brawny hands.

That is the reason that the Petro-Soviet (Soviet of Petrograd) did not reply to our radio telegram in which we asked that really impartial comrades be sent to Kronstadt.

Fearing for their own skins, the leaders of the Communists suppress the truth and disseminate the lie that White guardists are active in Kronstadt, that the Kronstadt proletariat has sold itself to Finland and to French spies, that the Finns have already organized an army in order to attack Petrograd with the aid of the Kronstadt *myatezhniki* mutineers and so forth.

To all this we can reply only this: all power to the Soviets! Keep your hands off them, the hands that are red with the blood of the martyrs of liberty who have died fighting against the White guardists, the landlords, and the bourgeoisie!

In simple and frank speech Kronstadt sought to express the will of the people yearning for freedom and for the opportunity to shape their own destinies. It felt itself the advance guard, so to speak, of the proletariat of Russia about to rise in defense of the great aspirations for which the people that fought and suffered in the October Revolution. The faith of the Kronstadt in the Soviet system was deep and firm; its all-inclusive slogan, *All power to the Soviets, not to parties!* That was its program; it did not have time to develop it or to theorize. It strove for the emancipation of the people from the Communist yoke. That yoke, no longer a bearable, made a new revolution, the *Third Revolution*, necessary. The road to liberty and peace lay in freely elected Soviets, “the cornerstone of the new revolution”. The pages of the *Izvestia* bear rich testimony to the unspoiled directness and single-mindedness of the Kronstadt sailors and workers, and the touching faith they had in their mission as the initiators of the Third Revolution. These aspirations and hopes are clearly set forth in NO.6 of the *Izvestia*, March 8, in the leading editorial entitled “What We Are Fighting For”:

With the October Revolution the working class had hoped to achieve its emancipation. But there resulted an even greater enslavement of human personality.

The power of the police and gendarme monarchy fell into the hands of usurpers — the Communists — who, instead of giving the people liberty, have instilled in them only the constant fear of the Tcheka, which by its horrors surpasses even the gendarme régime of Tsarism. *** Worst and most cruel of all is the spiritual cabal of the Communists: they have laid their hands also on the internal world of the laboring masses, compelling everyone to think according to Communist prescription.

*** Russia of the toilers, the first to raise the red banner of labor's emancipation, is drenched with the blood of those martyred for the greater glory of Communist dominion. In that sea of blood, the Communists are drowning all the bright promises and possibilities of the workers' revolution. It has now become clear that the Russian Communist Party is not the defender of the laboring masses, as it pretends to be. The interests of the working people are foreign to it. Having gained power, it is now fearful only of losing it, and therefore it considers all means permissible: defamation, deceit, violence, murder, and vengeance upon the families of the rebels.

There is an end to long, suffering patience. Here and there the land is lit up by the fires of rebellion in a struggle against oppression and violence. Strikes of workers have multiplied, but the Bolshevik police régime has taken every precaution against the outbreak of the inevitable Third Revolution.

But in spite of it all it has come, and it is made by the hands of laboring masses. The Generals of Communism see clearly that it is the people who have risen, the people who have become convinced that the Communists have betrayed the ideas of Socialism. Fearing for their safety and knowing that there is no place they can hide in from the wrath of the workers, the Communists still try to terrorize the rebels with prison, shooting, and other barbarities. But life under the Communist dictatorship is more terrible than death. ***

There is no middle road. To triumph or to die! The example is being set by Kronstadt, the terror of counter-revolution from the right to and from the left. Here has taken place the great revolutionary deed. Here is raised the banner of rebellion against a three-year old tyranny and oppression of Communist autocracy, which has put in the shade the three-hundred-year old despotism of monarchism. Here, in Kronstadt, has been laid the cornerstone of the Third Revolution which is to break

the last chains of the worker and open the new, broad road to Socialist creativity.

This new revolution will rouse the masses of the East and the West, and will serve as an example of new Socialist constructiveness, in contradistinction to the governmental, cut-and-dried Communist “construction”. The laboring masses will learn that what has been done till now in the name of the workers and peasants was not Socialism.

Without firing a single shot, without shedding a drop of blood, the first step has been taken. Those who labor need no blood. They will shed it only in self-defense. *** The workers and peasants march on: they are leaving behind them the *utchedilka* (Constituent Assembly) with its bourgeois régime and the Communist Party dictatorship with its Tcheka and State capitalism, which has put the noose around the neck of the workers and threaten to strangle them to death.

The present change offers the laboring masses the opportunity of securing, at last, freely elected Soviets which will function without fear of the Party whip; they can now reorganize the governmentalised labor unions into voluntary associations of workers, peasants, and working intelligentsia. At last is broken the police club of Communist autocracy.

That was the program, those the immediate demands, for which the Bolshevik government began the attack of Kronstadt at 6:45 P.M., March 7th, 1921.

V. Bolshevik Ultimatum to Kronstadt

Kronstadt was generous. Not a drop of Communist blood did it shed, in spite of all the provocation, the blockade of the city and repressive measures on the part of the Bolshevik Government. It scorned to imitate the Communist example of vengeance, even going to the extent of warning the Kronstadt population not to be guilty of excesses against members of the Communist party. The Provisional Revolutionary Committee issued a call to the people of Kronstadt to that effect, even after the Bolshevik Government had ignored the demand of the sailors for the liberation of hostages taken in Petrograd. The Kronstadt demand sent by radio to the Petrograd Soviet and the Manifesto of the Revolutionary Committee were published on the same day, March 7, and are hereby reproduced:

In the name of the Kronstadt garrison the Provisional Revolutionary Committee of Kronstadt demands that the families of the sailors, work-

ers and Red Army men held by the Petro-Soviet as hostages be liberated within 24 hours.

The Kronstadt garrison declares that the Communists enjoy full liberty in Kronstadt and their families are absolutely safe. The example of the Petro-Soviet will not be followed here, because we consider such methods (the taking of hostages) most shameful and vicious even if prompted by desperate fury. History knows no such infamy.

SAILOR PETRICHENKO

Chairman Provisional Revolutionary Committee

KILGAST

Secretary

The Manifesto to the people of Kronstadt read in part:

The long continued oppression of the laboring masses by the Communist dictatorship has produced very natural indignation and resentment on the part of the people. As a result of it relatives of Communists have in some instances been discharged from their positions and boycotted. That must not be. *We do not seek vengeance — we are defending our labour interests.*

Kronstadt lived in the spirit of its holy crusade. It had abiding faith in the justice of its cause and felt itself the true defender of the Revolution. In this state of mind the sailors did not believe that the Government would attack them by force of arms. In the subconsciousness of these simple children of the soil and sea there perhaps germinated the feeling that *not only through violence may victory be gained*. The Slavic psychology seemed to believe that the justice of the cause and the strength of the revolutionary spirit must win. At any rate, Kronstadt refuses to take the offensive. The Revolutionary Committee would not accept the insistent advice of the military experts to make an immediate landing in Oranienbaum, a fort of great strategic value. The Kronstadt sailors and soldiers aimed to establish free Soviets and were willing to defend their rights against attack; but they would not be the aggressors.

In Petrograd there were persistent rumors that the Government was preparing military operations against Kronstadt, but the people did not credit such stories: the thing seem so outrageous as to be absurd. As already mentioned, the Committee of Defense (officially known as the Soviet of Labour and Defense) had declared the capital to be in an “extraordinary state of siege”. No assemblies were permitted,

no gathering on the streets. The Petrograd workers knew little of what was transpiring in Kronstadt, the only information accessible being the Communist press and the frequent bulletins to the fact that the “Tsarist General Kozlovsky organized a counter-revolutionary uprising in Kronstadt”. Anxiously the people looked forward to the announced session of the Petrograd Soviet which was to take action in the Kronstadt matter.

The Petro-Soviet met on March 4, admission being by cards which, as a rule, only Communists could procure. The writer, then on friendly terms with the Bolsheviki and particularly with Zinoviev, was present. As chairman of the Petrograd Soviet Zinoviev opened the session and in a long speech set forth the Kronstadt situation. I confess that I came to the meeting disposed rather in favor of the Zinoviev viewpoint: I was on my guard against the vaguest possibility of counter-revolutionary influence in Kronstadt. But Zinoviev’s speech itself convinced me that the Communist accusations against the sailors were pure fabrication, without scintilla of truth. I had heard Zinoviev on several previous occasions. I found him a convincing Speaker, once his premises were admitted. But now his whole attitude, his argumentation, his tone and manner — all gave the lie to his words. I could sense his own conscience protesting. The only “evidence” presented against Kronstadt was the famous resolution on March 1, the demands of which were just and even moderate. It was on the sole basis of that document, supported by the vehement, almost hysterical denunciations of the sailors by Kalinin, that the fatal step was taken. Prepared beforehand and presented by the stentorian-voiced Yevdokimov, the right-hand man of Zinoviev, the resolution against Kronstadt was passed by the delegates wrought up to a high pitch of intolerance and blood thirst — passed amid a tumult of protest from several delegates of Petrograd factories and the spokesmen of the sailors. The resolution declared Kronstadt guilty of a counter-revolutionary uprising against the Soviet power and demanded its immediate surrender.

It was a declaration of war. Even many Communists refused to believe that the resolution would be carried out: it were a monstrous thing to attack by force of arms the “pride and glory of the Russian Revolution”, as Trotsky had christened the Kronstadt sailors. In the circle of their friends many sober-minded Communists threatened to resign from the Party should such a bloody deed come to pass.

Trotsky had been expected to address the Petro-Soviet, and his failure to appear was interpreted by some as indicating that the seriousness of the situation was exaggerated. But during the night he arrived in Petrograd and the following morning, March 5, he issued his ultimatum to Kronstadt:

The Workers and Peasants Government has decreed that the Kronstadt and the rebellious ships must immediately submit to the authority of the Soviet Republic. Therefore I command all who have raised their

hand against the Socialist fatherland to lay down their arms at once. The obdurate are to be disarmed and turned over to the Soviet authorities. The arrested Commissars and other representatives of the Government are to be liberated at once. Only those surrendering unconditionally may count on the mercy of the Soviet Republic.

Simultaneously I am issuing orders to prepare to quell the mutiny and subdue the mutineers by force of arms. Responsibility for the harm that may be suffered by the peaceful population will fall entirely upon the heads of the counter-revolutionary mutineers. This warning is final.

TROTSKY

Chairman Revolutionary Military Soviet of the Republic KAMENEV

Commander-in-Chief

The situation looked ominous. Great military forces continuously flowed into Petrograd and its environs. Trotsky's ultimatum was followed by a *prikaz* which contained the historic threat, "I'll shoot you like pheasants". A group of Anarchists then in Petrograd made a last attempt to induce the Bolsheviki to reconsider their decision of attacking Kronstadt. They felt it their duty to the Revolution to make an effort, even if hopeless, to prevent the imminent massacre of the revolutionary flower of Russia, the Kronstadt sailors and workers. On March 5 they sent a protest to the Committee of Defense, pointing out the peaceful intentions and just demands of Kronstadt, reminding the Communists of the heroic revolutionary history of the sailors, and suggesting a method of settling the dispute in a manner befitting comrades and revolutionists. The document read:

To the Petrograd Soviet of Labour and Defense

Chairman Zinoviev:

To remain silent now is impossible, even criminal. Recent events impel us Anarchists to speak out and to declare our attitude in the present situation. The spirit of ferment and dissatisfaction manifest among the workers and sailors is the result of causes that demand our serious attention. Cold and hunger have produced disaffection, and the absence of any opportunity for discussion and criticism is forcing the workers and sailors to air their grievances in the open.

White-guardist bands wish and may try to exploit this dissatisfaction in their own class interests. Hiding behind the workers and sailors

they throw out slogans of the Constituent Assembly, of free trade, and similar demands.

We Anarchists have long since exposed the fiction of these slogans, and we declare to the whole world that we will fight with arms against any counter-revolutionary attempt, in coöperation with all friends of the Soviet Revolution and hand in hand with the Bolsheviki.

Concerning the conflict between the Soviet Government and the workers and sailors, our opinion is that it must be settled not by force of arms but by means of comradely, fraternal revolutionary agreement. Resorting to bloodshed, on the part of the Soviet Government, will not — in the given situation — intimidate or quieten the workers. On the contrary, it will serve only to aggravate matters and will strengthen the hands of the Entente and of internal counter-revolution. More important still, the use of force by the Workers and Peasants Government against workers and sailors will have a reactionary effect upon the international revolutionary movement and will everywhere result in incalculable harm to the Social Revolution. Comrades Bolsheviki, bethink yourselves before it too late! Do not play with fire: you are about to make a most serious and decisive step. We hereby submit to you the following proposition: Let a Commission be selected to consist of five persons, inclusive of two Anarchists. The Commission is to go to Kronstadt to settle the dispute by peaceful means. In the given situation this is the most radical method. It will be of international revolutionary significance.

Petrograd

March 5, 1921

ALEXANDER BERKMAN

EMMA GOLDMAN

PERKUS

PETROVSKY

Zinoviev informed that a document in connection with the Kronstadt problem was to be submitted to the Soviet of Defense, sent his personal representative for it. Whether the letter was discussed by that body is not known to the writer. At any rate, no action was taken in the matter.

VI. The First Shot

Kronstadt, heroic and generous, was dreaming of liberating Russia by the Third Revolution which it felt proud to have initiated. It formulated no definite program. Liberty and universal brotherhood were its slogans. It thought of the Third Revolution as a gradual process of emancipation, the first step in that direction being the free election of independent Soviets, uncontrolled by any political party and expressive of the will and interests of the people. The whole-hearted, unsophisticated sailors were proclaiming to the workers of the world their great Ideal, and calling upon the proletariat to join forces in the common fight, confident that their Cause would find enthusiastic support and that workers at Petrograd, first and foremost, would hasten to their aid.

Meanwhile Trotsky had collected his forces. The most trusted divisions from the fronts, *kursanti* regiments, Tcheka detachments, and military units consisting exclusively of Communists were now gathered in the forts of Sestroretsk, Lissy Noss, Krasnaia Gorka, and neighboring fortified places. The greatest Russian military experts were rushed to the scene to form plans for the blockade and attack of Kronstadt, and the notorious Tukhachevski was appointed Commander-in-Chief in the siege of Kronstadt.

On March 7, at 6:45 in the evening, the Communist batteries of Sestroretsk and Lissy Noss fired the first shots against Kronstadt.

It was the anniversary of the Woman Workers' Day. Kronstadt, besieged and attacked, did not forget the great holiday. Under fire of numerous batteries, the brave sailors sent a radio greeting to the workingwomen of the world, an act most characteristic of the psychology of the Rebel City. The radio read:

Today is a universal holiday — Women Workers' Day. We of Kronstadt send, amid the thunder of cannon, our fraternal greetings to workingwomen of the world. *** May you soon accomplish your liberation from every form of violence and oppression. *** Long live the free revolutionary workingwomen! Long live the Social Revolution throughout the world!

No less characteristic was the heart rending cry of Kronstadt, "Let The Whole World Know", published after the first shot had been fired, in No. 6 of the *Izvestia*, March 8:

The first shot has been fired...Standing up to his knees in the blood of the workers Marshal Trotsky was the first to open fire against revolutionary Kronstadt which has risen against the autocracy of the Communists to establish the true power of the Soviets.

Without shedding a drop of blood we, Red Army men, sailors, and workers of Kronstadt have freed ourselves from the yoke of the Communists and have even preserved their lives. By the threat of artillery they want now to subject us again to their tyranny.

Not wishing bloodshed, we asked that nonpartisan delegates of the Petrograd proletariat be sent to us, that they may learn that Kronstadt is fighting for the Power of the Soviets. But the Communists have kept our demand from the workers of Petrograd and now they have opened fire — the usual reply of the pseudo Workers' and Peasants' Government to the demands of the laboring masses.

But the workers of the whole world know that we, the defenders of the Soviet Power, are guarding the conquest of the Social Revolution.

We will win or perish beneath the ruins of Kronstadt, fighting for the just cause of the laboring masses.

The workers of the world will be our judges. The blood of the innocent will fall upon the heads of the Communist fanatics drunk with the authority.

Long live the Power of the Soviets!

VII. The Defeat of Kronstadt

The artillery bombardment of Kronstadt, which began on the evening of March 7, was followed by the attempt to take the fortress by storm. The attack was made from the north and south by picked Communist troops clad in white shrouds, the color of which protectively blended with the snow lying thick on the frozen Gulf of Finland. These first terrible attacks to take the fortress by storm, at the reckless sacrifice of life, are mourned by the sailors in touching commiseration for their brothers in arms, duped into believing Kronstadt counter-revolutionary. Under date of March 8th the Kronstadt *Izvestia* wrote:

We did not want to shed the blood of our brothers, and we did not fire a single shot until compelled to do so. We had to defend the just cause of the laboring people and to shoot — to shoot at our ownbrothers sent to certain death by Communists who have grown fat at the expense of the people.

*** To your misfortune there broke a terrific snowstorm and black night shrouded everything in darkness. Nevertheless, the Communist

executioners, counting no cost, drove you along the ice, threatening you in the rear with their machine guns operated by Communist detachments.

Many of you perished that night on the icy vastness of the Gulf of Finland. And when day broke and the storm quieted down, only pitiful remnants of you, worn and hungry, hardly able to move, came to us clad in your white shrouds.

Early in the morning there were already about a thousand of you and later in the day a countless number. Dearly you have paid with your blood for this adventure, and after your failure Trotsky rushed back to Petrograd to drive new martyrs to slaughter — for cheaply he gets our workers' and peasants' blood!...

Kronstadt lived in deep faith that the proletariat of Petrograd would come to its aid. But the workers there were terrorized, and Kronstadt effectively blockaded and isolated, so that in reality no assistance could be expected from anywhere.

The Kronstadt garrison consisted of less than 14,000 men, 10,000 of them being sailors. This garrison had to defend a widespread front, many forts and batteries scattered over the vast area of the Gulf. The repeated attacks of the Bolsheviki, whom the Central Government continuously supplied with fresh troops; the lack of provisions in the besieged city; the long sleepless nights spent on guard in the cold — all were sapping the vitality of Kronstadt. Yet the sailors heroically persevered, confident to the last that their great example of liberation would be followed throughout the country and thus bring them relief and aid.

In its "Appeal to Comrades Workers and Peasants" the Provisional Revolutionary Committee says (*Izvestia* No. 9, March 11):

Comrades Workers, Kronstadt is fighting for you, for the hungry, the cold, the naked. *** Kronstadt has raised the banner of rebellion and it is confident that tens of millions of workers and peasants will respond to its call. It cannot be that the daybreak which has begun in Kronstadt should not become bright sunshine for the whole of Russia. It cannot be that the Kronstadt explosion should fail to rouse the whole of Russia and first of all, Petrograd.

But no help was coming, and with every successive day Kronstadt was growing more exhausted. The Bolsheviki continued massing fresh troops against the besieged fortress and weakening it by constant attacks. Moreover, every advantage was on the side of the Communists, including numbers, supplies, and position. Kronstadt had not been built to sustain an assault from the rear. The rumor spread by

the Bolsheviks that the sailors meant to bombard Petrograd was false on the face of it. The famous fortress had been planned with the sole view of serving as a defense of Petrograd against foreign enemies approaching from the sea. Moreover, in case the city should fall into the hands of an external enemy, the coast batteries and forts of Krasnaia Gorka had been calculated for a fight *against* Kronstadt. Foreseeing such a possibility, the builders had purposely failed to strengthen the rear of Kronstadt.

Almost nightly the Bolsheviks continued their attacks. All through March 10 Communist artillery fired incessantly from the southern and northern coasts. On the night of the 12–13 the Communists attacked from the south, again resorting to the white shrouds and sacrificing many hundreds of the *kursanti*. Kronstadt fought back desperately, in spite of many sleepless nights, lack of food and men. It fought most heroically against simultaneous assaults from the north, east and south, while the Kronstadt batteries were capable of defending the fortress only from its western side. The sailors lacked even an ice-cutter to make the approach of the Communist forces impossible.

On March 16 the Bolsheviks made a concentrated attack from three sides at once — from north, south and east. “The plan of attack”, later explained Dibenko, formally Bolshevik naval Commissar and later dictator of defeated Kronstadt, “was worked out in minutest detail according to the directions of Commander-in-Chief Tukhachevsky and the field staff of the Southern Corps. *** At dark we began the attack upon the forts. The white shrouds and the courage of the *kursanti* made it possible for us to advance in columns.”

On the morning of March 17 a number of forts had been taken. Through the weakest spot of Kronstadt — the Petrograd Gates — the Bolsheviks broke into the city, and then there began most brutal slaughter. The Communists spared by the sailors now betrayed them, attacking from the rear. Commissar of the Baltic Fleet Kuzmin and Chairman of the Kronstadt Soviet Vassiliev, liberated by the Communists from jail, now participated in hand-to-hand street fighting in fratricidal bloodshed. Until late in the night continued the desperate struggle of the Kronstadt sailors and soldiers against overwhelming odds. The city which for fifteen days had not harmed a single Communist, now ran red with the blood of Kronstadt men, women and even children.

Dibenko, appointed Commissar of Kronstadt, was vested with absolute powers to “clean the mutinous City”. An orgy of revenge followed, with the Tcheka claiming numerous victims for its nightly wholesale *razstrel* shooting.

On March 18 the Bolshevik Government and the Communist Party of Russia publicly commemorated the Paris Commune of 1871, drowned in the blood of the French workers by Gallifet and Thiers. At the same time they celebrated the “victory” over Kronstadt.

For several weeks the Petrograd jails were filled with hundreds of Kronstadt prisoners. Every night small groups of them were taken out by order of the Tcheka and disappeared — to be seen among the living no more. Among the last shot was Perepelkin, member of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee of Kronstadt.

The prisons and concentration camps in the frozen district of Archangel and the dungeons a far off Turkestan are slowly doing to death the Kronstadt men who rose against Bolshevik bureaucracy and proclaimed in March, 1921, the slogan of the Revolution of October, 1917: “All Power to the Soviets!”

* * *

Author’s Afterword: Lessons and Significance of Kronstadt

The Kronstadt movement was spontaneous, unprepared, and peaceful. That it became an armed conflict, ending in a bloody tragedy, was entirely due to the Tartar despotism of the Communist dictatorship.

Though realizing the general character the Bolsheviki, Kronstadt still had faith in the possibility of an amicable solution. It believes the Communist Government amenable to reason; it credited it with some sense of justice and liberty.

The Kronstadt experience 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.

There is another, a strategic, lesson taught by every rebellion.

The success of the uprising is conditioned in its resoluteness, energy, and aggressiveness. The rebels have on their side the sentiment of the masses. That sentiment quickens with the rising tide of rebellion. It must not be allowed to subside, to pale by a return to the drabness of every-day life.

On the other hand, every uprising has against it the powerful machinery of the State. The Government is able to concentrate in its hands the sources of supply and the means of communication. No time must be given the government to make use of its powers. Rebellion should be vigorous, striking unexpectedly and determinedly. It must not remain localized, for that means stagnation. It must broaden and develop. A rebellion that localizes itself, plays the waiting policy, or puts itself on the defensive, is inevitably doomed to defeat.

In this regard, especially, Kronstadt repeated the fatal strategic errors of the Paris Communards. The latter did not follow the advice of those who favored an immediate attack on Versailles while the Government of Thiers was disorganized.

They did not carry the revolution into the country. Neither the Paris workers of 1871 nor the Kronstadt sailors aimed to abolish the Government. The Communards wanted merely certain Republican liberties, and when the Government attempted to disarm them, they drove the Ministers of Thiers from Paris, established their liberties and prepared to defend them — nothing more. Thus also Kronstadt demanded only free elections to the Soviets. Having arrested a few Commissars, the soldiers prepared to defend themselves against attack. Kronstadt refused to act upon the advice of the military experts immediately to take Oranienbaum. The latter was of utmost military value, besides having 50,000 poods⁶ of wheat belonging to Kronstadt. A landing in Oranienbaum was feasible, the Bolsheviki would have been taken by surprise and would have had no time to bring up reinforcements. But the sailors did not want to take the offensive, and thus the psychologic moment was lost. A few days afterward, when the declarations and acts of the Bolshevik Government convinced Kronstadt that they were involved in a struggle for life, it was too late to make good the error.⁷

The same happened to the Paris Commune. When the logic of the fight forced upon them demonstrated the necessity of abolishing the Thiers régime not only in their own city but in the whole country, it was too late. In the Paris Commune as in the Kronstadt uprising the *tendency toward passive, defensive tactics proved fatal*.

Kronstadt fell. The Kronstadt movement for free Soviets was stifled in blood, while at the same time the Bolshevik Government was making compromises with European capitalists, signing the Riga peace, according to which a population of 12 millions was turned over to the mercies of Poland, and helping Turkish imperialism to suppress the republics of the Caucasus.

But the “triumph” of the Bolsheviki 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 Bolsheviki themselves: Soviets elected by direct and secret ballot, according to the Constitution of the R.S.F.S.R.; and freedom of speech and press for the revolutionary parties.

⁶ A pood equals 40 Russian or about 36 English pounds.

⁷ The failure of Kronstadt to take Oranienbaum gave the Government an opportunity to strengthen the fortress with its trusted regiments, eliminate the “infected” parts of the garrison, and execute the leaders of the aerial squadron which was about to join the Kronstadt rebels. Later the Bolsheviki used the fortresses as a vantage point of attack against Kronstadt. Among those executed in Oranienbaum were: Kolossov, division chief of the Red Navy airmen and chairman of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee just organized in Oranienbaum; Balachanov, secretary of the Committee, and Committee members Romanov, Vladimirov, etc. A.B.

The Tenth All-Russian Congress of the Communist Party was in session in Moscow at the time of the Kronstadt uprising. At that Congress the whole Bolshevik economic policy was changed as a result of the Kronstadt events and similarly threatening attitude of the people in various other parts of Russia and Siberia. The Bolsheviks preferred to reverse their basic policies, to abolish the *razverstka* (forcible requisition), introduce freedom of trade, give concessions to capitalists and give up communism itself – the communism for which the October Revolution was fought, seas of blood shed, and Russia brought to ruin and despair – but not to permit freely chosen Soviets.

Can anyone still question what the true purpose of the Bolsheviks was? Did they pursue Communist Ideals or Government Power?

Kronstadt is of great historic significance. It 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.

Kronstadt fell. But it fell victorious in its idealism and moral purity, its generosity and higher humanity. Kronstadt was superb. It justly prided itself on not having shed the blood of its enemies, the Communists within its midst. It had no executions. The untutored, unpolished sailors, rough in manner and speech, were too noble to follow the Bolshevik example of vengeance: they would not shoot even the hated Commissars. Kronstadt personified the generous, all-for-giving spirit of the Slavic soul and the century-old emancipation movement of Russia.

Kronstadt was the *first* popular and entirely independent attempt at liberation from the yoke of State Socialism – an attempt made directly by the people, by the workers, soldiers and sailors themselves. It was the first step toward the third Revolution which is inevitable and which, let us hope, may bring to long-suffering Russia lasting freedom and peace.

Alexander Berkman

Library.Anarhija.Net



Alexander Berkman
The Kronstadt Rebellion
1922

Retrieved on March 14th, 2009 from dwardmac.pitzer.edu

lib.anarhija.net