The Black Sea revolt - Tico Jossifort

The history of a 1919 naval mutiny of French troops sent to intervene in Russia against the revolution. Initiated by a group of anarchist sailors, the revolt spread to other ships - so preventing naval intervention against Soviet Russia and achieving the desired demobilisation of the mutineers.

I: Sailors In Revolt Seize the Battleship France

HOW did this mutiny happen, and why in the Black Sea? At the end of the First World War, an Allied army was operating in the Balkans. It seemed to be heading for Vienna and then Berlin. But the fearsome prime minister, Georges Clemenceau, had other intentions in mind; namely, to attack Soviet Russia through the Ukraine, in coordination with the White Russian armies, hoping to provoke the overthrow of the Bolshevik regime, and at the same time to achieve the economic colonisation of Southern Russia. Already on 30 October 1918, the first armistice of the Great War had been signed with Turkey. It opened up the Dardanelles to the Allies. On 16 November, part of the Allied fleet was able to enter the Black Sea.

At the same time as this aggression from the south, Clemenceau - known as the 'Tiger' - attacked Soviet Russia in the north. At the end of 1918, the troops of General Janin, which had landed at Vladivostok, had crossed Siberia to reach Omsk, where they were giving military support to the counter-revolutionary Admiral Kolchak. In addition, since June 1918, Franco-British forces had been occupying the ports of Archangel and Murmansk, to the east of Finland; they had overthrown the Soviet power and put in power a White government.

A little later, towards the end of January 1919, land forces coming from Romania reached and occupied the right bank of the Dniestr. Among them was the Fifty-Eighth Infantry Regiment, originating from Avignon. It had a revolutionary action committee, including a former member of the Socialist Party Youth, Tondut, a Corporal Thomas, and some others. The revolutionary flame had been passed on to them by some of the soldiers who had mutinied on the French front in 1917 who had not been shot, but had been deported to the Eastern army. In early February, it was the first regiment to refuse to fight against the proletarian revolution. 'No, never', shouted the soldiers. 'We haven't declared war on Russia. The armistice has been signed. We won't go.' Having become dangerous by its revolutionary spirit, the regiment was disarmed, and then sent back, not to France but to Morocco, where its men were drafted into disciplinary companies.

This example was to be followed, a little later, in early March, in the same way, by the soldiers of the 176th infantry regiment at Kherson. Brought back to Odessa by the frightened
command on French sloops, the soldiers explained to the sailors that they should not fight against the Soviet Russians, who were workers just like them.

For its part, the Committee of the Odessa Communist Party had distributed to the mutineers a leaflet in French, congratulating them on their action and expressing the gratitude of the Russian workers. Anticipating the future, it added: 'We have reason to believe that this is only the beginning of the fraternisation of the French and Russian troops on the new front that has been created by the bourgeoisie against our will.' Another leaflet explained to the soldiers of the Fifty-Eighth Regiment what Bolshevism was:

You have been told about Bolshevism, and the bourgeois press has made a huge fuss about it, claiming that it is the establishment of arbitrary rule, and that the Bolsheviks are thieves and criminals. Comrades, you must know the truth. A Bolshevik is an individual fighting for the immediate achievement of a socialist society. Bolshevism is a socialist society in practice. It is the establishment of the power of the workers and peasants, of those who have always been the tools of the rich and powerful, of those who have worked unceasingly and without reward in workshops, mills, factories and the fields, and of those who have bled for the others in great battles. Bolshevism is the rule of workers' and peasants' councils (soviets), established in every town and village, and which control all areas. These councils are the only democratic form which can finally enable the proletarian class to rule for itself. That is what Bolshevism is.

The Allied fleets were anchored in the outer harbours of Odessa and Sebastopol, and the soldiers and sailors had disembarked. The Bolsheviks produced more and more leaflets, which were rapidly made known to all the crews. One of them stated:

Demand your immediate return home! And if your leaders don't agree to send you back home, then organise your own return! Go back home and work with all your strength at the great task begun by the Russian Revolution, which will guarantee to the proletarians of the whole world, together with freedom and dignity, a greater well-being and happiness. Long live the soldiers' and sailors' soviets!

To avoid the dangerous fraternisation of Allied soldiers with insurgent Bolshevik workers, the Allied forces evacuated Odessa at the beginning of April. The soviets then took power.

The same thing happened at Sebastopol, where a leaflet was distributed to the Allied occupation forces which stated, among other things:

Do not believe that in Russia there is nothing but anarchy. Those who have claimed that have told a shameful lie. You must once again learn that in our country there is a fierce struggle for the freedom of the oppressed classes. Tell them that our ideal is the highest and noblest which there can be. Dear brothers, remember your own Great Revolution.

On most of the French warships, action committees had been formed well before the mutiny, often instigated by sailors or petty officers who were engineers; engineers were traditionally of a more revolutionary stamp than the deck-hands, because of the similarity between their work and that of a factory worker.

Some of these engineers, including the chief engineer André Marty,[1] had been in close contact since 1917 with the revolutionary syndicalists and anti-war socialists from Paris who had taken part in the conferences for the resumption of international relations at Zimmerwald (September 1915) and Kienthal (April 1916). One of the 'Kienthal' deputies, Pierre Brizon, edited the paper La Vague (The Wave) which had a circulation of 300 000. It had an enormous influence in the army and navy, where it was often passed around hundreds of readers. Each issue had a column of correspondence from soldiers and sailors. Cuttings from it reached the soldiers, inserted inside reactionary papers. Or else the sailors took out a
subscription to the paper, and if it arrived on board, even if it was confiscated by the officer in charge of censorship, the sailors had it returned to them surreptitiously by the officer's orderly. Besides *La Vague*, the crews read *Le Journal du peuple* (*The People's Paper*) and *Les Hommes du jour* (*Men of the Day*), both published by Henri Fabre and Georges Pioch, *L'Oeuvre* (*Work*) of Gustave Téry, *Ce qu'il faut dire* (*What Must Be Said*) of the libertarian Sébastien Faure, and before its editor's suspicious death in prison, Almereyda's *Le Bonnet Rouge* (*The Red Bonnet*).

Conditions were now ripe for the glorious Black Sea mutiny. It began in the Sebastopol outer harbour, on the battleship *France*. The ship had not entered a French port since it had left Toulon on 9 October 1916, and the sailors, victims of a ruthless discipline, longed to go home and be demobilised.

For years a group of revolutionaries, 20 or 30 members of various tendencies of an anarchist nature, had been formed on board. They reminded the sailors that in July 1914 it was the *France* which had brought the President of the French Republic, Raymond Poincaré, to St Petersburg on an official visit with a message of war; they said it was now the duty of the battleship to send a message of peace. On the initiative of a mechanical engineer called Vinciguerra, they had a clandestine library of books and pamphlets, and received anti-war and libertarian papers from France. They had succeeded in having an influence on the majority of the 1200-man crew.

On 16 April, the battleship *France* arrived at Sebastopol from Odessa. The landing party went ashore. It was their job to block the advance of the Red Army, which was approaching Sebastopol. On 17 April, the ship's bugles called them to battle stations. A substantial number of the engineers went on deck and refused to work as a sign of protest. Under threats from the NCOs, some sailors went down to the machines with a bad grace. The die-hards, who refused to obey, were arrested and locked up in the ship's cells. Among them were Copuette, Delarue, Leroux and Vuillemin.[2]

It was then that the sailors realised that a peaceful demonstration had no chance of success, and they decided to take clearly revolutionary action.

The opportunity came some days later. The officer in command had decided that the loading of coal would take place on 20 April, which was Easter Sunday. It was a laborious task, and so there was great discontent. The word went round: 'Those who don't want to carry coal, assemble on the forecastle, after the piping to quarters in the evening.'

Lagaillarde, who had been appointed to give a lead to the meeting, first of all sang love songs, then the *Odessa Song* (a French revolutionary song to the meeting, composed by unknown soldiers), and then the *Internationale*. Almost all the crew turned up, with 600 men taking up the chorus. The officers were going crazy; they gathered on the quarter deck, and took up arms. The neighbouring *Jean-Bart* was joining in they gathered in. In turn, the sailors rushed to the stern where the arms were stored, shouting 'Guns!'. They went down to the prison and opened them up. Thus, among others, they released Virgile Vuillermiri, a sailor-engineer aged 20, who had been in solitary confinement, and who was to take the lead of the mutiny. Vuillemin was elected at the same as two other comrades. The delegates presented their demands to the deputy commanding officer:

1. An end to the war against Russia.
2. Immediate return to France.
3. Less rigorous discipline.
4. Improved food.
5 Leave for the crew.
Then they went in a steam-launch to the battleship Jean Bart and stated their demands. To Toulon! No more war against the Russians! `Rise up! Rise up! Revolution!', they shouted, shaking the hammocks.

Vice-Admiral Amet, the commander of the fleet, arrived on board the France. Sailors and the Admiral stood face to face. The Admiral's sermon was interrupted by shouts of 'Take him away! Kill him!' When he claimed the Bolsheviks were bandits, a mutineer shouted at him: 'You're the biggest bandit.' The demonstrators abandoned Amet there, and went to the quarter deck singing the Internationale and the Odessa Song. The Admiral, furious, left the ship shouting threats.

Amet had no more luck on the Jean-Bart. Almost all his musicians were playing the revolutionary anthem, accompanied by the sailors singing in chorus. The officers of the ship then ordered hogsheads of wine to be brought up onto the deck in the hope of getting the crew drunk. But the mutineers placed a picket around the receptacles. Nobody touched them.

The next day, 20 April, Easter Sunday, almost all the sailors of the France and the Jean-Bart, instead of saluting the tricolour flag raised aft, stood facing the bow and sang the Internationale, while the red flag was raised on the bowsprit mast on both boats simultaneously.

A lieutenant-commander, shaking his fist at the red flag, shouted: 'You don't know what that rag stands for, it means civil war!' Two hundred sailors lined up deep in front of the revolutionary standard. The Vice-Admiral came on board. When he approached the first row of men protecting the red flag, they warned him that if he took one more step forward, they would throw him in the sea. There were shouts of 'Kill him! Throw him in the water!'

The Admiral then gave the crews permission to go ashore. But it was a planned ambush. A group of sailors formed a procession singing the Internationale through the streets of Sebastopol, and received a warm welcome from the populace. In front of the town hall, the president of the Bolshevik revolutionary committee greeted the demonstrators. But a lieutenant-commander tried to grab the red flag, and got a couple of smacks in the face. In response, without warning, salvoes of bullets swept across the street: fire had been opened up by Greek soldiers and the sub-lieutenant, accompanied by two petty officers from a section of the landing party from the Jean-Bart, while for their part, the men were firing in the air. It was a massacre. There were a very large number of killed and wounded among the sailors and the Soviet working-class population.

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The news of the ambush provoked the anger of the crews. Two sailors went back on board in civilian clothes on a Russian dinghy. A wave of mutineers rushed towards the rear of the boat, led by Virgile Vuillemin. A similar demonstration took place on board the Jean-Bart, the Justice and the Vergniaud. The sailors took control of all the ships. A delegation from the army came on board the France to congratulate the crew. Robez, the officer in command of the ship, began to whine: 'So who is in charge on board?' A delegate answered him: 'The crew!'

Later he summoned Vuillemin, who replied to him: 'If you give orders that the demonstrators are to be subdued by force of arms, then I shall order that you shall be suppressed by force of arms.' A boy of 20 was giving orders to a man of 53.

In turn, the delegates were summoned, almost coaxed, and invited to sit in armchairs. They refused and remained standing. They detailed the sailors’ grievances: revolting food, brutal discipline, and war against the Russians, which was unconstitutional since it had never been declared by France. The officer in command was alternately authoritarian and kindly, at one
moment trying to take the delegates prisoner, and the next begging them to calm the crew down.

Robez promised that there would be no subsequent disciplinary measures. Later, at the court martial, he insisted that he had only committed himself personally!

Self-management was established on the red battleship. At all posts, the sailors carried out their duties impeccably. At the machines, the first and second class petty officers were left at their posts, since they had a purely technical function. The flag was no longer saluted.

The French general staff drew the conclusion, a painful one from its point of view, that it was high time to evacuate Sebastopol and to hand power back to the Soviets (after having blown up the forts, broken the machines and sunk boats). Besides, to leave this rebel ship in the outer harbour for one more day, at a time when the Red Army was at the gates of the city and when a revolutionary committee already held power there, would have meant risking the possibility of the whole fleet, led by the France, going over to the Bolsheviks and the Revolution. But at the last moment the sailors protested at the fact that only the one battleship was getting under way. They feared this departure might be a trick on the part of the command, and that it was preparing severe reprisals. Besides, as one of them commented: 'If we set off without the Jean-Bart, we are cowards.'

Finally, the red battleship left on its own for Bizerta. But the crew was to remain in control of the ship until it arrived and anchored in the Tunisian port. The officers were obliged to refrain from any interference with the conduct of the crew; duties on board ship were to be run by a leading seaman delegated by the crew.

It might have been possible for this mutiny to join forces with the Russian Revolution. Such a possibility was to be envisaged, as we shall see below, by the action committee on the cruiser Waldeck-Rousseau, another warship which mutinied. It is also what, for his part, André Marty, a prisoner on this boat, had wanted to attempt on his own small ship, Le Protet, before he was informed against and arrested.

It is nonetheless the case that, as a result of the mutiny of the France and other French units of both naval and land forces, the enormous machine of imperialist war could no longer be
used against the October Revolution.

II: The Sailors of the Waldeck-Rousseau Were Pretending to Prepare a Banquet

Let us now come to the mutiny which broke out some days later, from 27 to 29 April, on the cruiser Waldeck-Rousseau. It seems to have acquired a relatively more revolutionary character, for, at one point, the sailors went so far as to discuss handing over the ship to the Soviet authorities in Odessa.
The Waldeck-Rousseau, unlike the France, which had not been anchored at Toulon since October 1916, had just been anchored there for two months. The young sailors had therefore been on leave, thanks to which they had come into contact with the working class, which was then involved in a powerful class movement.

On the boat, a revolutionary action committee of about 10 members had been formed a long time ago also on the initiative of an engineer by the name of Gentil. Two sailors, the gunner Lavieu and the electrician Simeau, specialised in propaganda. They distributed La Vague and pamphlets.

The committee held frequent meetings. In order to conceal its secret activity more effectively, it hid behind the disguise of an apparently harmless organisation, a 'Fraternal Association of Workers', made up of some hundred sailors and leading seamen. It had been set up in December 1918, on the way towards the French naval base at Cattaro (on the Dalmatian coast) by sailors from the Languedoc. Ostensibly it was intending to prepare a huge banquet on the eve of demobilisation and then to commemorate this memorable occasion, as ex-servicemen's associations do from time to time.

At Toulon, membership cards for the association had been printed. The supposed place of the proposed banquet had been christened 'Lucullus', and the word appeared prominently on the card. The original president had been put ashore at Toulon because he was a reservist. There remained the vice-president, François Péronne, an under-cook in the petty officers' galley and responsible for recruitment to the association, for his job brought him into contact with the whole crew.

'Lucullus' met openly at nightfall on the forecastle. The sailors sang and made plans, while the action committee worked within it and imparted a revolutionary orientation to the crew, unknown to the command.

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On 11 March, the cruiser, having for the second time taken back on board a watch which had been on leave, headed for Beirut. The crew was very young, and clearly understood why French imperialism was attacking Soviet Russia. From Beirut, the Waldeck-Rousseau sailed for Istanbul (Constantinople), and, on the evening of 3 April, entered the Bosphorus straits on its way into the Black Sea. The crew were getting angry. On 6 April, they anchored at Odessa, not far from the quays. The action committee had done its work: the gunners in several turrets refused to aim their guns at the great Russian port.

On board, they sang a song of sailors in disciplinary companies:
J'ai réfléchi, je ne tirerai pas,
Je suis marin, je refuse quand même,
Car sur mes frères révoltés là-bas
Je ne tirerai pas, c'est indigne de moi-même.

[I've considered, I shall not shoot,
I am a sailor, but I still refuse,
For on my brothers in revolt over there
I shall not shoot, it is unworthy of me.]

'It's only too obvious: we've come to make war'; that is what the sailors in their red pompons were saying among themselves. There was no doubt that the cruiser would be in the Black Sea for a long time. Moreover, there had not been a single delivery of mail since the departure from Toulon, and messages received by radio were no longer displayed. The discipline was harsher, inspections were more frequent, and the food was appalling.
On 19 April, the Waldeck-Rousseau, which had towed some barges of soldiers as far as the estuary of the Dniestr, returned to anchor off Odessa, where the red flags of the Bolsheviks were flying. Did they intend to intimidate the Soviet power?

When the crew learned that a prisoner from another ship had come on board - it was the chief engineer André Marty - feelings rose. A letter from the prisoner, scribbled in pencil, was circulated among the sailors. The revolutionary action committee aimed both to free Marty and to take the ship into the port of Odessa.

On the morning of 27 April, there were rumours that 'there are soviets on board'. The Rear-Admiral, panicking, had the prisoner moved elsewhere. The crew's reaction was immediate; they assembled on the forecastle. In the name of delegates elected by the sailors, Simeau read a list of demands:
1. Immediate return to France.
2. Better food.
3. Display in all artillery emplacements of all news picked up by radio.
4. Demobilisation of reservists.
5. Immediate putting ashore of the master-at-arms.
6. Leave to be granted in a regular order.

The list was adopted unanimously by a show of hands.

The delegation, led by Simeau and Lavieu, immediately went to the officer in command, the ship's captain Chopard, followed by the whole crew. The delegates were received in the captain's study. He thought he could get out of trouble by invoking the 'national interest'. The reply came: 'No and never. It's not our job to defend the millions of French capitalists!' And the gunner Nouveau, also a member of the secret action committee, shouted 'If you don't give us satisfaction, this evening the ship will be berthed in Odessa.'

There was a categorical refusal from the man who was master on board 'after God'. The delegation went back on deck, followed by the crew. There were shouts of 'To the rear! To the red flag!' It was decided to call an all-out strike. The master-at-arms, who had been threatening, was thrown in the sea - and then fished out again. Eight hundred sailors were still waiting for the reply of the commanding officer to their demands.

Chopard, at a loss, called Rear-Admiral Caubet to his assistance. He acted hypocritically. 'You must not listen to the few trouble-makers among you.' He had some friendly, coaxing words for each delegate. But the delegation, which had waited 20 minutes listening to this exhortation, was not putting up with it any longer: 'Admiral, the crew knows what it wants. Give it satisfaction. It has decided not to go back to war against its friends. Avoid doing irreparable harm!'

'And if I don't give you satisfaction, what will you do?'
'In that case the Waldeck-Rousseau will be berthed at the disposal of the Bolsheviks!'

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The ultimatum to the Admiral expired at five o'clock in the morning the next day. The Admiral took it into his head to assemble the crew in companies, in order to make sure that all were in support. The officers were driven away. Then the Admiral had to resign himself to establishing direct contact with the insurgents, amid the jeering: 'What do you want?'

'Immediate return to France!'

There was a flood of threats and insults: 'Throw the Admiral in the water!'

Eventually Caubet let them extract the promise that they would leave within 48 hours.
On 28 April, the *Waldeck-Rousseau* sailed for Constantinople. A delegate of the crew kept the radio under permanent scrutiny, checking telegrams.

Suddenly the news came through: Vice-Admiral Amet was reprimanding Rear-Admiral Caubet, who was his superior in the hierarchy. The cruiser was to go to Tendra Island, in the Black Sea, the same place where the Russian battleship *Potemkin* had rebelled for 15 days in 1905, after which - at least so they were promised - they would return to France.

The crew became violently angry. The engineers - as ever - made no bones about it: 'We must settle this once and for all. Let's seize the boat!'

At Tendra, the sailors heard of the mutiny of the *France* from men from another ship who had been taken on board. The whole crew was seized with the same desire: to do as the comrades in Sebastopol had done.

The revolutionary struggle then resumed on board the cruiser. The sailors went to the bow and demanded the election of a delegation. They then proceeded to elect four new delegates to replace the previous ones: very young men, aged 20 or 21.

The Rear-Admiral refused to receive these juvenile visitors. Was it war? Groups of sailors began to chase the NCOs, and tried to obtain weapons. The captain of a corvette pulled out his revolver. The Admiral, being barracked, made as if to shoot himself in the head, while a purser collapsed.

The officers went to the rear, which had been turned into a blockhouse. A gun was aimed, ready to shoot shrapnel at the mutineers. In the face of this the sailors were almost unarmed. They could only use revolvers they had bought ashore and knives.

Threat faced threat: the Rear-Admiral declared that he was ready to blow up the ship if the mutineers took command of it. Armed groups (opposed to the crew) controlled the three companion-ways down to the magazine.

But, seeing that they didn't have enough weapons to respond effectively to the officers, the rebel sailors did not push violent action any further. In any case, they had won what they wanted; that very week, the *Waldeck-Rousseau* abandoned its attempt to attack the Russian Revolution; it passed through the Dardanelles, on the way back to France.

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If the mutineers of the *Waldeck-Rousseau*, as we have just seen, had intended to hand their ship over to the Russian Revolution (or rather threatened the command that they would), this had been, apparently, a means of extortion, in order to win the return of the cruiser to France and their demobilisation, which was so impatiently awaited.

On only one boat in the Black Sea fleet had a plan been conceived whose revolutionary objective seems to have been more consistent. It had ripened in the excitable heads of some engineers on the destroyer *Protet*, at that time anchored in the Romanian port of Galatz.

These engineers, generally of low rank, had long been under the influence of civilian workers in the naval dockyards of Toulon and Brest, highly skilled workers who traditionally had a high level of class consciousness.

Unfortunately, unlike the mass movements on the *France* and the *Waldeck-Rousseau*, which were to excel in spontaneity, but whose political orientation was still vague, the Blanquists on the *Protet* were a small vanguard minority, a bit wild, with a conspiratorial mentality and lacking contact with the rest of the crew. This was a crew, moreover, made up largely of young people whose attitude was that of the second delegation of the *Waldeck-Rousseau*: they aspired to peace and demobilisation rather than to the Revolution. Therefore it could not
play the role of detonator for the whole fleet, although the presence of André Marty, a prisoner on the Waldeck-Rousseau, contributed to igniting the mutiny on the cruiser, as we have seen.

The venture was prepared by a small combat group. André Marty, the instigator, took into his confidence the leading engineer Louis Badina, who approved all points of his plan and agreed to help recruit a dozen trustworthy men, which Marty's rank did not permit him to do himself. If we believe Marty's account, the plan was to disarm by night the officers and NCOs and shut them up in their cabins or workrooms, then to bind and gag the officer on duty on deck, and then to cut off the electricity for the radio transmitter. Thus they could have taken over the ship and steered it to Odessa.

A nucleus of three leaders was formed: Marty, Badina and a gunner called Durand. They finalised the details of the planned operation on 13 April. On the evening of 15 April, they convened a small meeting in the town of Galatz, in which took part the unskilled seaman Bourrouilh, the officers' cook Filliatre, and the two engineers Cendrier and Gaborit, as well as the three leaders. Marty explained that by attacking Russia, the Black Sea fleet was violating the constitution, since war had not been declared by France, and, in such conditions, insurrection was, in the language of 1793, 'the most sacred of duties'.

But the contacts which Badina had unwisely made with the Galatz branch of the Romanian Socialist Party attracted attention. And, above all, three of the conspirators - Durand, Bourrouilh and Filliatre - turned out to be provocateurs. They had even tried to outdo the others, proposing to throw the officers in the sea rather than to keep them as hostages.

The next night, 16 April, at 11.30pm, returning on board, André Marty was challenged as he was crossing the gangway onto the destroyer. The commanding officer, Lieutenant-Commander Welféle, a royalist and a supporter of the Action Française, who detested a reader of L’OEuvre like Marty, informed him that he was being put under close arrest. A little later the accused was summoned before him and he stated: `I know you are in contact with the Bolsheviks. You are accused of extremely grave offences.' As he came out of the officer's room, Marty passed Badina with an armed sailor on either side of him: the leading seaman had also been arrested on deck. The next day Badina succeeded in escaping from the naval guard house at Galatz; subsequently he was to be sentenced in absentia.

Thus failed the plot on the Protet, which, if it had not been launched too early and if it had succeeded, could have stamped on the Black Sea mutiny a more clearly revolutionary
III: 'Boys! Sing the Madelon if You Like, But Not the Internationale!'

The mutinies of the France and the Waldeck-Rousseau had snowballed, and numerous other ships took up the revolt.

We have already mentioned the case of the battleship Jean-Bart, which, anchored not far from the France, in the outer harbour of Sebastopol, acted in solidarity with the revolutionary ship on 20 and 21 April.

Potatoes on the Justice: This was also the case with the battleship Justice which had anchored close to the other two. On the latter, the spark which set off the explosion was a simple task concerning potatoes. The sailors had only been given frozen or rotten potatoes to peel. There were lively protests. ViceAdmiral Amet, already very busy elsewhere, had just arrived on the battleship. He summoned the crew to assemble on the quarter deck. When he stated that it was necessary to 'bring down the Bolsheviks', the sailors could stand it no longer. They sang the Internationale. Then the superior officer made the ludicrous suggestion: 'Boys, sing the Madelon[3] if you like, but not the Internationale.' Shouts burst out: Bandit! Throw him in the water!' He was jeered, and potatoes were thrown at him as he left the ship shattered, while the red flag was raised.
**Threats against the sailors of the Bruix:** By a similar process of contagion, the cruiser *Bruix* was also infected at Tendra while still in the Black Sea, by the revolt of the battleship *Waldeck-Rousseau*. When the officer commanding this vessel delivered a string of vituperations against Bolshevism, a delegate of the crew responded by conveying to him a written protest:

This day, 28 April 1919, the crew of the *Bruix*, by means of its delegates, considering that our presence here can have no other result than to act as an obstacle to a friendly nation as it strives to make progress, decides that a period of 48 hours from Monday 28 April... will be allowed for a decision to return to France. When this period expires, the crew will take all necessary measures to get the ship moving... imprisonment in your rooms will be used only in the event of a formal refusal on your part to accede to our demands.

The commanding officer then called the whole crew together, and threatened to use against the French sailors a British light cruiser and two Japanese destroyers which were present in the outer harbour. The delegate responded: `Neither the British fleet nor Japanese guns will make me retreat. As during the war, each of us will die at his post.' The command finally had to back down. A few days later the *Bruix* set off for France.

At Toulon, the rising began on the *Provence*.

But despite this, French imperialism was not about to abandon its warlike ventures against the Russian Revolution. As a result, the Black Sea mutinies had more distant consequences. They ignited the powder in Toulon itself. Anti-war newspapers were in great demand among the sailors, and revolutionary leaflets were circulating on the ships and in the naval barracks.

In early June, the battleship *Provence*, a flagship which had been in the outer harbour since 21 May, was getting ready to leave to go and `inspect' the naval forces in the Black Sea. But, as André Marty comments in his book: `The loading of munitions for land warfare in unusually large quantities, as well as of numerous gas masks, clearly indicated to even the most simple-minded of the sailors that the battleship was going to set off for a new war. This could only be against revolutionary Russia.'

In Paris, the National Assembly debate about the Black Sea mutinies was scheduled for 6 June. So at Toulon on 5 June, just before midnight, the red flag was hoisted on the foremast of the *Provence* as a sign of solidarity with the rebels.

On the morning of Whit Sunday, 8 June, the instruction had been spread for all ships in the outer harbour to send delegates to the Soldiers' and Sailors' Club. At 10.00am, there were already 400. They occupied the theatre. One of them got up on the stage and began to speak. A very lively debate in the `direct democracy' style was begun about the course of action to be adopted in the coming days.

But the bourgeoisie could not tolerate the occupation of premises, especially by servicemen. Local and national police hastened to clear them out of the club. There was an exchange of blows. The building was closed and put under the control of the cops. The commander-in-chief of the port sent a telegram to demand reinforcements of cavalry and police.

The next day, Monday, which was also a public holiday, the sailors gathered in a copse, a place that had been agreed on at the meeting the previous day. There were at least 2000 of them.

Vice-Admiral Lacaze, a future member of the Académie Française, appeared in a car and harangued the crowd of sailors: `Now! Why are you listening to disloyal Frenchmen who are brainwashing you with their anarchist pamphlets?"
When the Admiral had cleared off, an action committee was nominated. This prepared a general rising of all the ships and soldiers in Toulon, in concert with the striking workers from the Mediterranean Ironworks and Shipyards at La Seyne-sur-Mer.

On 11 June, the Provence was due to set off for the East. According to the action committee's plan, this flagship was to have the honour of raising the red flag, thus giving the signal for the rising. On 10 June, the rebellion broke out. 'The time has come! To the quarter deck!', shouted a voice. As the sailors reached the ladders, another voice cried: 'To arms! To the weapons store!' And another: 'We're on our way for the revolution!'

The mutineers rushed towards the arms racks, and grabbed guns and bayonets. Sixty armed men went up on deck. The senior officers fled. A corvette captain tried to come out of his cabin; a sailor levelled his rifle against his chest and ordered him to go back inside. The officer mumbled: 'What's going on?'

'Nothing, it's the revolution.'

By order from above, the bugle called to battle stations. It was a waste of time. Nobody moved. The command made concessions and negotiated. The departure of the Provence was adjourned.

From the battleship the revolt then spread into the town. The soldiers of the Fourth Colonial Regiment, learning that their departure for the East was imminent, forced open the doors of their barracks and flooded out, singing the Internationale.

Soldiers, sailors and workers from the arsenal all mingled together. Some 1500 of them advanced towards the naval prison with the intention of taking control of it. Mounted gendarmes charged. Groups of servicemen resisted. One of the demonstrators had got behind the railings of the public gardens, and from there he stoned the gendarmes. There was the sound of gunfire.

The rebels almost took control of the naval base and the whole town. The Provence would not go to Russian waters.

Next came the Condorcet. For the mutiny on the battleship Condorcet, which took place at the same time, we have the good fortune of being able to give an account written by its main leader, the leading seaman engineer Marcel Monribot, today in his seventies:

The Condorcet was in the outer harbour at Bizerta after having undergone a survey and repairs. That was when the battleship France entered the outer harbour of Bizerta, in the hands of the crew who had rebelled in the Black Sea. Informed by the sailors from the France, we realised that our ship was due to be sent to Russia. On the Condorcet there was a revolutionary socialist group under the leadership of the leading seaman engineer Marcel Monribot.

It was decided that a letter asking that the older age-groups be put ashore and demobilised should be taken to the office of the executive officer. This was granted. So there remained on the Condorcet only the younger age groups (17, 18, 19). Eight hundred to a thousand zouaves were taken on board and later put ashore at Beirut. The ship, after a brief stop at Smyrna, passed through the Dardanelles, and was at Tendra in the Black Sea, a few sea miles from Odessa. Then a resolution was adopted by the revolutionary committee: no work would be done, and no action would be undertaken against the new Russian Republic.

The crew, assembled on the forecastle, was visited by the second in command, Binet: 'What's going on? Who wants to talk politics with me?'
The leading seaman engineer Marcel Monribot, surrounded by the leading seamen engineers Jean Vessat and Raoul Goubert from the revolutionary committee, stepped forward and asked: 'Why are we in Russia?'

'What a question! What has being in Russia got to do with you? I am an officer, and I have never asked where orders come from, I have simply carried them out.'

Monribot replied: 'We consider that the war you want to force upon us is contrary to the Constitution. We are workers, and we understand the role you want to make us play.'

'And what role do you think we want to make you play?'

'Why did the cruiser Bruix, as we have heard, fire an artillery salvo against the town of Kherson? That is a formal proof of aggression against the Soviet Republic.'

If our former comrades who had been put ashore at Bizerta had been with us at this moment, our return to France would have taken place immediately, but with a crew cut by half the task was difficult, despite the fact that the remainder of the revolutionary committee had prepared everything.

The chief mechanical engineer Foquenot called up the leading seamen engineers Monribot and Bernard, and embarked on a great comparison between the United States of America, which had come to the aid of the Allies, and Russia, which had abandoned them.

When Monribot had returned to his post at the main engine, the chief engine-room artificer Le Gall, knowing of the meetings held in this spot, found the records and papers of the revolutionary committee which he showed me and handed over to me so that I could ensure their disappearance, which was done. Meanwhile, sub-lieutenant Robert Lebat learned that there was to be a refusal of the uniformed parade the next day. He tried to persuade a group of sailors to go to the parade: 'Now the war is over, there are some who are reverting to their depraved prewar ideas. Look towards the Rhine! Do your brothers and fathers have the same attitude as you?'

A comrade came to warn the engineers in the main engine. Monribot immediately went up into the main between-decks and asked the same question he had already asked of the second-in-command Binet: 'Why are we in Russia?'

No reply from the officer. But the discussions had blunted the spirit of too many young sailors, who, moreover, had not taken part in the war. The general staff of the navy nonetheless decided to withdraw the Condorcet from the Black Sea. Our aim had been achieved. Wishing at all costs to avoid a fresh rebellion, the officer in command, ship's captain Thomine, only applied light penalties. A few days later the Condorcet reached Istanbul, and then France.

The Voltaire mutinies at Bizerta: A few days later, from 19 to 21 June, that the crew of the battleship Voltaire rebelled at Bizerta, then an important French war-port, again as the ship was about to leave for the Black Sea.

Revolutionary graffiti written in red lead appeared all over the ship. When in the evening the bugle called for fire drill, the crew, instead of obeying, sang the Internationale and the Carmagnole.

The stoker Alquier declared to the officer in command: 'The bourgeoisie can go to Russia if they want to. We have nothing to defend over there.'

The crew began a general go-slow. No officer or petty officer was obeyed any longer. In the end, the sailors were put ashore in small groups, and were given new postings. It was only after a month's delay that the battleship could leave for the East.
The *Guichen* with Charles Tillon:[4] During the same month of June, there was also a mutiny on the light cruiser *Guichen*. This was used for troop transports to the East, shuttling between the Italian port of Taranto and the Greek port of Itea.

When those on board heard the news of the mutinies in the Black Sea, it was a revelation for the sailors: 'So that's why we're transporting the troops! It's a war against the Russian Revolution!'

To calm them down, the officer in command, who knew his classics, sent the crew to visit the ruins of Delphi. The aristocratic officer in charge of accompanying the sailors mixed politics with archaeology. He compared the ruins of the Sanctuary of Apollo, 'destroyed by the Barbarians', to those which had piled up in Russia under Bolshevik rule. It was too much. On their return, the sailors came down the slopes of Mount Parnassus singing the *Internationale*.

The leading seaman engineer Charles Tillon was given the job of drawing up a petition to the officer in command in the name of the crew. It demanded the return of the *Guichen* to France as rapidly as possible. The letter was delivered at the harbour of Itea. Since the commanding officer refused to accept collective claims, the sailors responded by abandoning all work.

But they were subjected to repression. When the crew saw two barge-loads of Senegalese infantry approaching the ship, there was an immediate response. The sailors armed themselves with a variety of objects and rushed towards the accommodation ladders to pull them up and prevent the boarding. The commanding officer was knocked over. He fled and locked himself in his rooms.

However, the two barges succeeded in coming alongside the stem, and the infantrymen were able to come up a ladder. The sailors rushed forward and came up against a row of Senegalese drawn up in front of the mess-room, with fixed bayonets and machetes at their sides. In the end, the crew was surrounded on the foredeck, and the mutineers were arrested one at a time. But eight days later the *Guichen* returned to France.

There were to be two more mutinies: on the battleship *Diderot* at Beirut on 2 August and on the destroyer *Touareg* at Odessa on 7 August.

**Repression:** When it has been frightened, the bourgeoisie gets tough. Courtmartials, some meeting on board ship and others in naval bases, inflicted on the Black Sea sailors years in prison: 10, 15, 20, with sometimes for some the humiliation of dismissal from the navy and being sent to the infernal special section at Calvi (Corsica), a forerunner of Hitler's concentration camps. Before the military courts, the accused, in general, did not abandon their revolutionary steadfastness. Thus Virgile Vuillemin, the driving force of the mutiny on the *France*, gave evidence for two hours and was able to make himself into the effective lawyer of the accused.

The one most harshly treated was chief engineer André Marty of the destroyer *Protet*, sentenced to 20 years hard labour and prohibited from entering certain areas for 20 years.

As a minister was to state to the members of the National Assembly: 'You can forgive sailors, but an officer, never,' So Marty was to be the last to regain his freedom. In fact, a powerful propaganda campaign enabled the working class to win an amnesty for the Black Sea mutineers in July 1922, but Marty was only released a year later.

The tireless Committee for the defence of the Black Sea sailors was to publish a song, to the tune *Glory to the Seventeenth*, ending with the chorus:

Salut! Salut à vous!
Vaillants marins de la mer Noire!
Salut! Salut à vous!
Petits cols bleus couverts de gloire.
Salut! Salut à vous!
Ennemis du capitalisme,
Qui croyait, en comptant sur vous,
Assassiner le communisme!

[We salute you
Brave sailors of the Black Sea!
We salute you
Little white collars covered with glory.
We salute you
Enemies of capitalism,
Which thought that, by counting on you,
It could murder Communism!]

NOTES
1. André Marty (1886-1956) was a professional seaman before 1914, and was involved with the socialist paper *Cri du marin*. Jailed in 1919 and released in 1923, he joined the PCF, and was a member of its Political Bureau from 1931, a deputy from 1924 to 1955, and Secretary of the Comintern during 1935-43. He organised International Brigades in Spain. Expelled from the PCF in 1953, in his last years he had contacts with Trotskyists and anarchists. [Translator's note]
2. Virgile Vuillemin (1898-1981) was jailed in 1919, and released in 1920. In 1924, he was a leading figure in the anarchist-individualist group 'Vers la beauté', advocating education through art. He joined the PCF at the Liberation, but resigned in 1952 in protest at the expulsion of Marty. In 1958-59, he was a candidate in municipal elections on a list organised by the PSA and the UGS. [Translator's note]
3. A popular song among French troops in the First World War. [Translator's note]
4. Charles Tillon was born in 1897. Close to the revolutionary syndicalists before the First World War, he was jailed in 1919, but was released on health grounds. In the PCF from 1921, he was an activist in the CGTU. A member of the PCF Political Bureau during 1944-52, and a minister in several postwar governments, he was disciplined in 1952 and sent back to his base. Restored to full party rights in 1957, he was expelled from the PCF in 1970, and formed Secours Rouge with Jean Paul Sartre. [Translator's note]