

# The Kronstadt Revolt - Ante Ciliga



Ante Ciliga discusses the question of Kronstadt, at the time of Trotsky's later writings about the event.

## **The Kronstadt Revolt**

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The correspondence between Trotsky and Wendelin Thomas (one of the leaders of the revolt in the German Navy in 1918, and a member of the American Committee of Enquiry into the Moscow Trials) regarding the historical significance of the events in Kronstadt in 1921, has given rise to widespread international discussion. That in itself indicates the importance of the problem. On the other hand, it is no accident that special interest should be shown in the Kronstadt revolt today; that there is an analogy, a direct link even between what happened at Kronstadt 17 years ago, and the recent trials at Moscow, is only too apparent.'

Today we witness the murder of the leaders of the Russian revolution; in 1921 it was the masses who formed the basis of the revolution who were massacred. Would it be possible today to disgrace and Suppress the leaders of October without the slightest protest from the people, if these leaders had not already by armed force silenced the Kronstadt sailors and the workers all over Russia?

Trotsky's reply to Wendelin Thomas shows that unfortunately Trotsky -- who is, together with Stalin, the only one of the leaders of the October revolution concerned in the suppression of Kronstadt who remains alive - still refuses to look at the past objectively. Furthermore, in his article 'Too Much Noise About Kronstadt', he increases the gulf which he created at that time between the working masses and himself; he does not hesitate, after having ordered their bombardment in 1921 to describe these men today as 'completely demoralised elements, men who wore elegant wide trousers and did their hair like pimps'. No! It is not with accusations of this kind, which reek of bureaucratic arrogance, that a useful contribution can be made to the lessons of the great Russian revolution.

In order to assess the influence that Kronstadt has had on the outcome of the revolution, it is necessary to avoid all personal issues, and direct attention to three fundamental questions:

(1) In what general circumstances the Kronstadt revolt arose?

(2) What were the aims of the movement?

(3) By what means did the insurgents attempt to achieve these aims?

### **The masses and the bureaucracy in 1920-21**

Everyone now agrees that during the winter of 1920 to 1921 the Russian revolution was passing through an extremely critical phase. The offensive against Poland had ended in defeat at Warsaw, the social revolution had not broken out in the West, the Russian revolution had become isolated, famine and disorganisation had seized the entire country. The peril of bourgeois restoration knocked at the door of the revolution. At this moment of crisis the different classes and parties which existed within the revolutionary camp each presented their solution for its resolution.

The Soviet Government and the higher circles in the Communist Party applied their own solution of increasing the power of the bureaucracy. The attribution of powers to the 'Executive Committees' which had hitherto been vested in the soviets, the replacement of the dictatorship of the class by the dictatorship of the party, the shift of authority even within the party from its members to its cadres, the replacement of the double power of the bureaucracy and the workers in the factory by the sole power of the former - to do all this was to 'save the Revolution!' It was at this moment that Bukharin put forward his plea for a 'proletarian Bonapartism'. 'By placing restrictions on itself the proletariat would, according to him, facilitate the struggle against the bourgeois counter-revolution. Here was manifested already the enormous quasi-messianic self-importance of the Communist Bureaucracy.

The Ninth and Tenth Congresses of the Communist Party, as well as the intervening year passed beneath the auspices of this new policy. Lenin rigidly carried it through, Trotsky sang its praises. The Bureaucracy prevented the bourgeois restoration . . . by eliminating the proletarian character of the revolution. The formation of the Workers' Opposition within the party, which was supported not only by the proletarian faction in the party itself but also by the great mass of unorganised workers, the general strike of the Petrograd workers a short time before the Kronstadt revolt and finally the insurrection itself, all expressed the aspirations of the masses who felt, more or less clearly, that a 'third party' was about to destroy their Conquests. The movement of poor peasants led by Makhno in the Ukraine was the outcome of similar resistance in similar circumstances. If the struggles of 1920-1921 are examined in the light of the historical material now available, one is struck by the way that these scattered masses, starved and enfeebled by economic disorganisation, nevertheless had the strength to formulate for themselves with such precision their social and political Position, and at the same time to defend themselves against the bureaucracy and against the bourgeoisie.

We shall not content ourselves, like Trotsky, with simple declarations, so we submit to readers the resolution which served as a programme for the Kronstadt movement. We reproduce it in full, because of its immense historical importance. It was adopted on February 28th by the sailors of the battleship 'Petropavlovsk', and was subsequently accepted by all the sailors, soldiers and workers of Kronstadt.

After having heard the representatives delegated by the general meeting of ships' crew to report on the situation in Petrograd this assembly takes the following decisions:

1. Seeing that the present soviets do not express the wishes of the workers and peasants, to organise immediately re-elections to the Soviets with Secret vote, and with care to organise free electoral propaganda for all workers and peasants.
2. To grant liberty of speech and of press to the workers and peasants, to the anarchists and the left socialist parties.

3. To secure freedom of assembly for labour unions and peasant Organisations.
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 labour and peasant movements.
6. To elect a Commission to review the cases of those held in prisons and concentration camps.
7. To abolish all 'politodeli' because no party should be given special privileges in the propagation of its ideas or receive financial Support from 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'.
9. To equalize all the rations of all who work with the exception of those employed in trades 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 judgement 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 labour.
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 our resolutions.
14. To appoint a travelling commission of control.
15. To permit free artisan production which does not employ hired labour.

These are primitive formulations, insufficient no doubt, but all of them impregnated with the spirit of October; and no calumny in the world can cast a doubt on the intimate connection existing between this resolution and the sentiments which guided the expropriations of 1917.

The depth of principle which animates this resolution is shown by the fact that it is still to a great extent applicable. One can, in fact, oppose it as well to the Stalin regime of 1938, as to that of Lenin in 1921. More even than that: the accusations of Trotsky himself against Stalin's regime are only reproductions, timid ones, it is true, of the Kronstadt claims. Besides, what other programme which is at all socialist could be set up against the bureaucratic oligarchy except that of Kronstadt and the Workers' Opposition?

The appearance of this resolution demonstrates the close connections which existed between the movements of Petrograd and Kronstadt. Trotsky's attempt to set the workers of Petrograd against those of Kronstadt in order to confirm the legend of the counter-revolutionary nature of the Kronstadt movement, comes back on Trotsky himself: in 1921, Trotsky pleaded the necessity under which Lenin was situated in justification of the suppression of democracy in the Soviets and in the party, and accused

the masses inside and outside the party of sympathising with Kronstadt He admitted therefore that at that time the Petrograd workers and the opposition although they had not resisted by force of arms, none the less extended their sympathy to Kronstadt.

Trotsky's subsequent assertion that 'the insurrection was inspired by the desire to obtain a privileged ration' is still more wild. Thus, it is one of these privileged people of the Kremlin, the rations for whom were very much better than those of others, who dares to hurl a similar reproach, and that at the very men who in paragraph 9 of their resolution, explicitly demanded equalisation of rations! This detail shows the desperate extent of Trotsky's bureaucratic blindness.

Trotsky's articles do not depart in the slightest degree from the legend created long ago by the Central Committee of the Party. Trotsky certainly deserves credit from the international working class for having refused since 1923 to continue to participate in the bureaucratic degeneration and in the new 'purges' which were destined to deprive the Revolution of all its left-wing elements. He deserves still more to be defended against Stalin's calumny and assassins. But all this does not give Trotsky the right to insult the working masses of 1921. On the contrary! More than anyone else, Trotsky should furnish a new appreciation of the initiative taken at Kronstadt. An initiative of great historic value, an initiative taken by rank-and-file militants in the struggle against the first bloodstained 'purge' undertaken by the bureaucracy.

The attitude of the Russian workers during the tragic winter of 1920-1921 shows a profound social instinct; and a noble heroism inspired the working classes of Russia not only at the height of the Revolution but also at the crisis which placed it in mortal danger.

Neither the Kronstadt fighters, nor the Petrograd workers, nor the ranks of the Communists could summon, it is true, in that winter the same revolutionary energy as in 1917 to 1919, but what there was of socialism and revolutionary feeling in the Russia of 1921 was possessed by the rank-and-file. In their Opposition to this, Lenin and Trotsky, in line with Stalin, with Zinoviev, Kaganovitch, and others responded to the wishes and served the interests of the bureaucratic cadres. The workers struggled for the socialism which the bureaucracy were already in the process of liquidating. That is the fundamental point of the whole problem.

### **Kronstadt and the NEP**

People often believe that Kronstadt forced the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) -- a profound error. The Kronstadt resolution pronounced in favour of the defence of the workers, not only against the bureaucratic capitalism of the State, but also against the restoration of private capitalism. This restoration was demanded -- in Opposition to Kronstadt -- by the social democrats, who combined it with a regime of political democracy. And it was Lenin and Trotsky who to a great extent realised it (but without political democracy) in the form of the NEP. The Kronstadt resolution declared for the Opposite Since it declared itself against the employment of wage labour in agriculture and small industry. This resolution, and the movement underlying, sought for a revolutionary alliance of the proletarian and peasant workers with the poorest sections of the country labourers, in order that the revolution might develop towards socialism. The NEP, on the other hand, was a union of bureaucrats with the upper layers of the village against the proletariat; it was the alliance of State capitalism and private capitalism against socialism. The NEP is as much opposed to the Kronstadt demands as, for example, the revolutionary socialist programme of the vanguard of the European workers for the abolition of the Versailles system, is opposed to the abrogation of the Treaty of Versailles achieved by Hitler.

Let us consider, finally, one last accusation which is commonly circulated: that action such as that at Kronstadt could have indirectly let loose the forces of the counter-revolution. It is possible indeed that even by placing itself on a footing of workers' democracy the revolution might have been overthrown; but

what is certain is that it has perished, and that it has perished on account of the policy of its leaders. The repression of Kronstadt, the suppression of the democracy of workers and soviets by the Russian Communist party, the elimination of the proletariat from the management of industry, and the introduction of the NEP, already signified the death of the Revolution.

It was precisely the end of the civil war which produced the splitting of the post-revolutionary society into two fundamental groupings: the working masses and the bureaucracy. As far as its socialist and internationalist aspirations were concerned, the Russian Revolution was stifled: in its nationalist, bureaucratic, and state capitalist tendencies, it developed and consolidated itself.

It was from this point onwards, and on this basis, each year more and more clearly, that the Bolshevik repudiation of morality, so frequently evoked, took on a development which had to lead to the Moscow Trials. The implacable logic of things has manifested itself. While the revolutionaries, remaining such only in words, accomplished in fact the task of the reaction and counter-revolution, they were compelled, inevitably, to have recourse to lies, to calumny and falsification. This system of generalised lying is the result, not the cause, of the separation of the Bolshevik party from socialism and from the proletariat. In order to corroborate this statement, I shall quote the testimony regarding Kronstadt of men I have met in Soviet Russia.

'The men of Kronstadt! They were absolutely right; they intervened in order to defend the Petrograd workers: it was a tragic misunderstanding on the part of Lenin and Trotsky, that instead of agreeing with them, they gave them battle,' said Dch. to me in 1932. He was a non-party worker in Petrograd in 1921, whom I knew in the political isolator at Verkhne-Uralsk as a Trotskyist.

'It is a myth that, from the social point of view, Kronstadt of 1921 had a wholly different population from that of 1917,' another man from Petrograd, Dv., said to me in prison. In 1921 he was a member of the Communist youth, and was imprisoned in 1932 as a 'decist' (a member of Sapronov's group of 'Democratic Centralists').

I also had the Opportunity of knowing one of the most effective participants in the Kronstadt rebellion. He was an old marine engineer, a communist since 1917, who had, during the civil war, taken an active part, directing at one time a Tcheka in a province somewhere on the Volga, and found himself in 1921 at Kronstadt as a political commissar on the warship 'Marat' (ex 'Petropavlovsk'). When I saw him, in 1930, in the Leningrad prison, he had just spent the previous eight years in the Solovietski islands.

### **The Methods of Struggle**

The Kronstadt workers pursued revolutionary aims in struggling against the reactionary tendencies of the bureaucracy, and they used clean and honest methods. In contrast, the bureaucracy slandered their movement odiously, pretending that it was led by General Kozlovski. Actually, the men of Kronstadt honestly desired, as comrades, to discuss the questions at issue with the representatives of the government. Their action, had at first, a defensive character -- that is the reason why they did not occupy Oranienbaum in time, situated on the coast opposite Kronstadt.

Right from the start, the Petrograd bureaucrats made use of the system of hostages by arresting the families of the sailors, Red Army soldiers and workers of Kronstadt who were living in Petrograd because several commissars in Kronstadt -- not one of whom was shot -- had been arrested. The news of the seizing of hostages was brought to the knowledge of Kronstadt by means of leaflets dropped from aeroplanes. In their reply by radio, Kronstadt declared on March 7th 'that they did not wish to imitate Petrograd as they considered that such an act, even when carried out in an excess of desperation and hate, is most shameful and most cowardly from every point of view. History has not yet known a similar procedure'. The new governing clique understood much better than the Kronstadt 'rebels' the

significance of the social struggle which was beginning, the depth of the class-antagonism which separated it from the workers. It is in this that lies the tragedy; of revolutions in the period of their decline.

But while military conflict was forced upon Kronstadt, they still found the strength to formulate the programme for the 'third revolution', which remains since then the programme of the Russian socialism of the future.

### **Balance Sheet**

There are reasons for thinking that granted the relation between the forces of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, of socialism and capitalism, which existed in Russia and Europe at the beginning of 1921, the struggle for the socialist development of the Russian Revolution was doomed to defeat. In those conditions the socialist programme of the masses could not conquer: it had to depend on the triumph of the counter-revolution whether openly declared or camouflaged under an aspect of degeneracy (as has been produced in fact).

But such a conception of the progress of the Russian Revolution does not diminish in the slightest, in the realms of principle, the historic importance of the programme and the efforts of the working masses. On the contrary, this programme constitutes the point of departure from which a new cycle in the revolutionary socialist development will begin. In fact, each new revolution begins not on the basis from which the preceding one started, but from the point at which the revolution before it had undergone a moral set-back.

The experience of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution places anew before the conscience of international socialism an extremely important sociological problem. In the Russian revolution, as in two other great revolutions, those of England and of France, why is it that it is from the inside that the counter-revolution has triumphed, at the moment when the revolutionary forces were exhausted, and by means of the revolutionary party itself ('purged', it is true of its left-wing elements)? Marxism believes that the socialist revolution, once begun, would either be assured of a gradual and continued development towards integral socialism, or would be defeated through the agency of bourgeois restoration.

Altogether, the Russian Revolution poses in an entirely new way the problem of the mechanism of the socialist revolution. This question must become paramount in international discussion. In such discussion the problem of Kronstadt can and must have a position worthy of it.