70th Anniversary of Kronstadt Rebellion

by Mike Harris

March of 1991 marked the 70th anniversary of what, in our opinion, signified the end of the Russian revolution. The event in question is the March 1921 revolt of the sailors of the Kronstadt naval base — or as was called during the revolution: “Red Kronstadt” — in the Gulf of Finland near Petrograd (later renamed Leningrad).

The sailors, long heralded as the vanguard of the revolution by the Bolsheviks, rebelled against the Russian working class’ “enslavement” at the hands of the Communist usurpers.” The Kronstadt sailors (many consider themselves Social Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, anarchists and rank-and-file communists) condemned the Bolsheviks (the party of Lenin and Trotsky) “who, instead of giving the people freedom, instilled in them the fear of falling into the torture chambers of the Cheka [secret police].”

In the face of the continued militarization of the workplace, the Kronstadt sailors called on the Bolsheviks to halt the use of “Communist guards kept on duty in the factories and mills.” And replace them, to guard against a counter-revolutionary movement, with guards who would be “appointed” and serve “at the discretion of the workers.”

Furthermore these sailors recognized that the unions (no longer called “soviets” or workers councils) under the Bolsheviks had become “bureaucratized.” The Kronstadt rebels criticized these unions for “fastening the workers to their benches,

so that labor has become not a joy but a new form of slavery.” Furthermore, the protests of workers and peasants “expressed in spontaneous uprisings” and “driving them out on strike” against miserable living and working conditions were met “with mass executions and bloodletting, in which they have not been surpassed by tsarist generals.”

Recognizing that the “ideas of socialism have been betrayed” by the Bolsheviks, the Kronstadt sailors set up a free soviet and called upon the people to create a “third revolution” (the first being the revolution of 1905, the second in October 1917). These sailors, who came from the working class and peasantry, believed that there could be no middle ground in the struggle for freedom and libertarian socialism. The struggle, they argued, must be one that would “rouse the laboring masses of the East and of the West.”

The formation of the Kronstadt soviet would serve “as an example of the new socialist construction as opposed to bureaucratic Communism.”

Their vision of a new socialist society would be one of “free association of workers [and] peasants” where “the toilers [would have] the opportunity to have their freely elected soviets, operating without the slightest force of political party pressure.”

Sadly, this last attempt to organize a “third revolution” and the hopes of a new, free and libertarian society were crushed by Trotsky’s Red Army. And, also sadly, it took the laboring masses abroad many decades to “see of their own eyes that everything hitherto created here by the will of the workers and peasants was not socialism.” What was created instead by the Bolsheviks and their armed might was “state capitalism, whose hangman’s noose enforces the laboring masses.”

Although these observations and proclamations were absolutely correct (but were probably never again to be openly aired in public in the Soviet Union), criticism of Bolshevism was long in the making.

As early as 1918, at the First All-Russian Conference of Anarchosyndicalists (Moscow), the anarcho-syndicalists “accused the government of betraying the working class with its suppression of workers' control in favor of such capitalist devices as one-man management, labor discipline and the employment of 'bourgeois' engineers and technicians. By forsaking the factory committees [soviets] ... for those 'dead organizations' the trade unions, and by substituting decrees and red tape for industrial democracy, the Bolshevik leadership was creating a monster of 'state capitalism'...”

In March 1920, the Second All-Russian Congress of Food Industry Workers (which was very much influenced by anarcho-syndicalist ideas) criticized the Bolsheviks for inaugurating “unlimited and uncontrolled domination over the proletariat and peasantry, frightful centralism carried to the point of absurdity...destroying in the country all that is alive, spontaneous and free.” Furthermore the Foodworkers came down hard on “the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat [which] is in reality the dictatorship over the proletariat by the [Bolshevik] Party and even by individual persons.” These criticisms more and more became obvious to many Russians. By the Third All-Russian Congress of

7. Paul Avrich, The Russian Anarchists quoted in 1917-1921, the Bolsheviks and Workers Control, London Solidarity
9. “Third All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions,” stenographic report, quoted in ibid, p. 64
Trade Unions in April 1920, Trotsky became so brazen as to declare that the “militarization of labor... is indispensable.”9 And Lenin boasted at this congress that he believed as early as 1918 that there is a positive “necessity of recognizing the dictatorial authority of single individuals for the purpose of carrying out the Soviet [sic] idea.”10

It is easy to see, by these quotes, the basis and justification of the Kronstadt sailors’ demands and the basis for their uprising which occurred in March 1921.

It is also quite interesting that just prior to the actual rebellion other important events were also taking place both within the communist Party, its affiliated trade unions and within Russia itself. Some of these happenings are as follows.

In late January 1921 a group of dissident communists organized an opposition faction within the Communist Party called the “Workers Opposition.” While not being a mass movement per se, the Workers Opposition “enjoyed considerable support among rank-and-file factory workers,”11 particularly among the metal-workers who “formed the backbone of the Committee of Workers in 1917.”12 This obviously caused concern among the top Bolshevik leadership who, at this time, were preparing to firmly and finally enforce their absolute authority at the forthcoming 10th Party Congress. Ironically, the Party congress was to take place in March and was to be held in Petrograd, which is less than 50 miles from Kronstadt.

As a further backdrop to the Kronstadt rebellion strikes had broken out in late February in Petrograd and spread, in early March, to Moscow and other industrial centers.

“This [strike] movement,” wrote the anarcho-syndicalist activist and author G.P. Maximoff, “demanded an improvement of their starvation conditions, and then — a change in the general policies of the government, putting a stop to persecutions and terror, the restoration of freedom and free Soviet elections, — this movement was met by Lenin and his government with the arrests of anarchists and socialists throughout the country, with lock-outs, with martial law in Petrograd...armed suppression of the workers and the dispersal of workers demonstrations in Petrograd... The Petrograd scene strikingly resembled the last week of the Tsar’s absolutist regime.”13

On the first of March, at a mass meeting attended by 15,000 sailors, workers and others, the previously quoted “Resolution of the General Meeting... of the Baltic Fleet” was adopted. Shortly after the meeting took place “the Bolshevik authorities replied...by beginning to remove from the city the food and ammunition supplies. The sailors prevented this attempt, closed the city, and arrested some of the more obstreperous commissars.”14

The anarcho-syndicalist activist and editor of anarcho-syndicalist daily Golos Truda (The Voice of Labor) wrote that “soon after the public meeting...the Communists of Kronstadt began serious preparations for military action”15 against the Kronstadt revolutionaries. The Bolsheviks were quiet concerned that the revolutionary demands of the sailors would be welcomed by others; the development of a revolutionary opposition and movement against the Bolsheviks needed to be crushed. In this light, the Bolsheviks prepared for armed struggle.

Shortly after the March 1 meeting the Bolsheviks, through press and radio propaganda, called the people of Petrograd to arm themselves “against the White-guard [generic for counter-revolutionaries].”16

15.Voline, ibid, p. 479

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revolutionaries] conspiracy!"16 And against the "spies and provocateurs" who were not "really fighting for democracy but for Tsarist generals."

Having failed to starve the people of Kronstadt out, the Red Army made good on its threat of March 6 to shoot the rebels "like partridges."17 Despite the efforts of several anarchists, including Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman to resolve the conflict by peaceful means, commander of the Red Army, Leon Trotsky, ordered the artillery that was trained on Kronstadt from three directions to open fire on March 7. Being the true opportunists that the Bolsheviks were, it comes as little surprise that the opening salvos of this counter-revolutionary attack would occur on the Russian Labor Day.

The barrages did not cease. Nine days later Trotsky ordered a mass troop assault against Kronstadt. Across the frozen ice of the waters surrounding the island, and with machine guns at their backs so they would not retreat, regular army detachments and Cheka [Bolshevik equivalent of the Gestapo or FBI] regiments attempted to enter fortress Kronstadt. Despite the intense resistance and bravery of the sailors, Kronstadt fell to the Bolsheviks by midnight on March 18th. The last free soviet and the final chance for the Russian working class to create a mass movement that would carry out a libertarian communist revolution was brutally crushed.

The Bolshevik general Dibenko was ordered to "clean up the rebel city."18 "The victims of the Cheka," wrote Voline, "were innumerable, and they were executed in masse during the days which followed..." Furthermore, writes Alexander Berkman, "the prisons and concentration camps in the frozen Archangel and the dungeons of far (east) Turkestan"20 were filled with Kronstadt rebels "who rose against the Bolshevik bureaucracy and proclaimed in March 1921 the slogan of the Revolution of October 1917: All Power to the Soviets!"

Rising from the ashes of the Kronstadt dead, the aims, principles and goals of the Kronstadt rebels and Russian anarcho-syndicalists are again today being proclaimed by a new generation of revolutionaries inside Russia and other East European countries as well. Already the red and black flag of anarcho-syndicalism and libertarian socialism is flying in Leningrad, Moscow and towns and cities across Russia, the Far East, the Ukraine and even Siberia. What greater tribute to the memory of the Kronstadt rebels and the spirit of revolutionary Russia than to see the rebirth of the libertarian socialist movement.

In honor of the Kronstadt rebels and to insure that their memory is renewed, the Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists will be paid tribute to the 70th Anniversary of this rebellion by holding an international conference on Kronstadt in Leningrad (formally Petrograd) this March.

In closing, let me share with you the words taken from a leaflet issued by Petrograd anarchists distributed during the rebellion:

"The revolution has long been awaiting you. It calls from Kronstadt...Don't you see that the cause of Kronstadt is your cause?... Now it is your turn....Your first task is to destroy [all] government. Your second task is not to create any other. For authority brings with it, on the very first day, laws and restrictions... Let Anarchy follow you in triumph!"21

— The Anarchists

16. ibid p. 482-484
17. ibid p. 484
18. "Letter to the Petrograd labour and Defense Committee, to President Zinoviev" in ibid, p. 524, 525
19. ibid p. 533
20. Berkman, ibid, p. 104

21. Avrich, ibid, p. 163
For a further account of events see "Syndicalists in the Russian Revolution" by C.P. Maximoff.