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The Truth about Kronstadt — An Attempt at a Libertarian Soviet Revolution¹

M. Isidine
April–May 1921

Translated by Christopher Coquard
Edited by Søren Hough & Christopher Coquard

We have, at last, reliable information that allows us to understand the true character of the Kronstadt movement, which the Bolshevik government has just crushed. And we can affirm without hesitation that this movement has been odiously slandered: it has absolutely nothing in common with the Whites,² generals, monarchists, agents of the Entente, etc. Nor is it the work of poor dupes, unwittingly directed by reactionaries. It is an absolutely spontaneous movement, without preparation, without plot, without external guides; it was led only by the sailors of Kronstadt themselves who knew very well what they wanted. And what they wanted was not at all a counter-revolution, but a change that would allow, on the contrary, the Russian revolution to go forward towards a true equality and a true administration of the people by themselves. They defended the Soviets — a creation of the Russian working masses — against a government that had, in fact, suppressed them by substituting a dictatorship of officials.

What may have confused the Western public and given credence to the slander was the joy shown at the news of the Kronstadt uprising by the bourgeois press and the Russian reactionary parties. But is it not always so? If a revolutionary attempt were made in France, wouldn't the royalists try to fish in troubled waters? And during the war, did not the German government encourage the Irish movement and even the Russian Bolshevik movement in its interests? Did this prevent these movements from being clearly revolutionary? "Reactionary maneuvers" are always an easy argument to fall into. When we remember that, in 1893–94, Jaurès had already seen the role of the Jesuits in the anarchist attacks and spoke of certain red silk shirts that were found in the homes of all those searched and that had certainly been distributed to them by the Church!³

¹ Ed: Isidine, M. "La Vérité Sur Cronstadt — Une Tentative de Révolution soviétique Libertaire [The Truth about Kronstadt — An Attempt at a Libertarian Soviet Revolution]." *Les Temps Nouveaux* [*The New Times*], September April–May 1921.

² Ed: The Whites were one of many factions during the Russian Civil War. They were a politically heterogeneous group, ranging from social democrats to republicans to nationalists, united primarily by their anti-Bolshevik position.

³ Ed: We do not know for certain what Goldsmith is alluding to here. This may refer to the anarchist bombings that took place in 1893 and which led to severe repression of anarchist newspapers, such as *Père Peinard*. After right-wing opponents attacked the Socialist Party for being in league with the anarchists, socialist politician Jean Jaurès made an impassioned speech in the Chamber of Deputies denying the connection and pointing the finger back at the capitalist and clerical classes for causing the unrest (Jaurès, "On the Anarchists").

In Kronstadt, moreover, the reactionaries, if they were more intelligent, should have seen from the beginning that they had nothing to hope for. In their *Izvestia* (organ of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee), the revolting sailors energetically rejected the slander and clearly declared that they had absolutely nothing in common with the White generals.⁴

By their acts, moreover, the insurgents of Kronstadt showed their complete independence. Lacking everything, they refused to be supplied by the Entente.⁵ They also refused to receive the 500,000 francs of financial aid that Russian financiers from Paris were planning to send them. From Paris, too, a hundred Russian officers of the reactionary armies sent their offers of services by radio to Kronstadt; they were told, “Stay where you are, we don’t need you.”

Besides, all those who know the Russian revolutionary movement knew, from the beginning, what to expect. The Kronstadt sailors were already in the forefront of the movement during the first revolution, that of 1906; their role was also important in the revolution of 1917. They showed absolute intransigence and extreme fighting spirit; under Kerensky’s government, they proclaimed the Kronstadt Commune and demanded their autonomy.⁶ At that time, the government was reluctant to repress them and an agreement was reached. Trotsky said then, responding to some protests: “Yes, the Kronstadt sailors are anarchists. But when the moment of the decisive struggle for the revolution arrives, those who are now pushing you to repression will prepare the ropes to hang us all, while the Kronstadt sailors will give their lives for our defense.” Later, when the Bolsheviks were the spokesmen of the people’s demands (“peace, land and all power to the workers’ and peasants’ soviets”), the Kronstadt sailors contributed more than anyone else to give them the victory. And, during the last years, they were still there to defend Petrograd against the reactionary armies. And then they suddenly became agents of the “Whites”? Kronstadt, a nest of reaction? It is impossible.

Information and documents from there have now come to confirm what we all felt in advance. Let us say a few words about the course of events.

At the end of February, unrest broke out among the workers of Petrograd; it was a question of supplies. There were strikes and, as always, arrests of strikers. Kronstadt, where the discontent against the government was already great, was moved and decided to support the comrades of Petrograd. The movement immediately took on a political character. The powers of the Kronstadt soviet had long since expired, but the government refused to allow new elections in order to keep the power of the old, Bolshevik soviet. This was only one of the manifestations of the dictatorship of the Communist Party which the Kronstadt sailors had suffered more than once.

⁴ Ed: *Izvestia of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee of sailors, soldiers and workers of the town of Kronstadt* (1921) was the official newspaper of the Kronstadt rebels. Not to be confused with *Izvestia* (1917 – present), which was the official state newspaper of the Soviet Union which operated at the behest of the central government.

⁵ Ed: The Entente refers to the Allies during World War I (France, Britain, and Russia).

⁶ Ed: Aleksandr Kerensky (1881 – 1970) was the first prime minister of Russia and led the provisional government from March 1917 to November 1917. He was a moderate socialist whose government was deposed during the October Revolution. Kerensky fled to the United States where he spent the rest of his life (The Editors, “Aleksandr Kerensky”).

A delegation was sent by the sailors to Petrograd to study the situation there and to work out a plan of joint action. On its return, the following agenda was voted on March 1st by an assembly of the crews of ships of the line:

“Having taken note of the report presented by the representatives of the crews in Petrograd to study the situation in this city, we made the following decisions:

1. Since the present soviets do not express the will of the workers and peasants, the soviets must be immediately established by secret vote with, before the elections, full freedom of propaganda for all the workers and peasants.
2. Freedom of speech and press for workers and peasants, for anarchists and left socialist parties.
3. The freedom of meetings, professional unions, and peasant groups.
4. The meeting, before March 10, 1921, of a conference, without party, of workers, soldiers of the Red Army, and sailors of the city of Petrograd, Kronstadt, and Petrograd region.
5. The release of all political prisoners belonging to different socialist parties, all workers and peasants, soldiers of the Red Army, and sailors arrested for the workers’ and peasants’ revolts.
6. Election of a Commission to review the trials of prisoners in prisons and concentration camps.
7. The abolition of all “political sections,”⁷ because no party can enjoy privileges for the propaganda of its ideas and receive subsidies from the State for this purpose. In their place must be established commissions of instruction and education whose expenses must be borne by the state.
8. The immediate abolition of all “blocking units.”⁸
9. Unification of rations for all workers except for unhealthy industries.
10. The suppression of the communist detachments in all the units of the army and of the communist sentinels in the factories and the plants; in case of need, the detachments and the sentinels will be able to be ordered by the companies, and in the factories and plants by the workers.
11. Complete freedom for the peasants to freely use all the land and own the livestock, provided that they do not resort to wage labor.
12. We ask all military units and all fellow students of military schools to join our revolution.
13. We demand that all of our resolutions receive wide publicity.
14. That an Office of Mobile Controllers be appointed.
15. The freedom of the home industry, not employing salaried staff.”

The same resolution was then proposed to the general assembly of the citizens of Kronstadt, comprising about sixteen thousand people, and adopted unanimously. It became like a “charter” of the movement. On March 2, at a meeting of the delegates of the ships, military units, workshops and workers’ unions of Kronstadt (three hundred people in all) was appointed a “Provisional Revolutionary Committee” in charge of organizing the new elections, free this time, to the local Soviet; this Committee published a daily newspaper, the *Izvestia*, and it informs us about the goals and the character of the movement.⁹

In an “Appeal to the workers, red soldiers and sailors” published on March 13, they said:

⁷ Organization belonging exclusively to the “communist party” created to control them within all civil and military institutions.

⁸ Military detachments posted at railway stations to prevent the arrival of foodstuffs other than those bought and sold by the State.

⁹ Extracts from this newspaper were given by the newspaper *Voila Rosati* (Prague) and the bulletin *Pour la Russie* (Paris).

“Here in Kronstadt, we have, since March 2, overthrown the cursed yoke of the communists and raised the red flag of the third workers’ revolution.

Red soldiers, sailors, workers, the revolutionary Kronstadt calls on you.

We know that you are being deceived, that you are not being told the truth about what is happening in our country, where we are all ready to give our lives for the sacred work of the emancipation of the worker and the peasant.

They try to convince you that there are white generals and popes among us.

In order to put an end to these lies, we bring to your attention that the Provisional Revolutionary Committee consists of the following fifteen members:

1. Petritchenco, clerk of the ship of the line Petropavlovsk;
2. Jacovenko, telephonist of the liaison service of the Kronstadt zone;
3. Ossossov, mechanic of the ship of the line Sevastopol;
4. Arkhipov, chief mechanic;
5. Perepelkin, electrician of Sevastopol;
6. Patrushev, chief electrician of the Petropavlovsk;
7. Kupelov, auxiliary doctor;
8. Vershinin, sailor of the Sevastopol;
9. Tugin, worker at the electric factory;
10. Romanenko, manager of the repair yards;
11. Orechine, supervisor of the 3rd school of work;
12. Valk, foreman of the sawmill;
13. Pavlov, worker at the ammunition factory;
14. Baikov, head of the rolling stock of the fortress;
15. Kilgaste, pilot.

The article “Why We Fight” is very characteristic in this regard.

Another article entitled “Stages of the Revolution,” published in the anniversary issue of the 1917 Revolution (March 12), develops this idea that revolutionary Russia went through two successive periods: the one when, during the Provisional Government, it put all its hopes in the Constituent Assembly,¹⁰ and the period of the domination of the communist party.

“The communist party seized power by pushing aside the peasants and workers in whose name it acted... A new communist serfdom was born. The peasant became a mere laborer, the worker a salaried employee of the state factory. Intellectual workers were reduced to zero... The time has come to overthrow the commissarocracy. The vigilant sentinel of the revolution, Kronstadt, did not sleep. She had been in the front row in February and October. She was the first to raise the flag of revolt for the third workers’ revolution... The tsarist autocracy fell. The Constituent Assembly has become a thing of the past. The commissarocracy will fall, too. The time has come for real workers’ power, for soviet power.”

And here is an excerpt from the *Appeal to the World Proletariat*, March 13:

¹⁰ Ed: The Constituent Assembly was an elected body composed of Socialist Revolutionaries, Bolsheviks, and other parties. After elections were held in November 1917 and the Bolsheviks did not achieve a majority, they dissolved the Assembly on January 11, 1918, and shifted the government to one-party rule. Of note, although Kronstadt revolutionaries and their *Izvestia* were early proponents of the Constituent Assembly, they ultimately agreed with the Bolsheviks, stating they would only back the Assembly if it were “so composed as to confirm the achievements of the October revolution.” They would go on to provide armed support for the Soviet government following the Assembly’s dissolution (Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917-21*, 180–183).

“For twelve days, a handful of true heroes, proletarian workers, soldiers of the Red Army and sailors, isolated from the whole world, have taken it upon themselves to endure all the blows of the communist executioners. We will carry to the end the work begun for the liberation of the people oppressed by party fanaticism, or we will die with the cry of ‘Long live the freely elected Soviets!’ Let the proletariat of the whole world know this. Comrades, we need your moral support; protest against the violence of the communist autocrats...”

A fact worth noting. Everything we have said about the character of the Kronstadt movement is confirmed by the Bolsheviks themselves. A Russian Bolshevik newspaper published in Riga, the *Novy Put*, while propagating the fable of reactionary Kronstadt, imprudently publishes, in its March 19 issue, the following lines:

“The Kronstadt sailors are, as a whole, anarchists. They are not to the right, but, on the contrary, to the left of the communists. In their last radio communication they proclaim: ‘Long live the power of the Soviets!’ Not once have they shouted, ‘Long live the Constituent!’ Why did they rise up against the Soviet government? Because they don’t find it Soviet enough! They proclaim the same slogans, half anarchist, half communist, that the Bolsheviks themselves had launched three and a half years ago, in the aftermath of the October revolution.

In their struggle against the Soviet government, the Kronstadt insurgents speak of their deep hatred for the ‘bourgeois,’ for everything that is bourgeois. They say: the Soviet government has become ‘gentrified,’ Zinoviev is ‘exhausted.’¹¹ Here we are dealing with a left-wing rebellion, not a right-wing rebellion.”

The Kronstadt uprising is — at least for the time being — defeated. We do not know what repercussions it will have in Russia, all the while feeling a communion of spirit between it and all those peasant and worker revolts which, during the same period, agitated and still agitate the vast and various corners of Russia. But a certain conclusion emerges for us. Revolutionary Russia is burning the previous stages and setting a new path. It had hardly begun to linger on a purely political emancipation and of the cult of universal suffrage before being immediately confronted with the great social problem. Now, it is the state-centralizing tendency of social democratic movements which is collapsing.

The Soviets, as they take shape in the minds of the masses, represent extreme decentralization and autonomy. There remains the great question, the most difficult, the most serious: that of the organization of production not by the state, but by the producers.

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¹¹ Ed: Grigory Yevseyevich Zinovyev (1883 - 1936) was a Russian revolutionary, Bolshevik, and associate of Vladimir Lenin. At the peak of his career, he was a prominent member of the Communist Party, serving as chairman of the Communist International (Comintern) and of the Petrograd Soviet. Zinovyev worked with Joseph Stalin to prevent Leon Trotsky from taking over once Lenin had died, but was eventually turned on and executed in the Great Purge (The Editors, “Grigory Yevseyevich Zinovyev”).

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