

⁵¹ *HRR*, p. 102.
⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 123.
⁵³ Lionel Kochan, *Russia in Revolution* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1966) p. 186.
⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 187.
⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 188.
⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.
⁶⁰ Liebman, *Leninism*, op. cit., p. 121.
⁶¹ Kochan, op. cit., p. 212.
⁶² *Ibid.*
⁶³ Cliff, *Lenin*, Volume 2, p. 94.
⁶⁴ Lenin, op. cit., 1p. 104.
⁶⁵ Kochan, op. cit., p. 207.
⁶⁶ Quoted in Cliff, Volume 2, pp. 119-120.
⁶⁷ Quoted in Cliff, Volume 2, p. 121.
⁶⁸ Liebman, *Leninism*, op. cit., p. 129.
⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.
⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130.
⁷¹ Quoted in LeBlanc, op. cit., p. 252
⁷² Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 24 (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977), pp. 22-23.
⁷³ Liebman, *Leninism*, op. cit., p. 132.
⁷⁴ *HRR*, p. 337.
⁷⁵ Kochan, op. cit., p. 223.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 229-230. The total number of deserters reached more than 2 million by October 1917.
⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 235.
⁷⁸ Liebman, *Leninism*, op. cit., p. 158.
⁷⁹ Duncan Hallas, "All Power to the Soviets," in *International Socialism* 90, July/August, 1976, London, p. 19.
⁸⁰ Quoted in Tony Cliff, *Lenin*, Volume 2, pp. 290-291.
⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 298.
⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 299.
⁸³ *Ibid.*
⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 304.
⁸⁵ *HRR*, p. 17.
⁸⁶ Liebman, op. cit., p. 201.
⁸⁷ Marc Ferro, *October 1917* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980), p. 2.
⁸⁸ N.K. Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin* (International Publishers, New York 1979), pp. 351-352.
⁸⁹ John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, p. 14-15.
⁹⁰ Cliff, *Lenin*, Volume 2, p. 339.
⁹¹ Tony Cliff, *Lenin: Revolution Besieged*, Volume 3 (Pluto Press, London, 1978), pp.1-2.
⁹² Quoted in LeBlanc, op. cit., p. 282.
⁹³ Trotsky, *My Life*, op.cit., pp. 338-339.
⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 351-352.
⁹⁵ Liebman, op. cit., p. 197.
⁹⁶ Trotsky, *My Life*, op. cit., pp. 348-349.
⁹⁷ Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution," *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (Pathfinder Press, New York, 1980), pp. 394-395.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

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ORIGINALLY TITLED "HUE AND CRY."

Kronstadt and the Defeat of the Russian Revolution

A review of Maurice Brinton's *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1975)
 Paul Avrich's *Kronstadt 1921* (New York: Norton, 1974)

by **CHRIS HARMAN**

The question as to why the Russian Revolution degenerated has long perplexed socialists. Quite naturally, people have been led to ask whether there was any inevitable connection between Bolshevism and Stalinism. Lenin built an organization better at leading a revolutionary workers' movement than any other, before or since. If that organization somehow contained the seeds of present day totalitarianism, then the consequences as regards the present attitudes of socialists must be

immense. Logically it would mean that we could not build an effective organization to fight for workers' power, for fear that this would rapidly turn into its opposite.

Maurice Brinton is convinced that Lenin's method did foreshadow Stalin's. He attempts to show in this pamphlet how in 1918 the Bolsheviks destroyed the mass spontaneous movement of the workers that had previously put them in power. To back up his thesis Brinton produces quotations to show the Bolshevik's supporting workers' control in 1917, and then rapidly reverting to talk of one-man management in 1918.

The argument, in its simplicity, seems attractive. The only trouble is it is wrong.

In 1917, Lenin and the Bolsheviks certainly argued for workers' control. They believed that no force in Russia could overcome the chaos and disruption resulting from three years of war but the mass initiative of the working class. Only this could hold together and develop the productive apparatus on which millions depended for their livelihood.

By 1918 the direct representative of the workers, the Soviets, had taken power, with the Bolsheviks as the majority party in the Soviets. The devastation of industry by this time was enormous. Chaos succeeded chaos; the war with Germany was finally ended with Brest Litovsk, only for the Bolsheviks to suffer casualties from terrorists who wanted the war to go on. Within months the

remnants of the old regime were to launch a full scale civil war, backed by a dozen or more foreign armies. The question now was not just to call for the workers to run the economy, but to actually build the structures through which this could be done. The spontaneous movement of 1917 had produced a whole number of different, cross-cutting, often conflicting, organizational forms by which control was exercised in the factories and the localities—Soviets, factory councils, trade unions, and so on. The problem was to integrate these into a single framework, so that ‘one will,’ reflecting the common interest of all worker, would manage industry. Otherwise there was the danger that each group of workers, running its particular factory, would merely look to its own interests. Bukharin (in *The Programme of World Revolution*, 1919) summed up the problem:

Some of the workers, who are not sufficiently imbued with the class spirit argue as follows: we are here to take our own factory into our own hands and there is the end of the matter.... Such a point of view is wrong.... If a state of affairs came about in which every factory belonged to the workers of only that particular factory, the result would be competition between factories; one factory would try to gain more than another, they would strive to win over each other’s customers: the workers of one factory would be ruined, while the others would prosper; these latter would employ the workers of the ruined factory and in a word, we would have again the old familiar picture...capitalism would soon revive.

What Brinton describes as the struggle of the “Bolsheviks against workers’ control” was in fact a debate between different sections of the Bolshevik Party (and other workers) on how best to develop a coherent national framework. Some sections argued for the factory councils to be coordinated so as to constitute this mechanism. Others argued for the different organizations—factory, councils, industrial unions and Soviets—to be integrated into a single structure for doing the job. The latter were to carry the day.

Unfortunately, the debate as to how the workers were to control industry in Soviet Russia was to be largely academic. Not because of the “elitist” views of the Bolsheviks, but because within a matter of months neither the working class nor the factories were still to exist. The most militant workers rushed off to the front to form the shock troops of the largely peasant army. Shortage of essential raw materials closed down most factories.

The Bolsheviks could not just surrender power because the class that had given it to them had become atomized and decimated. They had somehow to fight on, in the hope that at some time in the future workers’ democracy would revive. Meanwhile they had to hold together the vast area of Russia by building up a new state machine. Unfortunately, without workers, this could not be based on direct workers’ initiative. Instead many of the personnel and methods of the old regime had to be employed as a stopgap measure.

Yet the traditions of revolutionary socialism and of workers’ democracy still played an important role. Russia remained for some years a bridgehead of world revolution.

Although cut off from its living roots in the class, the Soviet democracy did still function. Brinton inadvertently gives facts that belie his own contentions about the “Stalinist” nature of Bolshevism. The five congresses of the Soviets between 1917 and 1920 were not mere rubber

stamps for the the regime, but did involve considerable debate. The trade unions did still enjoy a degree of autonomy as against the party—“only two of the sixty or more Bolshevik trade union leaders supported the militarization of labor.” And in the party the tradition of free discussion between conscious socialist militants still survived, so that, for instance, Trotsky could be “shouted down at conferences of Party members, administrators and trade unionists” in December, 1919.

Over a period of time the functionaries of the party were to be corrupted by the environment in which they found themselves. The gangrene of bureaucracy and authoritarianism was to spread upward through the organs of the regime. However this process can only be understood by locating what happened in the real conditions of civil war and devastation. Brinton has an open disdain for such realities. Instead he distorts the meanings of discussions and conceals facts. For example, one small instance which typifies his whole approach: Brinton quotes as a critic of the Bolshevik line on workers’ control the anarchist Shatov; however, his account deliberately omits to mention that Shatov later joined the Bolsheviks, accepting their discipline as necessary to defend the revolution.

Such distortion means that Brinton’s work is little help to serious revolutionaries trying to come to terms with how the revolution was eventually lost.

Avrich’s book is far more useful. It describes another event often taken to prove the implicit totalitarianism of Bolshevism—the suppression of the Kronstadt revolt. Avrich himself has clear sympathies with the insurgents who seized the fortress commanding the naval approaches to Petrograd in March, 1921. Yet he concludes that “the historian can sympathize with the rebels and still concede that the Bolsheviks were justified in subduing them.”

At the beginning of 1921 Russia had just emerged from Civil War and foreign intervention. Wrangel was just out of Russia—but still had an army of 80,000 or more on its borders. Fighting with the Poles had ended, but no peace treaty was signed.

To the Russian peasants, however, it seemed that the war was over. All the measures they had previously been prepared to tolerate, they now rebelled against. Above all they objected to their grain being taken from them to feed the army (five million strong) and



Red Army soldier falling through the ice during the assault on Kronstadt

the workers of the towns. Yet the towns, with production at less than a fifth of its 1916 level, had nothing to offer the peasants in exchange for crops. Armed force had to be used to force the peasants to give up his produce—but force in turn destroyed the incentive for the peasant to produce at all. Famine grew and with it an overriding sense of hardship and privation. The Bolsheviks were hardly to blame. They were not responsible for the foreign invasion and the consequent despoilation. They did seize the peasants' crops—but they could hardly let the towns starve. But for whole layers of the population the misery of hunger and coldness was just too much to bear any longer. They reasoned that somehow there must be a way to overcome it. The Bolsheviks had not found this way, and must therefore be to blame. In February 1921 alone there were 118 uprisings against the government. The logic was reinforced by an element of truth in talk of corruption and bureaucratization of the Bolshevik Party. Whole layers of the party had already been corrupted. Yet the fact remained that 90 percent of the starvation and poverty was not curable by any amount of governmental change or action.

This is clearly shown by contrasting the programmes of different oppositional tendencies. The peasants rose up against, as they saw it, the parasites of the towns, denouncing "the government and the Jews." They demanded "free trade," which meant, in a situation when the towns were not producing enough value to feed their inhabitants, letting the condition of the workers deteriorate still further.

The Workers' Opposition [*a faction inside the Bolshevik Party—ed.*], on the other hand, although pointing to bureaucratization, complained that the peasants had benefited from the revolution, not the workers.

In Petrograd in February massive strikes took place because of a cut in the bread ration—yet such a cut was necessary, not because the Party members were eating more than their share, but because supplies of grain from the countryside were not coming through.

Kronstadt was composed of 75 percent of former peasants. With the end of the civil war these began to have the chance, for the first time, to visit their families. They would return to the fortress horrified by the poverty and desolation they found in the countryside. Bewilderment spread at the unexpected outcome of the revolution. Even among party members there was enormous difficulty in coming to terms with the harsh realities of an isolated revolution. By February 1921 half of the Bolsheviks in Kronstadt had torn up their party cards. The experience of Petrichenko (who was to be chairman of the uprising's Military Revolutionary Committee) seems to have been typical. He returned for a period to his native village in April 1920 and "had ample time to see the Bolshevik food detachments in action and to build up considerable hostility to the government." Such was his incomprehension at such actions that "he tried to join the Whites only to be turned away as a former Bolshevik." Anything, it seemed was better than the way the villages were being bled by the towns.

Whatever the motives of the insurgent sailors who were to seize Kronstadt on March 1, 1921, one thing was clear. The rebellion threatened the very survival not only of Bolshevik rule, but revolutionary rule of any sort in Russia. Both Bolsheviks and Whites saw that.

Avrich produces documents to show that even a month before the uprising White emigrant organizations were predicting some such incident in the fortress. They prophesied that the insurgents would be forced to turn to them for help—first of all in the way of supplies and foodstuffs. It did not matter that the rebels might proclaim opposition to the old regime—in Russia in 1921 if the towns (and the navy) were not to be fed by robbing the peasants, the only alternative was to turn to foreign

sources for supplies. A rebellion isolated in Kronstadt would have to turn abroad even sooner—given the probability of a Bolshevik blockade of the fortress.

Those who led the revolt did not see the logic of the situation at first. They voted four to one against accepting help immediately from Chernov (chairman of the defunct Constituent Assembly)—but did express "to all our brothers abroad deep gratitude for their sympathy." However, by the thirteenth day of the rebellion Petrichenko was to wire the even more dubious figure of Grimm, representative of the openly counter-revolutionary "Russian Union," for aid.

The Bolshevik leaders understood only too well the harsh logic of the Kronstadt revolt. The whole country was threatened with renewed civil war which could tear the fragile Soviet state asunder and permit renewed opportunities of intervention to the White forces.

It was a threat which grew with every day that the revolt lasted. The scruples of the rebels about making contacts with White emigrants were being eroded by hunger and cold. All that was stopping that contact was the fact that the Baltic was frozen over, and ships could not reach the fortress from abroad. But the ice would melt within a matter of weeks. And this posed an even greater threat to the Bolsheviks. Once the thaw had set in the fortress would be virtually unassailable.

Attempts were made to discuss a peaceful solution to the situation. The Petrograd Soviet asked if "a delegation of both party and non-party workers might visit Kronstadt." The rebels refused the offer. There was only one alternative if the likelihood of a White bridgehead 20 miles from Petrograd was to be avoided.

The Bolsheviks had to prepare for the difficult task of trying to cross the vast expanses of ice to seize the fortress by force. The first attempts were rebuffed at enormous cost to the government troops. "As the troops approached they were met by a murderous barrage of artillery and machine-gun fire from the forts and batteries around the island. Some of the exploding shells cracked open the ice, plunging scores of attackers into a watery grave." However, after drafting in more troops (including delegates from the 10th Party Congress—in the vanguard of which were members of the Workers' Opposition!) the government troops finally succeeded in entering the fortress on March 17. The leaders of the rebellion fled across the ice to Finland (where two months later Petrichenko and some other fellow refugees entered an agreement with General Wrangel to fight together against the Bolsheviks and restore "the gains of the March revolution.")

Those who remained were treated punitively, many being imprisoned or executed as an example to discourage further mutinies or peasant revolts. The treatment of the rebels was certainly harsh. It is also true that the proclamations of Kronstadt (some are reproduced by Avrich) were full of talk about the need for real soviet democracy. This has led many people to see Kronstadt as a precursor of modern revolutions against Stalinism (as in say Hungary in 1956) and the putting down of Kronstadt as clear evidence of the continuity between Bolshevism and Stalinism.

However, the comparison just does not work out. The deprivation against which the Kronstaders rose up was a natural privation, a result of war, civil war and famine; the privation of 1956 (and more recently) was the result of forced accumulation of wealth in order to satisfy the class goals of an entrenched bureaucracy. The rebels of 1921 were unable to produce a program that could have bridged the gap between the workers and the peasants; those of modern Eastern Europe can easily do so. Above all, Russia's Bolsheviks in 1921 were trying to break the stranglehold of world capitalism by spreading the revolution; today's Stalinists have for long been collaborating with capitalism to divide the world.