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KRONSTADT: PROLETARIAN SPIN-OFF OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION*

I

The interpretation of the historical events that more than fifty years ago entered historical chronologies (and were quickly removed from them) as 'the Kronstadt Rebellion of 1921' is inseparably linked to the social position of each interpreter; or, in other words, each interpretation is stamped and conditioned by the author's position vis-à-vis the class struggles occurring in the society.¹

Those who interpret the Russian Revolution of 1917 as a socialist upheaval, who consider the Bolshevik rule established during the Civil War years a proletarian power, must necessarily treat that which took place in that island fortress in the Finnish gulf as a counterrevolutionary attempt to overthrow the new 'workers state'. Those, on the other hand, who regard precisely the action of those in Kronstadt as a revolutionary act will sooner or later arrive at diametrically opposed interpretations of the Russian developments and of the real situation in Russia.

All this appears self-evident. But there is more to it. Bolshevism was not simply a form of economy or state whose existence at that time – not only in Kronstadt, but also in Petrograd, the

Ukraine, and in large parts of Southern Russia – was hanging in the balance; Bolshevism was also a form of organization that matured in the Russian revolutionary struggles and that was tailored for the Russian situation. After the Bolshevik victory in the October Revolution this form of organization was, and is still being, forced onto the workers of all countries by representatives of the most varied political positions.

The uprising of the population of Kronstadt against the Bolsheviks was not only a rejection of Bolshevik claims to power, but also a questioning of the traditional Bolshevik conception of Party and of the Party as such. That is why differences of opinion over organizational problems of the working class all too often include a discussion of Kronstadt, and why every discussion of Kronstadt inevitably discloses differences over the tactics and organizational issues of the proletarian class struggle. This means therefore that the Kronstadt Rebellion still remains, after more than a half-century, a burning issue. However colossal its historical importance, that is overshadowed by its practical importance for today's generations of workers.

Leon Trotsky was one of those who did not understand this significance. In his 1938 essay, 'Hue and Cry over Kronstadt', he groaned: 'One would think that the Kronstadt Rebellion occurred not seventeen years ago, but yesterday'.² Trotsky wrote these words at the same time when he worked day in and day out to expose the Stalinist falsification of history and the Stalinist legends. That he, in his critique of Stalinism, never went beyond the boundary of Leninist revolutionary legends – that is a fact that we can here overlook.

II

The Kronstadt Rebellion destroyed a social myth: the myth that in the Bolshevik state, power lay in the hands of the workers. Because this myth was inseparably linked to the entire Bolshevik ideology (and still is today), because in Kronstadt a modest beginning of a true workers' democracy was made, the Kronstadt Rebellion was a deadly danger for the Bolsheviks in their position of power. Not only the military strength of Kronstadt – that at the time of the rebellion was very much impaired by the frozen gulf – but also the demystifying effect of the rebellion threatened Bolshevik rule – a threat that was even stronger than any that could have been posed by the intervention armies of Denikin, Koltchak, Yudenitch, or Wrangel.

For this reason the Bolshevik leaders were from their own perspective – or better, as a consequence of their social position (which naturally influenced their perspective) – forced to destroy the Kronstadt Rebellion without hesitation.³ While the rebels were – as Trotsky had threatened – being 'shot like pheasants', the Bolshevik leadership characterized the Rebellion in their own press as a counterrevolution. Since that time this swindle has been zealously promoted and stubbornly maintained by Trotskyists and Stalinists.

The circumstance that Kronstadt gained open sympathy from both Menshevik and white-guard circles reinforced the Trotskyist and Stalinist versions.⁴ A sorrier justification of the official legend is hardly possible. Had Trotsky not himself disdainfully and correctly expressed his views in his *History of the Russian Revolution* about the political positions and social analyses of Professor Miliukov, the reactionary sympathiser with the Kronstadt

Rebellion? Just because Miliukov and the entire white-guard press sympathised with Kronstadt – was the Kronstadt Rebellion for this reason counterrevolutionary? How then, according to this notion, should the New Economic Policy, implemented shortly after Kronstadt, be evaluated? The bourgeois Ustrialov openly gave his blessing to the new policy! But that did not at all cause the Bolsheviks to denounce the NEP as ‘counterrevolutionary’. This fact is also symptomatic of the entire demagogic manner of fabricating legends. We will turn our attention away from this last issue. It is naturally of interest, not least because of the social function of legends which, however, can only be understood on the basis of the actual course of events, of the process of social development, and of the social character of the Russian upheaval.

III

The Kronstadt Rebellion of 1921 was the dramatic high-point of a revolution whose social content must in shorthand be defined as *bourgeois*.

The Rebellion was the *proletarian spin-off* of this *bourgeois* revolution, just as, in almost identical circumstances, the May events in Catalonia in 1937 represented the proletarian spin-off of the Spanish Revolution, or Babeuf’s conspiracy of 1796 was the proletarian tendency in the great French Revolution.⁵ The same causes are responsible for the fact that all three ended in defeat. In each case the conditions and prerequisites for a proletarian victory were lacking. Czarist Russia participated in the first world war as an underdeveloped country. Out of military and political need it had begun to industrialize and it took therewith the first

step on the capitalist path; but the proletariat that emerged in this context was numerically too small in relation to the huge mass of Russian peasants.

Certainly the political climate of czarist absolutism had resulted in a extraordinary increase in the militant spirit of the Russian workers. That enabled them to put a certain imprint on the developing revolution, but not enough decisively to influence its course. Despite the existence of the Putilov Works, the oil facilities in the Caucasus, the coal mines in the Donetz region, and the textile factories in Moscow, agriculture was the essential economic base of Russian society. Though a kind of emancipation of the peasantry occurred in 1861, the remnants of serfdom had by no means disappeared. The relations of production were feudal and the political superstructure corresponded: nobles and clergy were the ruling classes that – with the help of the army, the police, and the bureaucracy – exercised their power in the gigantic empire of large landholdings. Consequently, the Russian Revolution of the twentieth century confronted the economic task of abolishing feudalism and all of its components – serfdom, for example. It needed to industrialize agriculture and subject it to the conditions of modern commodity production; and it had to break all feudal chains on existing industry.

Politically, this revolution had the task of destroying absolutism, abolishing the privileges accorded the feudal nobles, and developing a form of government and the state machinery that could politically guarantee the solution of the revolution's economic goals. It is clear that these economic and political tasks corresponded to those which in the West had to be fulfilled by the revolutions of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth Centuries.⁶ However, the Russian Revolution – similar to the

later Chinese Revolution – had a peculiar characteristic. In Western Europe, above all in France, the bourgeoisie was the bearer of social progress, the preliminary proponent of the upheaval. In the East, and for the above-mentioned reason, the bourgeoisie was weak. And for this reason its interests were closely connected to those of czarism. That is, the *bourgeois* revolution in Russia had to be accomplished without, and moreover, against, the bourgeoisie.

IV

Lenin recognized exactly this peculiarity of the Russian Revolution. ‘The Marxists’, he wrote, ‘are thoroughly convinced about the bourgeois character of the Russian Revolution. What does that mean? That means that those democratic transformations of the political order and those socio-economic transformations, that are necessary for Russia alone, do not amount to the burial of capitalism, nor the burial of the rule of the bourgeoisie; rather they for the first time prepare the ground for a broad and rapid development of capitalism...’⁷ In another passage he wrote: ‘The victory of the bourgeois revolution in Russia is impossible [as] a bourgeois victory. That seems paradoxical. But so it is. The majority peasant population, the strength and consciousness of the proletariat that is already organized in the Socialist Party – all these circumstances lend a unique character to our bourgeois revolution. This uniqueness however does not eliminate the bourgeois character of the revolution’.⁸

One comment however must be added here: the party of which Lenin speaks was neither socialist, nor could one claim that the

proletariat was organized in it. It is of course true that it should be differentiated in several ways from the social-democratic parties of the West which played the role of the loyal opposition on the bourgeois parliamentary playing field, and which tried with all possible means to prevent the transformation of the capitalist into a socialist society. But Lenin's party did not differ from its Western counterparts in a socialist sense.

Lenin's party in Russia strove for the revolutionary transformation of social relations; but as Lenin himself admitted, it was a matter of a revolution that in a different form had long since been accomplished in the West. This fact did not remain without consequences for Russian Social Democracy in general and the Bolshevik Party in particular.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks were of the opinion that because of the class relations in Russia, their own party would inherit the role of Jacobins. Not without reason did Lenin define the social-democrat as 'a Jacobin in alliance with the masses'; not without reason did he create his party as a committee of professional revolutionaries; not without reason did he argue in *What is to be Done?* that their main task was the struggle against spontaneity.

When Rosa Luxemburg criticized this conception at the beginning of the twentieth century, she was correct, but also incorrect. She was correct in that Lenin's conspiratorial organization had nothing to do with the natural organizational forms of the militant workers, that is, those that are predicated on capitalist relations and that grow out of class antagonism.

What she overlooked, however, is that in Russia such a proletarian struggle was present in a very small measure, if at all.

In Russia where the abolition of capitalist production relations and wage labour was not even on the horizon, it was a matter of a different struggle.

For this struggle the Bolshevik party was perfectly suited. It completely fulfilled the needs of the imminent revolution. That the organizational form of this party – the so-called democratic centralism – would end with the dictatorship of the central committee over the mass of the members (as Rosa Luxemburg had predicted) proved to be completely correct; and precisely that was required for that ‘bourgeois revolution with its *unique* character’.

V

The Bolshevik Party derived its intellectual weapons from Marxism which at that time was the only radical theory that it could latch onto. Marxism, however, was the theoretical expression of a highly developed class struggle of a kind that was foreign to Russia; and it was a theory whose proper understanding was lacking in Russia. Thus it happened that the development of ‘Marxism’ in Russia had only the name in common with Marxism, and was actually much closer to the Jacobin radicalism of, for example, Auguste Blanqui than to the ideas of Marx and Engels. Lenin, and Plekhanov too, shared with Blanqui a *naturalistic* conception of materialism [*naturwissenschaftlicher* Materialismus] that on the eve of the revolution in France was the main weapon in the struggle against the nobility and religion, and that was very distant from dialectical materialism.

In Russia the situation was similar to that of pre-revolutionary France. Marxism, as Lenin understood it – and as he had to understand it – made it possible for him to gain deep insight into the essential problems of the Russian Revolution. That same

Marxism provided the Bolshevik Party with a conceptual apparatus that stood in the most blatant contradiction to its own tasks and also to its practice. This meant, as Preobrazhenski publicly acknowledged during a regional conference in 1925, that Marxism in Russia had become a mere *ideology*.

Naturally the revolutionary praxis of the Russian working class – to the extent that there was one – was not in harmony with the praxis of the Bolshevik Party that represented the interests of the bourgeois revolution in Russia as a whole. When the Russian workers rose up in 1917, they went, in accordance with their class nature, far beyond the limits of bourgeois upheaval. They attempted to determine their own lot and, with the help of the workers' councils, to realize their own self-determined forms of organization as producers.

The Party that was 'always right' and that was supposed to show the working class the proper path – since as the leaders insisted, the proletariat could not find it on its own – limped behind. The Party was forced to recognize the fact of the workers' councils just as it was forced to acknowledge the existence of a massive peasantry. Neither the worker councils nor the large peasantry fitted in with its doctrine which reflected all previous experiences of revolution where conditions had been underdeveloped. In Russia the revolutionary praxis on the part of either the workers or the peasants could not be sustained for long. The material conditions for such sustained revolutionary praxis did not exist.

VI

What happened was the following: capitalism (hardly developed) was not toppled. Wage labour remained, which Marx, as it is well known, insisted is predicated on capital, as conversely capital is predicated on wage labour.

The Russian workers did not obtain control over the means of production; that control fell rather to the Party (or the state). The Russian workers accordingly remained producers of surplus value. Neither the fact that the surplus value was not expropriated by a class of private capitalists, but by the state, or by the Party elements in control of the state, nor the fact that economic development in Russia – because of the absence of a bourgeois class – took another course than that of the West, changed anything for the position of the Russian worker as object of exploitation or wage slave. One cannot speak of the exercise of power by the working class. The czarist state was indeed broken, but the power of the workers' councils did not take its place. The councils that were spontaneously formed by Russian workers were stripped of their power as quickly as possible by the Bolshevik government, that is, already in the early summer of 1918, and they were condemned to complete insignificance. In place of the previous serfdom or quasi-feudal servitude, the economic basis of the country now assumed the form of economic slavery of the kind about which Trotsky wrote in 1917 that it was 'incompatible with the political sovereignty of the proletariat'. This thesis was correct; the Bolsheviks, however, – after they had wrongly proclaimed that *their* rule was that of the working class – helped themselves to political power, ostensibly in order to overcome the oppression of the Russian proletariat. But because of the lack of real worker power, Bolshevik political rule developed not into an instrument of emancipation, but into an instrument of suppression. In Bolshevik Russia, between the

outbreak of the February Revolution and the forceful elimination of Kronstadt and the introduction of the new economic policy, the situation was similar to that of the February Revolution of 1848 in France. Marx commented on this revolution as follows: 'In France the petit bourgeois does what normally would have to be done by the industrial bourgeoisie, the worker does, what normally would be the duty of the petit bourgeois. And the task of the worker, who resolves that? This obligation is not discharged in France; it is merely proclaimed in France'. In Russia, this obligation continued to be proclaimed. However, with the Kronstadt uprising, the revolutionary process – of which October was only a staging ground – had come to an end. Kronstadt was the revolutionary moment where the pendulum swings of the revolution swung the furthest to the left.

In the previous four fateful years a profound schism had been revealed between, on the one hand, the Bolshevik party and the Bolshevik government, and, on the other, the Russian working class. This became ever more apparent the more the opposition between this government and the peasants revealed itself. In addition there was the contradiction between workers and peasants, which was hushed up under the cover of the so-called *Smytschka*, that is, the class alliance between the two. From our perspective the contradiction between peasants and the Bolshevik government can be left aside. We only mention it in passing because the manifold contradictions between workers, Bolshevik government, and peasants, explains the necessity of party dictatorship.

VII

In the time-span, then, between the eruption of the revolution and the events of 1921, the Russian working class was engaged in a constant struggle. In the course of 1917, this struggle progressed much further than the Bolsheviks intended. In 1917, between March and the end of September, there had been 365 strikes, 38 factory occupations and 111 dismissals of company managers.⁹ The Bolshevik motto 'control of production by the workers' was, in these conditions, condemned to fail.

The workers expropriated the means of production on their own initiative, until, that is, the decree of workers' control that was issued on the 14th of November 1917, only one week after the Bolshevik seizure of power (!), put the brakes on these activities. After May 1918, 'nationalizations' could only be undertaken by the central economic council. Shortly before, in April 1918, the individual responsibility of company managers had been re-introduced; they no longer had to justify their decisions to 'their' workers.

The factory councils had been liquidated in January 1918. Soon afterwards, once the so-called war-communism had been surmounted, the economic laws of a commodity producing society made themselves felt.

Lenin lamented: 'The steering wheel slips out of the hands...the wagon does not drive properly, and frequently not at all in the way that the one who sits at the wheel imagines'. A Russian union newspaper reported that there were 477 strikes in 1921 with a total of 184,000 participants. Some other numbers: 505 strikes with 154,000 participants in 1922; 267 strikes in 1924, 151 of

which were in state-run factories; 199 strikes in 1925, 99 of which were in state factories.¹⁰

The numbers show a slow decline in workers' protests. The movement reached its high-point in 1921 with the Kronstadt Rebellion. On 24 February 1921 the Petrograd workers went out on strike. They demanded: freedom for all workers; abolition of the special decrees; free elections for the councils. These were the same demands that were raised a few days later in Kronstadt. A general discontent gripped the country. At the turn of the year 1920-21, Bolshevik Russia was the stage of a deep antagonism.

This immediately gave rise to the 'worker opposition' that was led by two former metal workers. This opposition demanded the exclusion of the Bolshevik Party, abolition of the Party dictatorship, and its replacement by the self-government of the producing masses. In a word, the opposition demanded council democracy and communism!

Shortly thereafter, the above-mentioned Kronstadt document characterized the general situation in Russia just as briefly as it did accurately: 'Through cunning propaganda the sons of working people were pulled into the party and subjected to a rigid discipline. When the communists felt that they were strong enough, they excluded step by step socialists of other stripes, and finally they shoved the workers and peasants themselves away from the rudder of the ship of state, yet they continued to rule the country in their names'.¹¹ Strong protests broke out in Petrograd in 1921. Proletarian demonstrators marched through the outlying areas of the city. The Red Army received the command to break up these demonstrations. The soldiers refused to shoot at the workers. The word was: general strike! On February 27, the general strike was a fact. On the 28th reliable troops devoted to the government were mobilized in Petrograd.

The strike leaders were arrested; the workers were driven into factories. The resistance was broken. Nevertheless, on the same day the sailors of the battleship *Petropavlovsk*, riding at anchor near Kronstadt, demanded free elections for the workers' councils and freedom of press and association – for the workers. The crew of the battleship *Sebastopol* joined in those demands. On the next day 16,000 people gathered in the Kronstadt harbor to declare their solidarity with the Petrograd strikers.

VIII

The significance of the Kronstadt Rebellion can hardly be overestimated. It is like a beacon light. The rebels wrote in their newspaper: 'What are we fighting for? The working class had hoped to win its freedom in the October Revolution. But the result is a still greater oppression. The Bolshevik government has exchanged the famous symbol of the workers' state – the hammer and sickle – for the bayonet and prison bars in order to protect a comfortable life for the commissars and bureaucrats'. This all means that in Kronstadt the moment of truth had arrived for Bolshevik rule, just as in 1848 the June Days of the French proletariat was the moment of truth for the radical French republic. Here as there the burial site of the proletariat was made into the birthplace of capitalism. In France the proletariat had forced the bourgeois republic to show its true colors as the state whose acknowledged purpose was the perpetuation of the rule of capital. Likewise in Kronstadt the sailors and workers forced the Bolshevik Party to show its true colors as an institution that was openly hostile to workers and whose single purpose was the

establishment of state capitalism. With the defeat of the rebellion, the path to that purpose had been cleared.

In the streets of Paris General Cavaignac drowned proletarian hopes in blood. The Kronstadt Rebellion was beaten down by Leon Trotsky. In March 1921 Trotsky became the Cavaignac, the Gustav Noske of the Russian Revolution. As befitting the irony of history, Trotsky, the most famous and most respected representative of the theory of permanent revolution, prevented the most serious attempt since October 1917 to make the revolution permanent.

This course, however, was unavoidable. The material prerequisites for proletarian victory in Kronstadt were lacking. The only thing that could have helped them was precisely that permanence of the revolution that we have mentioned. The Kronstadt workers themselves knew and understood this. For that reason they continually sent telegrams to their comrades on the Russian mainland asking for active support.

The Kronstadt workers pinned their hopes on 'the third revolution', just as thousands of Russian proletarians hoped for that third revolution in Kronstadt. But that which was called 'the third revolution' was in the agrarian Russia of that time, with its relatively small working class and its primitive economy, nothing but an illusion. 'In Kronstadt', Lenin said at a time when the construction of the Kronstadt legend had hardly begun, 'they don't want the power of the white guards, they don't want our power. But there is no other power'.¹²

Lenin was right to the degree that at that moment there was no other choice, at least not in Russia. But the Kronstadt workers, like the German workers, had shown the *possibility* of another form of power. With their commune and with their freely elected

councils, *the workers*, not the Bolsheviks, provided the prototype of a proletarian revolution and workers' power.

One should not be disturbed by the battle cry 'councils without communists'. 'Communists' is what those usurpers, those Bolshevik champions of state capitalism who suppressed the strike of the Petrograd workers, called themselves and what they still – and incorrectly – call themselves. The name 'communist' was hated by the Kronstadt workers in 1921, by the East German workers in 1953 and the Hungarian workers in 1956. The Kronstadt workers, however, just like those others, took their class interests to heart. Accordingly, their proletarian methods of struggle are still today of utmost importance for all of the class comrades who – wherever they may be – carry on their own struggle and have learned from experience that their emancipation must be their own work.

NOTES

* Translated from German by Joseph Fracchia.

¹Cajo Brendel's essay was originally given as a speech at the Technical University of Berlin in 1971, on the 50th anniversary of Kronstadt. See the original text: Cajo Brendel: „Kronstadt: Proletarischer Ausläufer der Russischen Revolution“. <http://www.members.partisan.net/brendel/crnstadt.html>

In: **Agnoli, Johannes; Brendel, Cajo; Mett, Ida**: *Die revolutionären Aktionen der russischen Arbeiter und Bauern: Die Kommune von Kronstadt*, Berlin: Karin Kramer Verlag, Berlin 1974. 94 pages.

² Trotsky's essay appeared in English with the title 'Hue and Cry over Kronstadt. A People's Front of Denouncers', in *The New International*, April 1938, p. 104. I retranslated the title from the

Dutch Trotskyist press in which the essay was republished shortly after its initial publication in English.

³Trotsky also speaks of this need in his biography of Stalin. There he says '[t]hat which the Soviet government did against its will in Kronstadt was a tragic necessity'. Nevertheless, already in the next sentence, and in keeping with the legend, he speaks again of 'a handful of reactionary peasants and rebellious soldiers'. (English edition: *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*, edited and annotated from the Russian by Charles Malamuth, London, 1947, p. 337).

⁴In certain Menshevik and white-guard circles, that is, not in all of them. It has been suggested that these were primarily those who found themselves outside of Russia at the time. In a contemporary document it is mentioned how the defeated remnants of the white guard who found themselves still in Russia recognized with such an unerring instinct the proletarian threat emerging in Kronstadt that they unconditionally volunteered their services to the Bolshevik leaders to help quell the rebellion. 'Die Wahrheit über Kronstadt', 1921. Complete reprinting of this work in German translation in *Dokumente der Weltrevolution*, vol. 2, *Arbeiterdemokratie oder Parteidiktatur*, Olten, 1967, p. 297ff.

⁵These examples could be endlessly multiplied. One might compare this with the movement of the Levellers in the English Revolution of the seventeenth century.

⁶Compare the social character of the Russian Revolution in 1917 in 'Thesen über den Bolschewismus', first published in *Rätekorrespondenz*, no. 3, August 1934; Reprint in Kollektiv-Verlag, Berlin, n.d.

⁷V. I. Lenin, 'Zwei Taktike der Sozialdemokratie in der demokratischen Revolution', in *Ausgewählte Werke*, vol. 1, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1964, p. 558.

⁸This is an indirect citation of Lenin from the essay by N. Insarov, that was published in September 1926 in the journal *Proletarii*. Insarov used the Russian edition of Lenin's Complete Works that was published by the Russian State Publishing House. The passage is to be found there in vol. 11, Part I, p. 28.

⁹ These figures were taken from F. Pollock (*Die planwirtschaftlichen Versuche in der Sowjetunion 1917-1927*, Leipzig, 1929, p. 25) and from the work of Y. G. Kotelnikov and V. L. Melier, *Die Bauernbewegung 1917* (which also contains facts concerning strikes and workers' political actions).

¹⁰ The statistics about the strikes and strikers are provided by the Russian union newspaper *Voprosy Truda*, 1924, no. 7/8. The editors note that the numbers are not at all complete. We cite once again Pollock, op. cit. In the (historical) first part of her book, *Labour Disputes in Soviet Russia, 1957-1965* (Oxford, 1969, p. 15), Mary McAuley also provides information about the number of strikes in Russia in the first years after the revolution. She bases her information on Revzin in *Vestnik Truda*, 1924, no. 5-6, pp. 154-160. These numbers are in agreement with Pollock's.

¹¹'Die Wahrheit über Kronstadt 1921', *Dokumente der Weltrevolution*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 288.

¹² *Dokumente der Weltrevolution*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 288.