

# A letter and reply on the Kronstadt rebellion

16 September 1998

To the editor:

Though I am admittedly a layman regarding knowledge of the history of the Russian Revolution, I am curious as to the stance of the Fourth International concerning genuine working class resistance to the course the Revolution was taking. Especially, I am curious as to the official stance regarding the Kronstadt Rebellion. As I have read them, the resolutions of the Kronstadt rebels in no way violated socialist doctrine. They appear to me to be aimed more towards establishing worker and peasant control of resources, products of their labor, etc., than the contemporary Bolshevik program was. However, they were brutally suppressed, with the full authorization of Lenin and Trotsky, who called for unconditional surrender or else the rebels would be slaughtered "like partridges."

Also, I have read that control of factories by the workers' councils was, according to Lenin, to be subordinated to State control, which seems a betrayal of the most basic of socialist ideals. I have also read of Trotsky's saying that the Party must be subject to "vigilant control from above," a call for hierarchical authority which sounds quite similar to normal policies in capitalist nations. I admit, my reading has unfortunately been limited on this score, so these instances may be taken out of context. However, it seems as though early Bolshevik thought established the root of authoritarianism from which Stalinism was later to grow, a root whose very nature I have always assumed socialism seeks to destroy.

Thank you for your time and response, if it is possible.

(Note: Obviously, I do not place the opposition to the Revolution by the Whites nor the Allied intervention in the region surrounded Archangel in the same category as genuine, left opposition. The motives of aristocrats, monarchists, capitalist elites, landed gentry, and imperialists are self-evident in their corruption and power lust.)

BK

Dear reader,

Your letter asking about the Trotskyist analysis of the Kronstadt revolt raises very important issues. In contrasting the Russian Revolution with the bureaucratic regime which collapsed in 1991, we base ourselves on an analysis of what happened to the 1917 Revolution: how a revolutionary regime became a counterrevolutionary one, indeed the most crucial support for world capitalism.

There are those who state, as you apparently do, that the working class never took power in Russia in 1917. There are also those who claim that a workers revolution did take place, but that events such as the suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion in 1921 mean that the working class had lost power. We do not agree with either of these interpretations.

Without an understanding of the historic significance of the Russian Revolution any effort to explain the events of 1921, when the fate of this first attempt to build socialism was at stake, is impossible.

October 1917 represented the first successful taking of power by the

working class. World capitalism broke initially at its weakest link, however, and the revolutionary government was faced with enormous obstacles in taking even the first steps towards socialism. The immediate fate of the Revolution hung in the balance for three years, during a civil war in which the counterrevolutionary armies were aided everywhere by all of the major as well as some of the minor imperialist powers. It goes without saying that the Bolsheviks were forced to take the harshest measures to defend the revolution.

The Kronstadt rebellion came soon after the successful conclusion of the Civil War. In March 1921, the sailors of the naval base near Petrograd (later Leningrad and now St. Petersburg) mutinied against the Soviet regime, opposing many of the measures necessitated by the Civil War.

The Kronstadt sailors had been among the most reliable supporters of the October Revolution, but in the intervening years many of the experienced revolutionary leaders and fighters had either perished or had been withdrawn from the armed forces to staff posts in the government, the economy and the party. Their place had been taken by newer recruits, drawn from the peasantry, which had suffered greatly from the war and the tremendous economic disruptions and sacrifices it brought with it.

As Trotsky later explained, the Kronstadt revolt also "attracted into its ranks no small number of Bolsheviks," confused and demoralized by events. A similar crisis erupted in the Ukraine, as Trotsky commented, "in the case of Makhno and other potentially revolutionary elements that were perhaps well-meaning but definitely ill-acting."

Trotsky always maintained that the suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion was a tragic necessity. The alternative was, he maintained, surrender of the October Revolution because, as he put it, "a few dubious Anarchists and SRs [the peasant-based Social Revolutionaries] were sponsoring a handful of reactionary peasants and soldiers in rebellion."

The Kronstadt rebellion had no program for the defense and extension of the revolution internationally. To the extent that the sailors' grievances were justified and understandable, who was to blame for them? The country had been bled dry by the Civil War and imperialist intervention. The revolution was fighting for its life, above all basing itself on the prospect of aid from the working class in the advanced capitalist nations of the West. The enemies of the revolution were aiming to use the disillusionment reflected at Kronstadt to restore capitalist rule in Russia, bringing with it the most bloody reprisals against the working class.

The Bolsheviks drew immediate lessons from this painful episode. They recognized in the rebellion a sign of growing and explosive contradictions within the revolution, principally between the working class and the far more numerous peasantry. The New Economic Policy, adopted during this period, was an effort to repair relations with the peasantry. The period of "War Communism," in which

economic life was completely subordinated to the needs of the civil war, gave way to the partial reintroduction of the market, which inevitably brought with it new problems of its own.

During this entire period the workers state remained isolated. The measures forced upon the Bolsheviks contained within them grave dangers to the revolution. Lenin's political battle as he struggled with mortal illness in the months before his death demonstrates that he was well aware of this. The revolution was fighting to survive, but meanwhile bureaucratism was growing within the party and state apparatus, and the Soviet bureaucracy would eventually strangle the Bolshevik Party and the revolution.

Revolutionary leaderships are not infallible. Some of the Bolsheviks' measures, such as the banning of party factions in March 1921, a step which Trotsky also defended as a temporary necessity, also contained within them serious dangers for party democracy. The fact remains that the revolutionary government faced tremendous odds as it fought to hold out against world reaction. As the isolation of the Soviet state continued, the bureaucracy made use of the ban on factions to consolidate its grip on the party. Stalinism then turned its fire first and foremost against the most dedicated fighters for socialism. In the next 15 years this was to culminate in the counterrevolutionary bloodbath of the Moscow Trials and the Great Purges of the late 1930s, in which hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries paid with their lives for their devotion to the cause of international socialism.

It is possible that a different tactical course could have avoided the bloody confrontation at Kronstadt, and that the ban on factions, temporary at first, increased the dangers to the revolution by strengthening bureaucratic tendencies. There is, however, a world of political and moral difference between the revolutionary violence and measures of self-preservation forced upon the Bolsheviks and the counterrevolutionary course of the Stalinists.

The issue of Kronstadt is bound up with other historic questions as well, principally the role of anarchism. Your interpretation of Kronstadt flows very much from your anarchist conceptions. Trotsky wrote quite powerfully on the relationship between socialism and anarchism. Allow me to quote at some length from his article, "Stalinism and Bolshevism," written in 1937. In the course of answering those who equated Stalinism with the October Revolution and its Bolshevik leadership, Trotsky discussed the question of socialism and its relationship to state power. He showed that it was definite economic and political conditions, and not simply the state as an abstract evil, which led to the growth of Stalinism.

"The anarchists, for their part, try to see in Stalinism the organic product not only of Bolshevism and Marxism, but of 'State Socialism' in general. They are willing to replace Bakunin's patriarchal 'federation of free communes' by the more modern federation of free Soviets. But, as formerly, they are against centralized state power. Indeed, one branch of 'state' Marxism, social democracy, after coming to power became an open agent of capitalism. The other gave birth to a new privileged caste. It is obvious that the source of the evil lies in the state. From a wide historical viewpoint, there is a grain of truth in this reasoning. The state as an apparatus of coercion is an undoubted source of political and moral infection. This also applies, as experience has shown, to the workers' state. Consequently it can be said that Stalinism is a product of a condition of society in which society was still unable to tear itself out of the strait-jacket of the state. But this position, contributing nothing for the evaluation of Bolshevism or Marxism, characterizes only the general cultural level

of mankind, and above all--the relation of forces between proletariat and bourgeoisie. Having agreed with the anarchists that the State, even the workers' state, is the offspring of class barbarism and that real human history will begin with the abolition of the State, we have still before us in full force the question: what ways and methods will lead, ultimately, to the abolition of the State?...

"Marxists are wholly in agreement with the anarchists in regard to the final goal: the liquidation of the state. Marxists are 'state-ist' only to the extent that one cannot achieve the liquidation of the state simply by ignoring it. The experience of Stalinism does not refute the teaching of Marxism but confirms it by inversion. The revolutionary doctrine which teaches the proletariat to orientate itself correctly in situations and to profit actively by them, contains of course no automatic guarantee of victory. But victory is possible only through the application of this doctrine. Moreover, the victory must not be thought of as a single event. It must be considered in the perspective of a historic epoch. The workers' state--on a lower economic basis and surrounded by imperialism--was transformed into the gendarmerie of Stalinism....

"To deduce Stalinism from Bolshevism or from Marxism is the same as to deduce, in a larger sense, counter-revolution from revolution. Liberal-conservative and later reformist thinking has always been characterized by this cliché. Due to the class structure of society, revolutions have always produced counter-revolutions. Does this not indicate, asks the logician, that there is some inner flaw in the revolutionary method? However, neither the liberals nor the reformists have succeeded, as yet, in inventing a more 'economic method.'"

The world has changed enormously in the 80 years since October 1917 and the 60 years since Trotsky wrote these words. The fundamental historic prognosis, however, remains absolutely appropriate. I would urge all of the readers of the *WSWS* to study this vital article, as well as other basic works of Trotsky, including *The Revolution Betrayed*, *The New Course*, *Lessons of October* and the *Third International After Lenin*.

Stalinism succeeded, after more than six decades, in burying the October Revolution, but the spokesmen and apologists for capitalism have little to celebrate, in post-Stalinist Russia or elsewhere. "Neither liberals nor reformists have succeeded ... in inventing a more 'economic method.'" Anarchist prejudices and schemas for the overnight abolition of the state, or simply ignoring its role, are also, we might add, no more able to point the way forward than they were in the years immediately after 1917. We cannot ignore the state, but must rather fight, as part of an internationally united working class, to create the conditions of social equality and the cultural development of humanity which will lead to the disappearance of the state and state coercion forever.

Sincerely,

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For the Socialist Equality Party

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