

## Pride and glory of the Russian revolution?

Power and democracy were the fundamental questions which bedevilled Russia in the 1917 revolution, as they have ever since. The Kronstadters' attempt to solve them produced a bustling, self-governing, egalitarian and highly politicized Soviet democracy, the like of which had not been seen in Europe since the days of the Paris Commune.

Yet, not surprisingly, in the debate on and struggle for power which convulsed the Russian revolution, it was the Kronstadt Soviet's *power* that caught universal attention, notably that of Trotsky, Tseretelli and Lenin. But it was symptomatic of the revolution's tragedy that Kronstadt's singular and innovating achievement of Soviet *democracy* went largely ignored.

The despatch with which the spontaneously elected Committee of the Movement put down the savage outburst of class hatred and revenge was truly impressive. More impressive still was the speed, prudence and skill with which its successor, the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, channelled the Kronstadters' revolutionary energies and egalitarian aspirations into the creation of a vast network of base assemblies, committees and trade unions, and, with their backing, established itself as an effective local authority. The Soviet's success in filling both the power vacuum created by the collapse and elimination of the Viren regime, and the institutional and cultural wasteland which it inherited, is more than remarkable. For, apart from some philanthropic, military-sporting and cultural-religious organizations, including no less than five societies for the struggle against alcoholism, chaired by Viren himself, his wife, some grey official, retired officer or priest,<sup>1</sup> there were no social, cultural or political clubs or trade unions to provide the creative setting for a local democratic intelligentsia in Kronstadt.<sup>2</sup> The town Duma,

consisting largely of ennobled citizens, merchants, a few retired officials and a minority of petty bourgeois and others listed as 'peasants', was blatantly unrepresentative.<sup>3</sup> Small wonder that it was 'half paralysed' when the revolution struck, and in a 'depressed state' thereafter.<sup>4</sup>

Had it not been for some socialist activists, mainly instructors and petty-officers, a few socialist students and professionals, and the revolutionary socialist ideology which, despite Viren's tight *cordon sanitaire*, had reached the deeply disaffected garrison and the town's workers, the Kronstadt revolution could easily have degenerated into a drunken orgy and pogrom, more ferocious and destructive than that of October 1905, because so much more frustration, humiliation and deep class hatred had since accumulated. Indeed, many officers, gendarmes, police spies and officials owed their lives to their incarceration by order of the Committee of the Movement and to the constant vigilance of the Executive Committee of the Soviet thereafter.

It is against the background of the penny-pinching Viren regime, with all its social and cultural poverty,<sup>5</sup> its cruelty and sterility, that the creative achievement and civilizing promise of Kronstadt's February revolution must be viewed and assessed.

Did the 'model revolutionary order' of which Kronstadt's sailors, soldiers and industrial workers felt so proud really work? Most observers, including former provisional government commissars Pepeliaev and Parchevsky, seem agreed that in public order, personal safety, cleanliness, good repair and regular provisioning, Kronstadt was in much better shape than Petrograd. Pepeliaev's report to the committee of the state Duma on 27 May 1917 did, it is true, dismiss as 'naive' the Kronstadters' boast of having 'raised the defence capacity of the fortress'. He sneered at the proliferation of 'bureaucracy' under which 'trifling matters', earlier dealt with by unit commanders, were instead brought to the unit committee and then passed on to the Executive Committee of the Soviet for decision. But even Pepeliaev admitted that the fortress had not deteriorated.<sup>6</sup> Sympathetic observers, such as Nikolai Rostov and Philips Price, were deeply impressed with the dignity and business-like seriousness of the well-attended Soviet plenum debates. Fact-finding delegations from the Helsingfors Soviet, inspecting the plants and workshops of Reval and Kronstadt early in April 1917, reported – somewhat sanguinely – that in Kronstadt (as contrasted with Reval)

‘productivity of labour had almost doubled compared with before the revolution’ in the torpedo workshops, the electro-mechanical plant and other factories they had visited. And in June, Price, describing the factory committees and dock unions running Kronstadt’s foundries and dockyards under the close control of the Soviet’s operational commissions, concluded that they had reached a ‘high state of efficiency’.<sup>7</sup>

As for the workings of Kronstadt’s ‘people’s courts’ and its Investigation Commission, information, and that sharply contrasting, has only been available to me for the latter. While Parchevsky remembered its proceedings as a travesty of justice, Evgenii Trupp, a member of the Commission, reported (*sic!*) its work to the *Delo naroda* as ‘a daring experiment in the creation of revolutionary forms of justice’.<sup>8</sup> Still, it was only thanks to the Investigation Commission and its work that, by the end of June 1917 and despite very trying circumstances, most officers had either been acquitted and freed, or transferred to the Ministry of Justice in Petrograd to serve their sentences.<sup>9</sup>

But it was in its commune-like self-government that Red Kronstadt really came into its own, realizing the radical, democratic and egalitarian aspirations of its garrison and working people, their insatiable appetite for social recognition, political activity and public debate, their pent-up yearning for education, integration and community. Almost overnight, the ships’ crews, the naval and military units and the workers created and practised a direct democracy of base assemblies and committees. Raised on them was the representative democracy of the Soviet, its Executive Committee and commissions. The elective principle was applied to all public offices. The office holders’ accountability to their constituents was strengthened by the latter’s right of instant recall and by the quarterly elections. The electorate was kept fully informed by Kronstadt’s *Izvestiia* which published verbatim the proceedings of the Soviet and a register of votes cast there on crucial issues. Wage differentials were reduced to a minimum and all epaulettes and insignia of rank were abolished. A new-born and vigorous political and social culture of socialist parties, clubs and *landsmannschaften*, newspapers, lecture courses, public addresses, Anchor Square mass meetings and festive rallies enveloped and permeated Kronstadt’s Soviet democracy.

Still, there were some limits to liberty and equality, even in the

'Free City of Kronstadt'. Thus, in the 14 April 1917 Soviet debate on the question of labour mobility, fears for Kronstadt's skilled work force won out over commitment to the 'principle of liberty'. True, Lebedev denounced as 'serfdom' a system which legally tied workers to their jobs, and could see nothing 'unpatriotic' in their seeking better conditions elsewhere, since 'freedom can be defended anywhere'. But Ermoshchenko thought freedom could best be defended in Kronstadt, 'the bulwark of Petrograd'. It was this latter view which prevailed when the Soviet resolved that 'the transfer of workers from Kronstadt to other towns is inadmissible'.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, when a group of women volunteered for enlistment and training in the workers' Red Guards during the Kornilov Days at the end of August, the Soviet plenum, with utter disregard for the lead given by the Executive Committee, for Bregman's dogmatic appeal to socialist ideology, Yarchuk's historical reference to the 'heroic' women of the French revolution, and Lamanov's passionate pleading, amidst laughter and uproar voted down his motion that 'women be admitted to the Red Guards on a par with men'. Neither Yarchuk's threat that he would 'tell the women the whole story', nor the desperate appeal of Shurgin, the Soviet's chairman, 'Comrades, where is your equality?' could persuade them to reconsider the matter at the next session.<sup>11</sup>

Yet while Kronstadt illustrates the working of Soviet democracy in one particular locality, it tells little about the viability of a nationwide Soviet system such as the toilers' republic of federated communes advocated by Rivkin, Lamanov and Kronstadt's SR-Maximalists. One necessary condition for Kronstadt's success may well have been the open, free and pluralist society of the period of the provisional government of 1917. Equally important was the weakness of a central government that allowed Kronstadt virtual autonomy, while at the same time underwriting its unilaterally increased wage bill and providing the supplies necessary to maintain the base, the fortress and their civil establishment.<sup>12</sup> But most important of all was the continuing existence of active political parties which contested (and jealously scrutinized) elections to the Soviet assembly and insisted on the proportionate manning of the Soviet's executive. They thus ensured that Kronstadt was virtually governed (until June 1918) by a socialist coalition resting on a very broad parliamentary base.

Thus, freeing themselves from the nightmare and servitude of an

autocratic police state which, as the sailor Skobennikov put it, had taught them only to use their 'hands and feet', the Kronstadters proved convincingly the capacity of ordinary people to use their 'heads, too'<sup>13</sup> in governing themselves, and managing Russia's largest naval base and fortress.

Kronstadt's democracy was self-consciously egalitarian, but its body politic was confined to the mass of producers or 'toilers', and excluded members of the propertied classes, although in July 1917 they voted for and could be elected to the unimportant town Duma and, in November 1917, the Russian Constituent Assembly. Nor did this exclusiveness bother most Kronstadters. Indeed, inclusive democracy based on universal franchise, as compared with the exclusive democracy of the Soviet, was mentioned only once in the Kronstadt Soviet's recorded debates, when the Menshevik Pavel Malyshev wondered whether the Soviets, elected only by the 'revolutionary democracy', were in fact 'fully democratic'.<sup>14</sup> But none of his fellow deputies seems to have shared his doubts; on the contrary, they were convinced that their Soviet was more 'fully democratic' than a bourgeois parliament. Red Kronstadt, which understood its revolution as a turning of the tables both on the tsarist hierarchical order, its officer corps and bureaucrats, and on Kronstadt's own very small bourgeoisie, was fully satisfied with the clipped democracy of its Soviet. As the SR Kalabushev claimed, it represented 'almost the entire population', and that was quite good enough.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the Kronstadters' sovietism was not derived from any clearly defined social-political theory, nor was it conceived as an alternative to the parliamentarism of a future Constituent Assembly based on universal franchise. Its chief thrust was directed against the provisional government which Kronstadt denounced as lacking in revolutionary and popular legitimacy. Indeed, one of its accusations against the provisional government was precisely its repeated postponement of elections to the Constituent Assembly. In this sense, Kronstadt's sovietism, at least during the period of the provisional government, was pre-parliamentary. It turned anti-parliamentary only after the October revolution.

Even for such inveterate anti-parliamentarians as Zverin and Rivkin, the point at issue in the argument with the 'constitutionalists' was not universal franchise as against Soviet toilers' franchise. Their insistence was on Soviet deputies, responsible and responsive

to the constituents, indeed 'punctual executors of their will', as contrasted with parliamentary deputies whom they castigated as too independent of and divorced from their constituents, and, so they claimed, invariably betraying their trust.

While the Kronstadt Soviet urged the speedy convocation of the Constituent Assembly, it does not seem to have given any thought to what relations should be between that future body and the existing Soviets acclaimed by all, with the notable exception of the Anarcho-Communists, as 'the sole parliament which expresses the will of the entire toiling people of Russia'. Kronstadt's vagueness on the subject was demonstrated in May 1917, when Raskolnikov, denouncing the provisional government and haranguing against a 'coalition ministry', proposed a government of Soviets 'headed by the people's Constituent Assembly' and was pressed no further on this hybrid; nor was the subject broached again.

But there was a truly dark side to Kronstadt's radical democratism. The insistent, almost obsessive desire to subject all executives, committee-men, Soviet deputies or members of the Executive Committee to the direct will and constant control of an active body politic made for the instability and weakness of both the Soviet and its Executive Committee. Indeed, it was precisely the flourishing grass-roots democracy that sometimes enabled popular, skilful and unscrupulous agitators such as Roshal, Yarchuk, and even Raskolnikov to subvert the institutionalized 'general will', as expressed by the Soviet's party system and its political balance. Making the rounds of the ships, military units, plants and workshops, and of Anchor Square's crowds, agitators could sometimes appeal directly to the electorate against too moderate or obnoxious Soviet deputies, and perhaps have them removed or made to change their votes. It was thus that they mobilized the 'masses' from outside against decisions of the Soviet in which they had been out-voted. True, in the April Days, Roshal's attempt at using mass pressure on the Executive Committee to reverse a moderate resolution of the Soviet failed, and he was promptly excluded. But on 25 May, he (or his associates) did succeed, by similar tactics, in forcing a faltering Executive Committee to rescind the agreement reached with Tseretelli and Skobelev. Similarly, it was only by mobilizing Anchor Square masses and the Bolshevized ships' crews and military units that Raskolnikov, bypassing the Executive Committee and the Soviet, brought off the supreme feat of organizing, under *Soviet* auspices,

Kronstadt's July Days expedition to Petrograd, where he made it serve open-ended *Bolshevik* aims.

But Roshal's and Raskolnikov's manipulative skills could only have brought Kronstadt's expeditionary force to Petrograd because, since June, its men had been ready for it, having been held back only at the last moment on 10 June. So far had matters gone that the Left SRs, the Bolsheviks' partners in the force, only walked out on them *after* the demonstration's detour to Bolshevik headquarters, when it became patently obvious that it had become a Bolshevik venture. Kronstadt's ready mobilization for the October revolution had little to do with Bolshevik manipulation. It was more than anything due to a broad Kronstadt consensus, embracing the entire Soviet's political spectrum, which regarded the overthrow of the weak and despised Kerensky government and the transfer of power to the Soviets as long overdue and voluntarily accepted Bolshevik leadership.

But despite the obvious limitations and defects of their egalitarian democracy, of which the Soviet deputies must have been well aware, Kronstadters were singularly lacking in self-doubt. Indeed, so confident were they in their vanguard role – Pepeliaev gaped at what he called their 'extraordinary conceit'<sup>16</sup> – and so proud of their exercise in self-government, that in summer and autumn they sent hundreds of special emissaries, liaison delegates and men due for home leave to many parts of European Russia. There, like Sergei Kudinski in the Soviet of Sormovo, they preached – far away from Kronstadt – the Kronstadt gospel of 'a Soviet which is the only master of all aspects of life . . . having all the power, revolutionary, political and economic'.<sup>17</sup>

Bolder still, in May and July 1917, they challenged Tseretelli's use of the Soviets to shore up a weak and faltering bourgeois government, and, in March 1921, rose against Lenin's and the Bolsheviks' emasculation of the Soviets and their cynical transformation into mere instruments of Bolshevik dictatorial rule.

To Tseretelli and the moderate majority of Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, Kronstadt was nothing but a hearth of Bolshevism<sup>18</sup> and a prime example of irresponsible anarchist 'experiments'. Worse still, Kronstadt was the first to challenge the 'united revolutionary power' of that coalition government which he had pledged himself to 'stand up for through thick and thin and support fully and unreservedly'.<sup>19</sup> The significance of the Kronstadt experiment in Soviet democracy was certainly lost on him. He



preferred 'organs of local self-government' based on universal suffrage to Soviets representing the working masses alone. In his opinion, workers still lacked 'the organizational experience' required 'to take power and administer the state'.<sup>20</sup> He deeply resented the Kronstadters' persistent critique and demonstrative challenge to his policy of coalitionism, his 'reason of revolution' (*razum revoliutsii*). Indeed, he seems to have developed an intense dislike of Kronstadt, and particularly the 'elemental, rebellious' crowd that gave him a 'hostile, even though restrained' reception in Anchor Square during his visit on 24 May. Many years later, he still 'vividly remembered' the 'instinctive hatred and craving for revenge and violence' that greeted his censorious critique of their callous treatment of the imprisoned officers.<sup>21</sup> Nor did the Kronstadt crowd endear itself to his close friend Vladimir Voitinsky, the Petrograd Soviet's indefatigable trouble-shooter, who ran the gauntlet of Anchor Square heckling on 16 May 1917 and later remembered it as

degraded and demoralized by a *katorga*-like existence under tsardom, this crowd lacked proletarian class-consciousness. It had the psychology of a *Lumpenproletariat*, a stratum that is a danger to revolution rather than its support . . . material suitable for a rebellion à la Bakunin.<sup>22</sup>

Not so Nikolai Rostov. Both more sympathetic and more knowledgeable, as a Socialist Revolutionary neo-populist he had little time for the facile class analysis of the erstwhile Bolshevik-now-Menshevik Voitinsky. Rostov visited Kronstadt late in May and was deeply impressed.<sup>23</sup> But on 4 July, the panicky, trigger-happy Kronstadt expeditionary hosts' inglorious mêlée in the Liteinyi Prospect deeply shocked him. He visited Kronstadt again during the sobering up that followed the July Days, and was with the festive crowd that assembled on 19 July in Anchor Square to remember the Kronstadt uprising of July 1906 and to honour its martyrs:

The Kronstadt crowd! What it may still do to our revolution! Here it stands, in a compact mass, listening attentively, responding warmly. A good many are undoubtedly dedicated revolutionaries, and, like their comrades of yesterday, will probably be ready tomorrow to face death with equal dignity and exaltation. What a mighty bastion of revolution Kronstadt could be! Alas, when you scan this crowd, you feel bewildered, puzzled, have trouble in understanding it. Yet you very much wish to see this crowd stand in the camp of the revolutionary democracy, just as it stands now, there in Anchor Square.<sup>24</sup>

It was Tseretelli's and the moderate Soviet leaders' failure, and



thus the tragedy of the Russian February revolution, that the Kronstadters' relentless critique of coalitionism was dismissed out of hand, while their novel experiment in Soviet self-government went unappreciated. Instead, the Kronstadters were written off as a mere Bolshevik and anarchist rabble, although Tseretelli and his associates knew full well that the Bolsheviks were in a minority there. Together, they thus abandoned what was still, as Rostov noted, an open-ended Kronstadt situation, surrendering it to the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd who, right from the start, had been so deeply impressed with Kronstadt's 'special importance' that, as early as mid-March 1917, they had already sent some of their very best organizers and agitators there.

Worse still, the radical Kronstadt crowd prefigured the rising tide of radicalism that swept the urban masses of Petrograd in June–July, and rose again with renewed and greater vigour in September–October, alienating them from their Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary leaders who had become fully identified with the coalition government, and driving them instead towards the Bolsheviks, with their 'All Power to Soviets' slogan. It was this that Voitinsky saw so clearly: 'that elemental, rebellious spirit, which in Kronstadt was already [in mid-May] boiling, seething and about to overflow, was only just beginning to flare up in the working-class suburbs of Petrograd'.<sup>25</sup>

But while Voitinsky either would not or could not act on his better knowledge, Tseretelli, standing, as Voitinsky put it, 'Like a captain on the bridge making policy',<sup>26</sup> may not even have wanted to notice the radical tide which made for 'All Power to Soviets'. Indeed, when later in his memoirs he pondered his Kronstadt experience and the failure of 'the democracy', it was its naive commitment to give 'unlimited freedom of propaganda' even to such elements as the Kronstadt Bolsheviks that he termed its 'basic defect' and 'greatest mistake'.<sup>27</sup> In short, the sole and simplistic lesson which Tseretelli drew in his Kronstadt chapter was regret at the 'democracy's' unwillingness, if not inability, to repress. Yet the Kronstadt sailors and soldiers who massed at the Tauride Palace on 4 July, shouting 'Tseretelli, Tseretelli!',<sup>28</sup> wished to remind him again, though more insistently and compellingly than in May, of his democratic mandate and duty to assume the power which the Kadet ministers had relinquished by walking out of the government on 2 July. Seeing the Soviet leaders so insensitive to their demands

and so afraid of power – Fiodor Dan reportedly exclaimed, ‘Shoot us down, but power we will not take!’<sup>29</sup> – the Kronstadters turned their backs on them, and, in the end, though a majority supported the SR-Maximalists and Left SRs, and many others were just non-party radical Kronstadt sailors<sup>30</sup> or Anarchists, they all threw in their lot with Lenin and the Bolsheviks. For they alone in Russia had the impressive organization and leadership, the active will and well-advertised determination to topple the discredited provisional government, holding out the promise of transferring ‘All Power to Soviets’ and making the Russian revolution into a social revolution.

There is little evidence to suggest that the Bolsheviks ever took the Kronstadt experiment in Soviet democracy more seriously than their Menshevik rivals, despite the praise lavished on the ‘pride and glory of the revolution’ for having assumed local power and provided both the example and the shock troops for the Bolshevik campaign of ‘All Power to Soviets’. Even when, in May 1917, Lenin took up Kronstadt’s cause against Tseretelli and the provisional government, defending it in the name of ‘democratism’, local self-government and elective offices, including that of the commissar, it was on Kronstadt as a pace-setter for Soviet *power* that he focussed, seizing on it to provide proof that in ‘the localities’ the revolution had overtaken Petrograd and had entered its ‘second phase’ which would transfer power to Soviets and to such institutions of popular sovereignty as the Constituent Assembly and organs of local self-government.<sup>31</sup> Thereafter, Kronstadt appears in his articles and private jottings together with Reval, Vyborg, the Baltic Fleet, and the troops in Finland, only as a forward base and recruiting ground for the seizure of power in Petrograd.<sup>32</sup>

If the Bolsheviks were too party-minded and absorbed in the business of seizing *power* and keeping it against all odds, the Mensheviks were too much obsessed with their bourgeois revolution to take note of Kronstadt’s Soviet innovations. Indeed, of all the Russian ‘Marxists’, including the independent *Novaia zhizn* group which stood somewhere between Menshevism and Bolshevism, it was only Ivan Bezrabortnyi (Manuilsky) in Trotsky’s *Vpered* and Anatolii Lunacharsky in *Golos pravdy* who waxed panegyric about the model democracy of the ‘Kronstadt Commune’.<sup>33</sup>

Kronstadt’s staunchest supporters were the neo-populist, non-Marxist radical left, the Left SRs, SR-Maximalists and Anarcho-Syndicalists. Visiting frequently, they found in its Soviet democracy

the living prototype of their ‘toilers’ republic’ of federated communes.

When, after the October revolution, Kronstadt became a major stronghold of Bolshevik Soviet power, its Soviet democracy, together with the naval democracy of the Baltic Fleet, was gradually whittled down until, in the end, it was contemptuously dismissed as some *komitetshchina* – misrule by proliferating committees. Small wonder that in March 1921, when the Kronstadt revolt burst on the Communist leadership assembled at the Tenth Party Congress to deal with Russia’s economic crisis and the party’s malaise, they saw in the Kronstadt programme and its demand for a renewal and reactivation of the Soviet system of democracy a simple and dangerous attack on Bolshevik power.

Moreover, a galaxy of Communist leaders and publicists, ranging from Trotsky, Nikolai Bukharin, Karl Radek, L. Sosnovsky, Emelyan Yaroslavsky in *Pravda* to Iurii Steklov in *Izvestiia*,<sup>34</sup> not to mention a host of smaller fry, rallied to a man in a vast and ugly propaganda campaign, aimed at the immediate ideological isolation and lasting delegitimation of Kronstadt’s ‘Third Revolution’. It was denounced as an ingenious White-Guardist plot, or at best as a petty bourgeois bridge to counter-revolution and restoration. Thus, unlike Tseretelli and his Soviet colleagues, as well as Kerensky and General Brusilov, who could not bring themselves or did not dare to take serious repressive action against the Kronstadters in 1917, Trotsky and the Communists did not falter when making good their threat to ‘shoot them down like pheasants’ in March 1921. Nor did they have to worry much about public opinion, certainly not among Communists. Even as severe a critic of party policy and leadership as the dissident Communist Alexandra Kollontai boasted at the Tenth Party Congress on 13 March 1921 that it was members of her Workers’ Opposition faction who had been ‘the first’ to volunteer ‘for Kronstadt’ and thus ‘to fulfil our duty in the name of Communism and the international workers’ revolution’.<sup>35</sup>

The denunciation of Kronstadt continued unabated for months after its savage repression. As late as July 1921, Radek and Bukharin excelled in castigating the left and wayward Communist Workers’ Party of Germany (KAPD) for having presumed to publish the left Dutch Communist Hermann Gorter’s critical comment which rubbed in the point that it was the ‘proletariat of Kronstadt’ which rose ‘against the Communist party’ and had posed the awkward question whether the lesson to be learned was not that ‘class dicta-

torship must replace the party dictatorship'.<sup>36</sup> There is not a shred of evidence to support the oft-repeated story that Bukharin, at the Third Comintern Congress, referred to the Kronstadters with sorrow as 'erring . . . true brothers, our own flesh and blood', whose revolt the Communists had been reluctantly 'forced to suppress'.<sup>37</sup> Nor is Bukharin likely to have thus publicly indulged his bleeding heart when savage denunciation of 'Kronstadt' had become a test of loyalty, if not a party ritual. Even spokesmen of the KAPD now hastened to dissociate themselves (and their theorist Gorter) from the Kronstadt *Auführer* (mutineers).<sup>38</sup> Indeed, at the Eleventh Party Congress, in March 1922, Trotsky used 'Kronstadt' to intimidate Alexandra Kollontai and the remnants of the defeated Workers' Opposition, identifying them, amidst applause, with 'the banner of Kronstadt – only Kronstadt'.<sup>39</sup> Small wonder that, in such an atmosphere of intimidation and repression, no serious analysis and party debate was possible.

While Radek and Bukharin cynically searched the foreign and White-Guardist press for 'exposures' that would provide 'a clear understanding of the social nature of the Kronstadt uprising',<sup>40</sup> Trotsky took recourse to facile sociology. He pointed to the alleged replacement of 'vast numbers of the revolutionary sailors' by such 'accidental elements' as 'Latvian, Estonian and Finnish sailors',<sup>41</sup> thus robbing Kronstadters of their glorious past and revolutionary credentials. While he never managed to live down his own gruesome role in the Kronstadt tragedy, he certainly did succeed in saddling its historiography with tendentious sociology.

Amidst the hysteria and cynicism of the Bolsheviks' reaction to 'Kronstadt', Lenin's immediate comments stand out as sober and honest. The Kronstadters, he conceded frankly, 'do not want the White Guards, and they do not want our state power either'. But their 'new power', regardless of whether it stood 'to the left of the Bolsheviks or slightly to the right', was doomed to a 'Crash' and bound to serve as a 'step-ladder', a 'bridge' to 'bourgeois counter-revolution'.<sup>42</sup>

In his private jottings, Lenin reached further, diagnosing the Kronstadt uprising as symptomatic of 'the political side, the political expression' of the economic crisis that beset Russian War Communism 'during the spring of 1921'. Lenin's 'lesson from Kronstadt' was double-pronged, and fateful in its historical consequences. 'In politics', Lenin noted, what was needed was 'a closing of the ranks',

a tightening up of discipline ‘inside the party’, an insistence on ‘the greatest firmness of the apparatus’, the strengthening of a ‘good bureaucracy in the service of politics’, the stepping up of the ‘implacable struggle against the Mensheviks, the Socialist Revolutionaries and Anarchists’. ‘In economics’, the Kronstadt episode, he thought, pointed to the need for ‘the widest possible *concessions* to the middling peasantry’, notably ‘local free trade’, in short, the New Economic Policy (NEP).<sup>43</sup> The Kronstadters’ immediate and indignant protest of 14 March 1921, ‘Kronstadt does not demand “free trade”, but the genuine power of the Soviets’,<sup>44</sup> was certainly lost on Lenin, single-mindedly bent as he was (as were all Bolsheviks, including Alexandra Kollontai!) on the maintenance and strengthening of the monopoly of power held by the Communist party. His decision to counter the Kronstadters’ protest against the Bolshevik perversion of Soviet power with what Martov denounced as a new *Zubatovshchina* of ‘purely economic concessions without a change in the political order’<sup>45</sup> marked a turning point, if not the terminal point, in the history of the Russian revolution. Lenin’s response blocked what was still left of the revolution’s political openness, completed the formation of the highly centralized and bureaucratized single-party dictatorship, and put Russia firmly on the road to Stalinism.

In the very centre of that fateful historical decision, and of the tragedy of the Russian revolution, stood Red Kronstadt, its ‘pride and glory’. Its sailors, soldiers and workers had enthusiastically enlisted in the front ranks of the October revolution and in the civil war, trusting that Soviet power would make the whole of Russia into one large Soviet democracy like their Kronstadt. Now it was they who found themselves in brutal confrontation with a Bolshevik power which had snuffed out their dream of egalitarian democracy and executed their Anatolii Lamanov as a ‘counter-revolutionary’.

The *Krasnyi Kronshadt* of 18 March 1921 trumpeted ‘the return of Soviet power’:

Foiled are the Kadets’ plots,  
Beaten their last black trump,  
Kronstadt lies at our feet,  
Adamantine is Soviet power!<sup>46</sup>

Adamantine or not, it certainly made sure that prostrate Kronstadt would not rise again, and that its Soviet democracy would remain but an unfulfilled promise of the Russian revolution.