

A Reply to the ICL-FI's "Bolshevism vs. Counterrevolution"

**and Assessing the Effects of the 1994 Russian Archival Data on Evaluating the
Kronstadt Rebellion**

Rashid Bulat

4/2/2021

Contents

Historiography in Bad Faith	3
The Consequences of Elfvengren	8
The Sailors: 1921 v. 1917	14
Conclusion	15
Bibliography	17

Out of the fray of acrimonious debate that always surrounds the Kronstadt rebellion, there have been numerous invocations of an article written by the ICL-FI in their periodical the *Sparticist* in 2006 titled “Kronstadt 1921: Bolshevism vs. Counterrevolution.” Detractors of the uprising have treated it as their smoking gun: citing it as evidence of “anarchist lies and the vindication of the Bolshevik position on Kronstadt as a Whiteguard plot.” The piece is based primarily on the relatively new primary source documents concerning the rebellion which have come to light with the opening of the archives in Russia in 1994. Suffice to say I was greatly skeptical of the piece’s conclusions, mainly because there were already numerous primary and secondary sources present before 1994 which discredited this view, among them being those used within Paul Avrich’s seminal work on the topic.

Finding that the article has circulated in the years since its release but that there was no rebuttal present, and that many others had shared my skepticism but were prevented from further investigation due to the language barrier, I decided to analyze the sources myself to evaluate the validity of the claims presented. In the end my skepticism proved to be merited. I argue that what the evidence supports, both new and old, is an altogether opposite conclusion from the one reached in the *Sparticist*: that although it is likely that a closeted White element existed in Kronstadt, it in fact had no power in influencing the political and military direction of the mutiny despite its desire to do so. This being a consequence of the rebellion’s spontaneity, the face-to-face democracy practiced within the Kronstadt soviet, and the political militancy of the sailors involved.

I have evaluated the new primary sources used by the ICL-FI taken from the two volume anthology *Kronshtadtskaya tragediya 1921*, which was made available to public viewing by the Russian Historical Society.

Historiography in Bad Faith

Noted in the *Sparticist* piece is how uncritically documents were accepted on face-value to fit a narrative despite their problematic nature, and where at other times only out-of-context excerpts of documents were taken where otherwise there existed data from those same sources that worked to exonerate the sailors from the virulent accusations heaped upon them.

Needless to say, we should exercise caution when assessing the historical integrity of sources about Kronstadt coming out of the nascent Bolshevik state and the successive Soviet Union. Lest it be forgotten, that a massive campaign of vilification was carried out both during and after the rebellion against the rank-and-file sailors and members of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee based on fabrication. Evident is that a significant portion of the source material the ICL-FI used to make their arguments comes out of this campaign. One such example is the “Kuzmin Report” that they cite.

“In his report to the 25 March 1921 session of the Petrograd Soviet, fleet commissar Kuzmin described how the threat of mass executions was nearly carried out. Early on the morning of March 18, Shustov set up a machine gun outside the cell, which contained 23 prisoners. He was prevented from slaughtering the Communists only by the advance of the Red Army across the ice” (*Sparticist*, Kronstadt 1921: Bolshevism vs. Counterrevolution, English edition No. 59 Spring 2006).

It's known, however, that Kuzmin himself admitted that he lied about the circumstances of his imprisonment for purposes of propaganda against the mutineers. And that in reality such policies against the prisoners as he explained in his report flew in the face of all known established relations between Bolshevik prisoners and the sailors.

“At any rate, Kronstadt was noteworthy for its humane treatment of its adversaries during a period of high emotion and growing tension. No harm whatever came to the 300 Bolshevik prisoners; there were no executions, no tortures, no beatings. The revolt, after all, was not against the Whites, whom the sailors passionately hated and would have slaughtered without the slightest remorse, but against fellow revolutionaries whose ideals they shared and whose practices they were merely seeking to reform. One may wonder, however, about the fate of a Trotsky or a Zinoviev had they fallen into the rebels' hands. In any case, even the most unpopular officials emerged unscathed. Reports that Kuzmin had been brutally handled and had barely escaped summary execution lacked any basis in truth. Victor Serge ran into him at Smolny after the revolt, and Kuzmin, looking hale and hearty, confessed that such stories were mere 'exaggerations,' that he and his comrades had been treated correctly. Ilyin was also spared, though Petrichenko was incensed at his treachery. And when the Revolutionary Committee heard that relatives of Communists were being boycotted or dismissed from their jobs, it cautioned the population against vengeful behavior: 'In spite of all the outrageous acts of the Communists, we shall have enough restraint to confine ourselves only to isolating them from public life so that their malicious and false agitation will not hinder our revolutionary work'” (Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921, The Uprising of Sailors at The Kronstadt Naval Base is Examined in The Context of The Political Development of The New Soviet State*, Princeton University Press 1970, p. 187).

Avrich was citing Serge's memoirs in recounting this conversation (Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, New York Review of Books, NY, p. 148), and there's no reason to assume that Serge was lying as he himself was a Bolshevik who outlined that the crushing of the rebellion was justified, and had been an ally of Trotsky throughout his entire life. The fact that Kuzmin was lying makes sense in light of the details of his story. First, is that the Red Army had successfully crossed the ice on March 17th (Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 205, 206), reaching the north-east wall. This is one day before Kuzmin notes that they did, an action that supposedly saved the prisoners from being massacred. And second, the fact that he lied corresponds well to the far-fetched nature of his story. If the intention—as Kuzmin attempts to portray—was to kill as many Bolsheviks as possible before the opportunity is lost, then the use of a machine gun against a group of unarmed prisoners held in a single cell would've taken a matter of seconds likely having no effect whatsoever on whatever it was Shustov supposedly went to go do afterwards.

This example by the ICL-FI of arguing in bad faith—of there existing exculpatory evidence against their claims and yet they declined to engage with it as it inconveniences their fabricated narrative—foreshadows the intellectual rigor of their piece as a whole and is a pattern that the reader shall see occurs over and over again. Claims of ignorance to the exculpatory evidence also cannot be invoked, since the writers themselves indicated they've read Avrich's work and would have come across the entry on Serge's memoirs.

Equally problematic is their failing to weigh how a source's origin affects its historical integrity. An example is attempting to draw conclusions on the basis of Cheka interrogations—which are cited liberally—where the use of coercion through torture was not unlikely. We have testimony from Serge as well as other evidence that abuse and depravity within Cheka was the norm (Serge, *Op. Cit.*, p. 94).

An impudent example of this bad faith principle can be seen by their explanation of the March 1st presidium and the March 2nd delegate meeting. Below I devote the next few paragraphs to deconstructing their story of the events, much of which contains sweeping portions of text containing no citations (seemingly taken from Avrich), and comparing it to a more nuanced analysis of what occurred.

“The Kronstadt revolt began in the wake of workers’ protests that started in Petrograd on February 20 when a fuel crisis forced the closure of major factories. Through a combination of concessions to the workers and arrests of key Menshevik agitators, the government quickly quelled the protests without any bloodshed. But rumors of workers being shot and factories bombarded nonetheless made their way to Kronstadt on February 25” (*Sparticist*, *Op. Cit.*) (there are no citations for these claims).

The backdrop of the revolt was the crisis of War Communism, the continuation of the draconian regimentation of labour and requisitioning policies which the proletariat and the peasantry no longer saw the justification for with the civil war having been won. In the final week of February, several wildcat strikes swept up Petrograd as a result of these policies. Against two hotbeds of the strike movement, the Trubochy and Laferme factories, the Bolsheviks tried to starve the workers into submission by shutting down the factories, effectively nullifying their ration cards, in an attempt to set an example for others to obey and get back to work. Suffice to say this inflamed the strike movement even more, with it reaching its height on the 28th when it spread to the giant Putilov metal works. (Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 41, 42).

“Delegations of sailors from the warships Petropavlovsk and Sevastopol went to Petrograd and saw that these rumors were false. When they returned to Kronstadt on February 27, they did not, however, dispel the lies. Instead, fresh lies were heaped on—including that thousands of sailors in Petrograd had been arrested. Arms were distributed to the Kronstadt sailors. Shipboard meetings on February 28 were quickly followed by a March 1 mass meeting in Kronstadt’s Anchor Square, which adopted a program of demands, and a delegated meeting on March 2 to discuss new elections to the local soviet. Communist speakers at these meetings were cut off” (*Sparticist*, *Op. Cit.*) (there are no citations for these claims).

It’s true that a delegation was sent by the Sailors in light of the rumors spreading about the massive labour unrest in the city. Although they did see that there was no proof of workers being executed as some rumors had indicated, they nonetheless found something else which evoked from them shock and disgust.

“When the Kronstadt delegation arrived in Petrograd, it found the factories surrounded by troops and military cadets. In the shops still in operation, armed Communist squads kept a watchful eye on the workmen, who remained silent when the

sailors approached. ‘One might have thought,’ noted Petrichenko, a leading figure in the impending revolt, ‘that these were not factories but the forced labor prisons of tsarist times.’ On February 28 (the *Sparticist* writers make the mistake of claiming that the delegation left a day earlier than it actually had) the emissaries, filled with indignation at the scenes they had witnessed, returned to Kronstadt and presented their findings at an historic meeting on board the Petropavlovsk. Their report, of course, expressed full sympathy for the strikers’ demands, and called for greater self-determination in the factories as in the fleet. The meeting then voted for a long resolution which was destined to become the political charter of the Kronstadt rebellion” (Avrich, *Op. Cit.* p. 77).

“When Kalinin arrived, he was met by music, banners, and a military guard of honor, a hopeful sign that serious trouble might still be averted. Moreover, the Anchor Square meeting opened in a friendly spirit, with the Bolshevik chairman of ‘the Kronstadt Soviet, P. D. Vasiliev, himself presiding. But tempers began to flare when the report of the delegates sent to investigate the Petrograd disturbances was read. When the Petropavlovsk resolution was put before the assembly, excitement reached a high pitch. Kalinin rose and began to speak against it but was repeatedly interrupted by hecklers” (Ibid., p. 77).

Although it’s true that initially the hecklers prevented the Bolshevik delegation of Kuzmin and Kalinin from speaking uninterrupted, the next day during the March 2nd meeting of delegates both Kuzmin and Vasiliev were allowed to make their arguments uninterrupted (Ibid., p. 82–84).

“Baltic Fleet commissar Kuzmin and two other Communist leaders were arrested at the March 2 meeting—supposedly to ensure ‘true freedom’ for the elections! When the delegates balked at a proposal to arrest all other Communists at the meeting, this was met with a dramatic—and utterly baseless—announcement that armed Communist detachments were about to surround the hall and arrest all the participants. What ensued is vividly described in a Communist eyewitness account quoted by Shchetinov: ‘In the panicked commotion a vote on something was rushed through. A few minutes later the chair of the meeting, Petrichenko, quieting down the meeting, announced that The Revolutionary Committee, formed of the presidium and elected by you, declares: All Communists present are to be seized and not to be released until the situation is clarified.’ In two, three minutes, all Communists present were seized by armed sailors.”

In fact, the ‘Provisional Revolutionary Committee’ (PRC) had already ‘elected’ itself and sent messages to the various Kronstadt posts the night before, declaring: ‘In view of the situation in Kronstadt at this time, the Communist Party is removed from power. The Provisional Revolutionary Committee is in charge. We ask that non-party comrades take control into their hands’ Here was an early taste of ‘free soviets,’ anarchist-style!

Once the mutiny was under way, over 300 Communists were imprisoned; hundreds more fled. Agranov pointed out: ‘The repression carried out by the PRC against those Communists who remained faithful to the communist revolution fully refutes the supposedly peaceful intentions of the rebels. Virtually all the minutes of the PRC sessions indicate that the struggle against the

Communists still at large, and against those still in prison, remained an unrelenting focus of their attention. At the last phase, they even resorted to threats of field courts martial, in spite of their declared repeal of the death penalty” (*Sparticist*, Op. Cit.).

It’s noted that it was proposed that all Communists be arrested during the meeting. However in the atmosphere of Bolshevik violence and repression against the sailors the suggestion shouldn’t come as a surprise. For example, whereas Kalinin would be allowed to return to Petrograd safely after the deliberations on March 1st, a 30-man delegation sent by the sailors to Petrograd on the same day was likely shot by Cheka sometime after their arrival.

“The meeting voted to send a 30-man delegation to Petrograd to acquaint the people with its demands and to request that they send nonparty representatives to Kronstadt in order to observe the situation at first hand. The delegates, duly dispatched, were arrested on arrival and never heard of again” (Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 79).

Moreover were the violent threats made by the Bolshevik delegates on both March 1st and the 2nd. On the 1st, despite being heckled, Kuzmin managed to ring out toward the end of the meeting his threat against the sailors, “[denouncing] the Petropavlovsk resolution as a counter-revolutionary document, shouting that indiscipline and treason would be smashed by the iron hand of the proletariat (Ibid., p. 78).” A similar threat was issued on the 2nd by Kuzmin at the end of his speech: “you can even shoot me if it suits your fancy. But should you dare to raise your hand against the government, the Bolsheviks will fight with their last ounce of strength” (Ibid., p. 83). Not noted however was what decision was reached on the suggestion to arrest all Bolsheviks during the March 2 meeting.

“The delegates rejected [the] motion to arrest the other Communists present and to deprive them of their arms. Although a vocal minority expressed strong anti-Communist feelings, most of their comrades were determined to adhere to the principles of the Petropavlovsk resolution, the charter of their budding movement, which guaranteed a voice for all left-wing political groups, Bolsheviks included” (Ibid., p. 84).

Suffice to say the sympathy extended to the Bolsheviks as fellow socialists by the sailors despite their conflict with them was not reciprocated. The characterization of the claim that the signaling of approaching armed communist detachments was baseless and hysterical is an unsubstantiated fabrication, with the reality being far more nuanced.

“According to Petrichenko, it was the work of the Communists themselves, with the object of breaking up the conference. Although certainly possible, there is no evidence that this was the case. It is just as likely that the sailor who shouted the news wanted to stir things up against the Communists. And it is worth noting that Petrichenko himself took up the rumor and announced that a detachment of 2,000 Communists were indeed on their way to disperse the meeting. What may have inspired the rumor was the fact that a group of Communist trainees, headed by a member of the Kronstadt Cheka, were observed leaving the Higher Party School while the conference at the House of Education was in progress. Far from intending to attack the

meeting, however, they were actually fleeing Kronstadt for Krasnaya Gorka, a fort located on the mainland to the southwest. Another incident, on the previous day, may also have contributed to the insurgents' fears. Following the Anchor Square meeting, a number of Bolshevik loyalists did in fact consider taking military action to head off the rebellion. Novikov, the commissar of the Kronstadt fortress, even obtained light artillery and machine guns from the arsenal. But when it became apparent that they lacked sufficient support for such an undertaking, Novikov's group decided to quit the island. Novikov himself was intercepted at Fort Totleben, near the Karelian coast, but managed to escape on horseback across the ice" (Ibid., p. 86).

Lastly, the mass arrest "of over 300 communists," amounted to three Bolsheviks after the events of the March 2 presidium out of a Bolshevik delegate body that had approximately 100 representatives, as despite the conflict the Bolsheviks were allowed to participate in the Kronstadt soviet and "managed to win a very substantial minority, amounting perhaps to as much as a third of the total number [of delegate seats]" (Ibid., p. 81). This is out of a total delegate body of around 300 (Ibid., p. 80). Supposedly, this was the great "unrelenting struggle against the communists" à la Agranov and the "anti-communist White plot." The integrity of the Agranov report as a source will be dealt with later.

It's an unfortunate reality for Avrich's seminal work on the rebellion—which lucidly articulates the positions and anxieties of both sides with nuance and historical discipline—that it's consistently misused by both supporters and detractors of the mutiny. Each side considers only constituent parts of the whole, what it finds most appealing to their preconceived notions about what happened in Kronstadt. Reading the book itself cover to cover and with an open mind is the strongest remedy to dispel this confusion.

The Consequences of Elfvengren

Despite these tendencies, it seems that some of the sources used are generally sound. For example, it wouldn't make sense to assume that White groups were lying to themselves about preparations, aspirations, and connections in relation to the mutiny within their own internal documents. This makes the existence of some sort of White group present in Kronstadt highly likely due to the Elfvengren document, made by the leading White agent in Finland General G.E. Elfvengren. The document asserts the existence of White cells and cells of other political groups organized by the National Center (a coalition of various tendencies within the White movement operating from emigration) present in Petrograd, Moscow, and Kronstadt, that were attempting to organize a coup against the Bolsheviks and that the "agreed upon timetable"—mentioned within the Elfvengren excerpt used by ICL-FI in their article—was referring to some plan of action towards this end.

"As I've already reported, for a long time now there has been an organization in Petrograd working toward preparing a coup. This organization united (or rather, coordinated) the actions of numerous (I know of nine) completely separate groups (organizations), which were each by themselves preparing for a coup."

"At the suggestion of the center that unites all of these groups, a timetable with the aim of a coup was established, which was dependent on the beginning of actions

taking place in Petrograd, as otherwise it wouldn't be possible to immediately receive the necessary quantity of provisions. In this regard, authorities in Petrograd have already come to an agreement with similar organizations in Moscow, and likewise in Kronstadt" (Georg Elfvengren, Report to Russian Evacuation Committee in Poland, no later than 18 April 1921; reprinted in *Kronshtadtskaya tragediya* 1921, Documents in Two Volumes, Moscow: Russian Political Encyclopedia, 1999).

On its surface the entry seems damning to the integrity of the rebellion. Can it then be concluded that the uprising was a Whiteguard plot for a coup? The entry as a whole in fact supports the opposite conclusion. Although a White presence was noted during the mutiny, Elfvengren writes that it had no role in the rebellion's organization which he states was ***completely spontaneous and went against White interests of fermenting a coup***:

"The events that took place in Petrograd and Kronstadt [the strike movement and the rebellion respectively] ***were not the actions of the aforementioned organizations*** [referencing the White cells operating in Petrograd, Kronstadt, and Moscow] and ***spontaneously occurred against their wishes*** (my italics), or rather, to put it more precisely, their outbreak went against their wishes, because at that time the Bolsheviks sensed that there would soon be an organized uprising involving the garrison and the sailors, and they wanted to thwart this uprising with a preemptive strike, which would grant them the opportunity to frustrate all plans of the [coup] organizers and carry out a thorough purge in Petrograd and Kronstadt."

"The Provisional Revolutionary Committee, which was created in a moment of danger very hastily and ***quite accidentally*** (my italics), led the entirety of the uprising in Kronstadt in order to unite all leadership and administration and to end the disorganization and confusion which from the beginning reigned in Kronstadt. This committee was composed mainly of sailors and workers, and of primary influence was gained by the sailor Petrichenko, who is very energetic and popular" (Ibid.).

Therefore, as explained by a leader of the White movement within the movement's own internal documents, we can soundly come to the following conclusion: since the organization of the mutiny was not carried out by closeted White elements in Kronstadt, since it went against their wishes and interests, and since its organization was spontaneous and occurred accidentally from their position and from that of the White leadership, we can categorically conclude that its organization was not a White plot and that the members of the PRC couldn't have been closeted Whiteguardists. To assume otherwise forces asinine absurdities, one being for instance: that the mutiny leadership was consciously organizing against its own interests.

It seems that the White movement had no efficacy in these spontaneous uprisings in Kronstadt and Petrograd, which they viewed as unorganized and premature actions that could only sap their strength by luring out their forces and opening the door to a Bolshevik crackdown. On top of this is the nonchalant reference to Petrichenko as merely just another organizer who took the lead within the rebellion, rather than as a some kind of White agent in collusion with the National Center as Bolshevik fabrications would assert, reaffirming that their claims in this regard were just that.

In light of this, the ICL-FI's explanation in using the Elfvengren excerpt of why the rebellion began before the ice melted, as a White operation whose hand was forced, falls apart. It wouldn't

have been possible for White elements to force an uprising as evidently they had no role in the direction and organization of the mutiny and that its direction and organization went against their interests of fermenting a coup. There is also another salient incongruity in the ICL-FI's analysis of the Elfvengren excerpt they use, I reproduce it below for clarity using their translation:

“The key is that the Kronstadt sailors (the local organization connected with the broader organization), upon learning of the beginning of the movement in Petrograd and of its scale, took it for a general rising. Not wanting to passively remain on the sidelines, they decided, despite the agreed upon timetable, to go to Petrograd on the icebreaker Ermak, and take their place alongside those who had already come out. In Petrograd they immediately got oriented and saw that things were not as they expected. They had to quickly return to Kronstadt. The movement in Petrograd had died down, all was quiet, but they—the sailors—who were now compromised before the Commissars, knew that they would be repressed, and decided to take the next step and use the isolation of Kronstadt to announce their break from soviet power and to independently drive ahead their rising that they were thus compelled to begin” (Elfvengren, Op. Cit., *Sparticist* translation.).

It is known that the rebellion began on March 2 (Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 85). It's a fact that the Ermak had made its way from Kronstadt to Petrograd on March 1 to refuel, however it never made it back until after the revolt was crushed (Ibid., p. 101, 139). If it was the case that this movement of the Ermak to Petrograd the day before rebellion was where it was noted that the discontent among the Petrograd proletariat started to wane (and it had started to wane by that time, after a mix of concessions and repression and after reaching its height on the 28th of February after spreading to the massive Putilov metalworks {Ibid., p. 41, 42}) and that it was decided by the Whiteguard conspirators then and there that they needed to get this information back to Kronstadt to launch the rebellion as soon as possible, it's difficult to imagine how they would of managed to return to convey this information after docking in hostile territory with the island's only icebreaker.

Take by comparison, that with the deliberations of the same day on March 1 there was the dispatchment of a 30-man delegate team from Kronstadt to Petrograd, an event discussed in detail above, and where it was elaborated that they in all likelihood were shot by Cheka sometime after their arrival. With the Bolsheviks greeting the delegates to such a reception, what could be said of the sailors aboard such a valuable piece of military hardware, one that may have been able to prevent the Bolsheviks from seizing the island altogether?

What's more is the fact that the ICL-FI omitted a portion of Elfvengren's entry from the excerpt they used. The correct translation should include: “they decided, despite the agreed upon timetable, to go to Petrograd on the icebreaker Ermak **and other ships.**” The Baltic Fleet at that point contained battleships, armoured cruisers, cruisers, destroyers, gunboats, submarines, minelayers, minesweepers, auxiliaries, and transports, all of which had made their way to Kronstadt from various former Tsarist ports in Finland and Estonia in 1918 after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (G.A. Ammon, *Morskiye pamyatnyye daty. — M.: Voenizdat, 1987*) (The Peace of Brest-Litovsk: The Treaty of Peace Between Russia and Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey, March 3 1918, accessed from the Marxist Internet Archive). With this, the scenario Elfvengren creates comes off as even more absurd: that a column of naval ships from the mutineers should approach Petrograd during what the Bolsheviks considered at that point to be a

hostile insurrection and be allowed to dock, unboard, and then return home, is far-fetched in light of the precedent established toward sailors coming from the island after February 28th. If on the other hand one would like to argue that it was the case that a separate excursion had been made before March 1—which seems much more likely—then it would have been the case that the labor unrest in Petrograd had been growing, not declining, as the wave of strikes began to descend by March 1st and petered out between the 2nd and 3rd (Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 49).

The *Sparticist's* interpretation of this excerpt by Elfvengren therefore creates a conundrum: if these supposed closeted Whites arrived on March 1st it's not likely they would have returned, and if they arrived before March 1st then workers' unrest would have been mounting to an all-time high in Petrograd. Either way, it seems to be a case of bad intel on part of the Whites regarding specifics on the ground. Precedence of bad intel on Kronstadt among the White movement is nothing new. For example, there are stories in the emigre press (e.g. *Rul'*, March 8, 1921, cited in *Ibid.*, p. 139) stating that the Ermak was used by the rebels to break a path to Oranienbaum.

A potential explanation for this excerpt of the Elfvengren entry, and one that makes more sense in light of what the document outlines elsewhere, was that Elfvengren was himself speculating as to why a rebellion was launched in spite of the general plans of the coup organizers. This interpretation of the excerpt as speculation would also take into account the nonsense regarding the Ermak and "other ships."

If the Whites then had no role in organizing the rebellion, was it the case however that they and their lackeys nonetheless attempted to manipulate it into becoming a springboard to relaunch the civil war? The new as well as the old primary source evidence indicates that if it was their objective to do so, then they failed miserably in this task, as is evident from the recorded actions and attitudes of the rank-and-file Sailors, who were committed to bringing the program of the revolution back to the principles of October and out of the bureaucratic rot.

"The Kronstadt uprising broke out under the pretext of replacing the old Soviet, whose mandate had run out, with a new one based on secret balloting. The question of universal suffrage, extending the vote also to the bourgeoisie, was carefully avoided by orators during demonstrations for fear of striking discord with the rebels themselves which the Bolsheviks could make use of... They did not speak of the Constituent Assembly, but the assumption was that it could be arrived at gradually, via freely elected soviets" (I.E. Oreshin, *Volia Rossii*, April-May 1921, quoted in Shchetinoy, Introduction to *Kronshtadtskaya tragediya*).

This fear among some moderate elements within the rebellion in making their intentions known, by outlining an imperative to pussyfoot around their vision of a remergent Constituent Assembly—a position generally held by SRs and Mensheviks—outlines a political atmosphere where any proposed initiatives that could temper the rank-and-files' revolutionary agenda or mitigate their grassroots power in navigating the political and military direction of the mutiny would be put down. As one of the testaments to this political militancy of the sailors coming out of the new source material, Elfvengren notes how Viktor Chernov (the SR and Menshevik leader) sent a telegram to Kronstadt to congratulate the sailors on their action and how he was preparing to cross the gulf from Finland on an icebreaker loaded with food supplies for them.

“Nothing of course came [of these plans], primarily because in Kronstadt the name of Chernov, as with all party leaders in general, was treated with absolute disgust. They laughed at his telegram and didn’t respond to it” (Elfvengren, Op. Cit.).

It’s evident that the sailors were the ones calling the tune throughout the revolt, and claims that White generals and bourgeois officers played an authoritative role in its organization—which the ICL-FI echoes with its use of the dubious Agranov report—falters in the face of actual developments on the grounds and by the historical sources of the White movement itself. Let us turn once more to their star source, the Elfvengren entry, and see what he had to say on the matter:

“The [White] officers, although they were not directly involved in leadership, were nevertheless involved as *spetsov* [military specialists] and helped the committee with advice on military issues. General Kozlovsky was in a similar situation [as the officers]—head of artillery—and had no other significance or influence on the course of events. Kozlovsky and the officers, not wanting to just wait for the enemy to consolidate themselves and attack them, tried to counsel the [Provisional Revolutionary] Committee to decisively undertake an operation against Oranienbaum to bring the mainland out of passivity. The Committee however only decided to defend itself” (Ibid.).

Below we can see Paul Avrich having come to the exact same conclusion with the primary sources available then, 44 years before the Elfvengren entry was made accessible.

“For all their activity, however, the officers remained in a purely advisory capacity throughout the rebellion. They had no share, so far as one can tell, in initiating or directing the revolt, or in framing its political program, which was altogether alien to their way of thinking. No officers took part in drawing up the Petropavlovsk resolution, none addressed the mass meeting in Anchor Square, none attended the March 2 conference in the House of Education, none served on the Provisional Revolutionary Committee. Their role, rather, was confined to providing technical advice, just as it had been under the Bolsheviks. Some of the rebels later told Fyodor Dan when they were in the same Petrograd jail that Kozlovsky merely carried on his duties as before and enjoyed no other authority in their movement. Given the sailors’ independent spirit and traditional hatred of officers, it is unlikely in any case that Kozlovsky and his colleagues could have won real influence among them. The Provisional Revolutionary Committee, which remained firmly in the saddle throughout the revolt, showed its distrust of the specialists by repeatedly rejecting their counsel, however sound and appropriate it might be” (Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 101).

All should take notice when the cry of “White plot” is heard against Kronstadt that there is never a follow up response—at least not one rooted in evidence—in answering why the sailors refused to break the ice around the island to prevent a ground invasion despite the counsel of White military specialists to do so, why they refused to seize the Oranienbaum bridgehead to capture grain stores and spread the rebellion into the mainland as the White military specialists had counseled to do so (Ibid., p. 100–102), why Bolsheviks were allowed to obtain one-third of all the seats within the Kronstadt soviet, why Kalinin was allowed return to Petrograd despite

becoming a valuable political hostage, why in general Bolshevik prisoners were treated with respect and dignity, and why all aid from non-socialist groups was declined up until the bitter end when starvation was beginning to set in, and even then no resources actually reached the sailors.

On this last point regarding resources, we have nothing to corroborate Pereplenkin's claims made during his Cheka interrogation cited in the *Sparticist* of food reaching the sailors, should any efficacy be held in this source to begin with. Moreover, Bolshevik sources by their own accounts note that no provisions had ever reached the sailors.

“The French and American Governments also at once mobilized support for Kronstadt under the flag of the Red Cross. This help, however, did not arrive quickly enough. The red troops, commanded by communists, went into action before the emigre counter-revolutionaries succeeded in reaching Kronstadt through Finland with their supplies” (The Communist International 1919–1943, Documents Selected and Edited by Jane Degras, Volume I, p. 214)

On top of this are the sources coming out of White Finland, the American chargé d'affaires in Viborg, and the American Red Cross, all of which were closely monitoring the situation, stating also that no provisions had reached the island.

“Professor Tseidler hoped to use the food stores of the International Red Cross in Stettin and Narva to aid the rebels, and the Russian Red Cross in Paris telegraphed Geneva for permission, but none was forthcoming. Tseidler also asked the Baltic Commissioner of the American Red Cross, Colonel Ryan by name, to release his stores in Viborg. Eager to help, Ryan went to Paris on March 11 to consult with his superiors at the European headquarters of the American Red Cross. The talks, however, were without result. As Ryan told a reporter from *Obshchee Dela*, two difficulties stood in the way: first, his organization was barred by its constitution from lending aid to any political or military group, and second, even if this could somehow be circumvented, the Finnish government would not allow any food to pass over its borders. Despite Bolshevik accusations of Finland's complicity with the Whites, throughout the revolt, in the words of Harold Quarton [chargé d'affaires], the Finns were ‘zealous in respecting the recently concluded peace treaty’ with the Soviet government. The Finnish General Staff considered the rising premature and doomed to failure [exactly what Elfvengren thought as well], and did not want to give the Bolsheviks any excuse for military reprisals. At best, as Tseidler himself noted afterwards, the Finns were willing to allow medical supplies through as a humanitarian gesture, but nothing came of this offer” (Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 119, 120).

If this wasn't enough, then we also have Elfvengren corroborating that it was in only the final days of the mutiny that any food was able to be sent out to the island.

“[Kronstadt] was beginning to run out of food, and only in its final days were the correct shipments established from the outside” (Elfvengren, Op. Cit.).

Another problem in using the Agranov report in an attempt to paint the revolt as a White plot, is its concession that its “investigation failed to show the outbreak of the mutiny was preceded by the activity of any counterrevolutionary organization at work among the fortress’s command or that it was the work of Entente spies” (Yakov Agranov, Report to Cheka Presidium, 5 April 1921; reprinted in *Kronshtadtskaya tragediya*). Other statements of the Agranov report—which have already been shown to be fraudulent—such as the dominant role of White military specialists and the use of brutality against Bolshevik prisoners, seemingly comes into conflict with the report’s statement on spontaneity. What is the ICL-FI’s explanation for this incongruity?

It claims that this excerpt of the Agranov report on the spontaneity of the rebellion was made “on the basis of the very limited evidence available in the days immediately after the mutiny” (*Sparticist*, Op. Cit.). However, all the claims of the Agranov report, regarding the Whites’ role, policies toward prisoners, and on spontaneity, were made at the same time: on the same day of April 5th 1921, when the report was submitted to the Cheka presidium. If the ICL-FI desires to dismiss the claims of spontaneity because it was a premature conclusion on the basis of “very limited evidence,” then it has to dismiss the entirety of the Agranov report on the same grounds.

Furthermore is the fact that the report was released eighteen days after the end of the rebellion (Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 210), not on the “days immediately after the mutiny.” And if it’s the case that this timeframe should still be insufficient for drafting a proper report from which to draw conclusions, then the Komarov and Kuzmin Report—made seven days after the end of the mutiny—must be dismissed as well.

These dilemmas are academic of course, as it’s been shown through more reliable sources that the cruxes of all of these reports are generally false. But then what are we to make of the excerpt on spontaneity? The Bolshevik campaign of defamation would have no stake in playing up the spontaneity of the mutiny, which it strived to paint as a White plot. With the presence of other strong source material corroborating this spontaneity, the excerpt seemingly works to reciprocate this corroboration.

The Sailors: 1921 v. 1917

What is often heard in response to claims regarding the spontaneity of the rebellion and the sailors’ militancy is the common refrain: of the political constitution of the Kronstadt sailors having been diluted after three years of war, replaced by politically incompetent, nationalist, and petit-bourgeois muzhiks of the Ukrainian countryside. The incongruity of this position is that: it would like to case the sailors as stupid peasants duped by the Whites, but it uses sources which cast them as politically advanced enough to organize spontaneously, to reject Mensheviks, SRs, Whiteguardists, and the constituent assembly, all while accepting the principles of the Petropavlsk resolution and extending their implications to adversarial parties in allowing the Bolsheviks to participate in their soviet.

“The Kronstadters had long been regarded as the torchbearers of revolutionary militancy, a reputation which remained largely untarnished throughout the Civil War, despite their volatility and lack of discipline. As late as the autumn of 1920, Emma Goldman recalled, the sailors were still held up by the Communists themselves as a glowing example of valor and unflinching courage ; on November 7, the third anniversary of the Bolshevik seizure of power, they were in the front ranks of the

celebrations, and their reenactment of the storming of the Winter Palace in Petrograd was widely acclaimed by the crowd. No one at that time spoke of any “class degeneration” at Kronstadt. The allegation that politically retarded muzhiks had diluted the revolutionary character of the fleet, it would seem, was largely a device to explain away dissident movements among the sailors, and had been used as such as early as October 1918, following the abortive mutiny at the Petrograd naval station, when the social composition of the fleet could not yet have undergone any sweeping transformation” (Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 91).

We see that the refrain comes forward as likely another example of opportunism against the rebellion, with the same song having been sung as far back as 1918. Connoting the mutiny with such a dilution was a central pillar in the Bolshevik defamation campaign against the sailors, with their position as the torchbearers of the revolution remaining unquestioned from October 1918 to the end of the civil war.

In addition to this we also have Getzler’s assertions on sailor composition, supported by his citations of S. N. Semanov’s *Likvidatsiia antisovetskogo Kronshtadtskogo myatezha 1921 goda*. The conclusion that the ICL-FI comes to regarding Semanov’s data is that it “indicated when the sailors enlisted, but not where they had served in 1917. The evidence indicates that the 1921 crews were overwhelmingly not veterans of Kronstadt 1917” (*Sparticist*, Op. Cit.). But this is plainly false based on an elementary analysis of the lists themselves, which outline not only the year of conscription but which Kronstadt battleship among either the Petropavlovsk or the Sevastopol they were assigned to (the sailors of both ships participated in the February and October Revolutions, both supporting the Bolsheviks in the latter). From this data Semanov concludes, which Getzler would later echo in his own work, that:

“[by 1921] 79.2% of the sailors of the two strongest ships of the Baltic Fleet [the Petropavlovsk and Sevastopol], that is, almost 4/5 of both crews, began service in the navy before 1917. In 1921, only 3 people joined the crews.” (S. N. Semanov, *Likvidatsiya antisovetskogo Kronshtadtskogo myatezha 1921 goda*, — M.: Nauka, 1973).

It’s without a doubt that there had to be turnover among the most revolutionary elements as a result of the civil war, but also clear is that many of those elements remained as well

“Not unexpectedly, when the rebellion finally erupted, it was the older seamen, veterans of many years of service (dating in some cases from before the First World War) who took the lead” (Avrich, Op. Cit. p. 90).

Conclusion

A question which arises is: if these sources had vindicated the Bolshevik position on Kronstadt as the ICL-FI claims, why were they stowed away in the Soviet archives rather than brought to light to finally put the question of Kronstadt to rest, which stood as an immoral stain on the history of the revolution and fuels caustic debate within the left up to the present day? One potential explanation why is the harmless variation of events: merely it was lost in the muck, an archivist tucked it into a cabinet without giving it a second look. A more sinister, and not

unmerited variation as a result of the substance of the sources as we've seen, is that they lead one to accept the opposite conclusion: the spontaneity of the rebellion, militancy of the sailors, et al, and so there stood no purpose in publicizing these documents.

In considering this new source material, central questions regarding the revolutionary integrity of the mutiny can finally be put to rest, at least for those concerned with the facts. What then, if anything, do these revelations mean for an evaluation of Kronstadt in its role as the Third Revolution, and in the Bolsheviks' rationale for putting down the rebellion by force?

There is the usual libertarian refrain: rather than meeting them with the bludgeon, had the Bolsheviks heeded the sailors' warning and began the initial process toward restructuring their political institutions at the end of the civil war so as to make them more accountable to the workers, peasants, soldiers, and lower members of the party, *i.e.*: recreating the protections of the soviet, if the abomination of Stalinism may have been averted or if the Soviet Union may have survived; as the mutual causal link of these phenomena was an uncontrolled centralization of power not liable to the interests or concerns of the toilers below, in whose name the bureaucracy justified its rule.

Whatever the merit of this view, what is evident by now however is that all such scenarios are academic: that the Bolsheviks were an authoritarianist aberration from their ideological beginnings, hostile and untrusting toward the popular institutions of the soviets, the workers' councils, and later the trade unions, which they denounced as "inefficient," "chaotic," "impractical," "petit-bourgeois," and an "anarcho-syndicalist deviation." They only held efficacy in the dictatorship of the proletariat as the dictatorship of the vanguard party, masking their core tendencies in the jargon of libertarian socialism on the eve of October. It seems therefore that a military confrontation between them and the libertarian-minded sailors was in all likelihood an inevitable outcome.

To have become a successful military action the revolt would have had to spread into mainland Russia—effectively reigniting the civil war on a new front after it had just concluded—a prospect that likely would have been met with little sympathy from the war weary peasantry and proletariat. The alternative would have been to stay on the island and consistently receive aid from the White emigration across the gulf. This would have been politically untenable given the precedence of sailor hostility toward the Whites, and also because it raises the prospect of the Whites demanding a greater say in the mutiny's organization in exchange for provisions, threatening the entire premise of the rebellion. Regardless of which way the mutiny would have gone, it is likely that its military success along either plane would have granted reactionary forces a new opportunity to reinsert themselves into Russia. With the Elfvengren entry revealing that the White movement had been fermenting a coup, had a new military calamity occurred on a scale to have engulfed Petrograd and other regions, it may have provided the Whites the opportunity to have launched their action.

One could however say that the sailors didn't care for a successful military action at any cost, rejecting White aid, White soldiers, and White counsel, feeling that if they held out long enough the workers of Petrograd would have risen to their cause—as was their expectation—and the Bolsheviks would have had to concede to the demands of Petropavlovsk. Even so, the chance of reaction wreaking havoc once again in the nation after three years of a monstrous civil war was a risk the Bolsheviks were not going to take, and in this sense one can see the rationale behind putting down the rebellion. To echo Avrich:

“Throughout the conflict each side behaved in accordance with its own particular goals and aspirations. To say this is not to deny the necessity of moral judgment. Yet Kronstadt presents a situation in which the historian can sympathize with the rebels and still concede that the Bolsheviks were justified in subduing them. To recognize this, indeed, is to grasp the full tragedy of Kronstadt” (Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 6).

Notwithstanding, embracing the violent repression against the mutiny had wrung the death knell for the revolution. The Trotskyist deflection of what was the natural conclusion following the destruction of proletarian and peasant power, is that a “bureaucratic layer in the Soviet party and state apparatus usurped political power from the proletariat and its Bolshevik vanguard” (*Sparticist*, *Op. Cit.*). This is sheer nonsense. Once the state began to beat the workers into submission and to beat those who would call for the return to the principles of October, all talk of “proletarian power and its vanguard” boils down to pathetic posturing. It can be argued that Russia, with its relatively backward economic conditions and the failure of revolution to successfully spread to Germany had no choice but to pursue capitalism by fiat. There is a debate to be had there, but we could never know since those institutions of socialism that existed were supplanted by state capitalism rather than pursued further, a process beginning before the civil war and, evident from the events in Kronstadt, after its conclusion.

The Kronstadt rebellion then continues to stand as the revolution that could have been, the moment of lost potential, and the immortal warning of what is to come should in the next revolutionary moment power again be conceded to an elite which proclaims to rule in the name of the dispossessed and dominated.

Bibliography

Sparticist, Kronstadt 1921: Bolshevism vs. Counterrevolution, English edition No. 59, Spring 2006
Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921, The Uprising of Sailors at The Kronstadt Naval Base is Examined in The Context of The Political Development of The New Soviet State*, Princeton University Press 1970

Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, New York Review of Books

Georg Elfvengren, Report to Russian Evacuation Committee in Poland, no later than 18 April 1921; reprinted in *Kronshtadtskaya tragediya* 1921, Documents in Two Volumes, Moscow: Russian Political Encyclopedia, 1999

I.E. Oreshin, *Volia Rossii*, April-May 1921, quoted in Shchetinov, Introduction to *Kronshtadtskaya tragediya*

Yakov Agranov, Report to Cheka Presidium, 5 April 1921; reprinted in *Kronshtadtskaya tragediya*
G.A. Ammon, *Morskiye pamyatnyye daty. — M.: Voenizdat*, 1987

S. N. Semanov, *Likvidatsiya antisovetskogo Kronshtadtskogo myatezha 1921 goda, — M.: Nauka*, 1973

The Peace of Brest-Litovsk: The Treaty of Peace Between Russia and Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey, March 3 1918, accessed from the Marxist Internet Archive

The Communist International 1919–1943, Documents Selected and Edited by Jane Degras, Volume I, accessed from the Marxist Internet Archive

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Rashid Bulat
A Reply to the ICL-FI's "Bolshevism vs. Counterrevolution"
and Assessing the Effects of the 1994 Russian Archival Data on Evaluating the Kronstadt
Rebellion
4/2/2021

Retrieved 15 June 2021 from:
<https://archive.org/details/a-reply-to-the-icl-fis-bolshevism-vs.-counterrevolution-and>
Author's original thread on Reddit:
https://www.reddit.com/r/DebateAnarchism/comments/mpqwew/a_reply_to_the_iclfis_bolshevi
This is a reply to "Russian Archives Refute Anarchist Lies, Again: Kronstadt 1921: Bolshevism vs. Counterrevolution" by the International Communist League–Fourth Internationalist (ICL-FI).

usa.anarchistlibraries.net