Chapter Forty-Three

Tell Me Where You Stand on Kronstadt

A Review of Paul Avrich, Kronstadt 1921

Twenty miles to the west of Leningrad, there is an island in the Gulf of Finland on which stands the naval base and city of Kronstadt. But Kronstadt is not only the name of a place; it is also a symbol of that moment when, in February and March 1921, the Bolshevik régime faced for the first time the enmity of its own working class in the rebellion of the sailors and other workers of Kronstadt against Lenin’s government. They were suppressed by the Red Army. Everybody who takes an attitude toward communism and Marxism has been forced to try to settle accounts with what happened at Kronstadt when the sailors revolted: Russian émigrés, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, anarchists, later historians of the revolution, each has given his account.

Paul Avrich’s excellent and magisterial book is a work of non-partisan scholarship that illustrates how partisan in the best possible way non-partisan scholarship can be. He gives us the closest examination of all the available evidence that we are likely to have for some time and he uses his evidence to construct a narrative that, in its most brilliant passages, matches the power of Deutscher’s

The Prophet Armed and Moshe Lewin’s Lenin’s Last Struggle. But, by so doing, he strengthens rather than weakens the case for the maxim: Tell me where you stand on Kronstadt and I will tell you who and what you are.

There are three main positions that have been taken on the Kronstadt rising of 1921 and they are all untenable. The first was that of the émigré groups associated with the National Centre in Paris, a group founded by former leaders of the Kadet party. Avrich prints for the first time (in English) a memorandum of the National Centre written in expectation of a rising at Kronstadt, and containing plans for it, only a few weeks before the actual rising took place. But, in fact all those who aspired to aid the Kronstadt rebels in order to bring about the overthrow of the October revolution failed even to make contact with the rebels. There is no evidence to show that the Kronstadt rising was not entirely independent of outside assistance.

Moreover the Kronstadt rebels would not have been likely to make common cause with the emissaries of the Kadets. Their revolutionary tradition placed them far closer to the Bolsheviks. In 1905, the sailors of Kronstadt had revolted and rioted. In 1906, they mutinied again. In May, 1917, the Kronstadt Soviet declared itself the sole power in Kronstadt. In October, 1917, it was sailors from Kronstadt that stormed the Winter Palace and, three years later, were among the crowds who cheered the re-enactment of that storming on the third anniversary of the Revolution, only six months before they rebelled against the Soviet government. Why did they rebel?

Avrich places the Kronstadt rising where it belongs, in the crisis of so-called ‘war communism’. At the very moment when the sailors rose, Lenin was carrying out at the Tenth Communist Party Congress policies designed to moderate the rigours of earlier ones which had called for confiscation of the peasants’ produce on the one hand and regimentation of industrial labour on the other. These policies, combined with the shortages and the destruction caused by war and civil war, had finally brought many workers and peasants to the point of despair.

For both peasants and workers, there was a bitter contrast between the initial stages of the Revolution, in which the old owners and managers had

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2 Deutscher 2003a; Lewin 1975.