

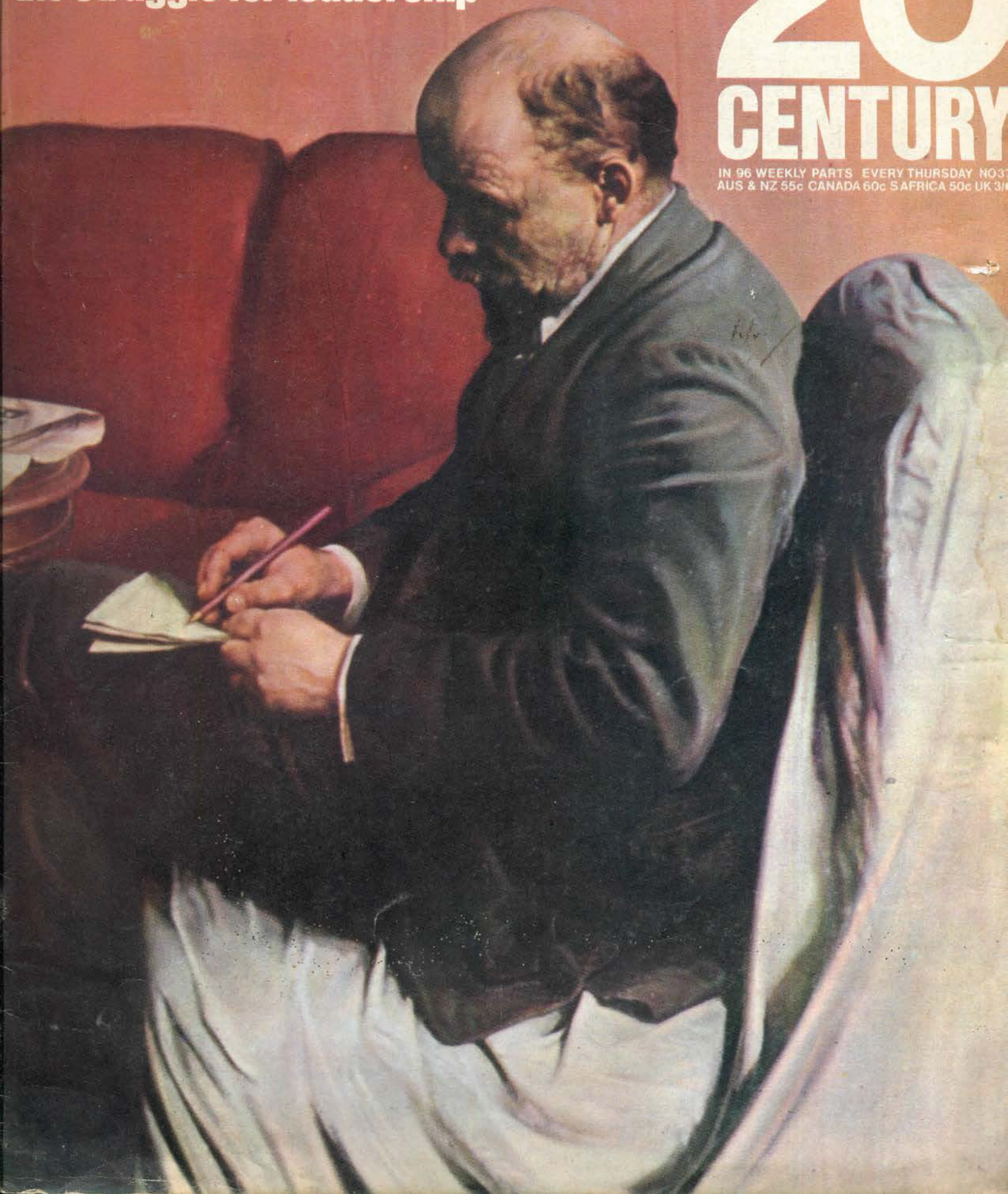
Lenin / AJP Taylor

Also: Stalin versus Trotsky -
the struggle for leadership

HISTORY OF THE

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The Kronstadt Rising

Russia, February-March 1921 / J.N. Westwood

On 16th March 1921 the Bolshevik government sent troops dressed in white across the ice to Kronstadt, to fight the men Trotsky had once called 'the pride and glory of the Revolution'. The rising of the sailors of the Baltic Fleet was not intended as an act of disloyalty to the Soviet state; their simple demands were a call to return to the

ideals of the Revolution

abdication had been a signal for old scores to be settled with ships' officers. In the Bolshevik Revolution of November it was the sailors of the Baltic Fleet who brought the guns of the cruiser *Aurora* to within point-blank range of the Winter Palace in Petrograd. When Lenin decided to dissolve forcibly the Constituent Assembly—freely elected by Russians on 25th November 1917 and lacking a Bolshevik majority—it was the Baltic sailors who were there with their rifles and bayonets. In the drawn-out and bitter fighting of the Civil War, the only Red units which could be relied upon not to dissolve into retreat were the sailors. They were an unruly collection of men, embittered by years of hardship and disciplinarianism suffered in the claustrophobic confines of iron-clads. They often showed contempt for others—especially peasants—fighting in the Red ranks. But they had an underlying sense of what popular democracy meant, and they were willing to fight hard for it. By 1921 many of the sailors of 1917 had

At the Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party in 1921 Lenin intended to introduce radically new policies so as to gain a breathing space and to show that 'proletarian democracy' had not really been abandoned during the ruthless years of 'war Communism'. Among these changes the New Economic Policy would be the most important. That changes were urgently needed was proved by the Kronstadt Rising, which took place while the Congress was in session and, in Lenin's words, 'illuminated reality like a flash of lightning'. For the rebellion of the Baltic Fleet showed that the masses had been pushed too far, that moderation was called for. In rising against the government the rebels made it easier for Lenin to persuade Party members to accept his new line. Trotsky once described the sailors of the Baltic Fleet as 'the pride and glory of the Revolution'. It had been in the ships and bases of the Baltic Fleet that most blood had been shed in the otherwise relatively peaceful March Revolution; the Tsar's

Bolshevik troops move in on the sailors of Kronstadt. The sailors were known as the 'conscience of the Revolution'. They demanded the restoration of the rights for which they had fought four years before.



disappeared and been replaced by new recruits, but the Baltic sailors still preserved their belief that they were the first rank of the Revolution. The public, too, accepted this, and so did the Bolshevik leaders in their speeches and writings.

The headquarters of the Baltic Fleet was Kronstadt, situated on Kotlin Island, fortified and commanding the sea approach to Petrograd. From December to March the sea is frozen and there is thus good access either to the nearest shore (Russia, five miles distant), or to the more distant northern coastline (Finland). In the town itself there were, apart from soldiers and sailors, many workers and their families. The trade unions had a strong membership there, but of Kronstadt's total population of around 50,000 less than two per cent were Communist Party members.

A second 'pride and glory' of the revolution were the workers of Petrograd, but it was these who in fact set off the Kronstadt Rising. In February 1921 thousands of Petrograd workers came out on strike, and the Red Army cadets sent to prevent their demonstrations took no strong action. The workers' demands were mainly economic, although there were political overtones. In particular, the workers protested against Trotsky's so-called Labour Army,

which was simply an organization of strike-breakers selected from the Red Army. They also demanded the freedom to choose and change their jobs, and to elect genuinely chosen representatives to trade union and governmental (soviet) bodies. The presence of armed Communist detachments in the factories and the arrests and executions by the Cheka were also resented, especially now that the Civil War was over.

It was a tradition of the Revolution that the Kronstadt sailors took a fraternal interest in the affairs of the Petrograd workers, and they had the unwritten right to send their delegates to the workers' meetings. These delegates came almost daily, and returned to their ships and barracks to report. At this disturbed time a glaring difference appeared between what the delegates reported and what the Party reported. In particular, the sailors soon noticed that the Party and government were misrepresenting the demands of the workers, were minimizing the seriousness of the strikes and demonstrations, and concealing the repressive measures which the government was beginning to take.

The meetings held in Kronstadt were quite unofficial, but nevertheless, by tradition, influential. Officially Kronstadt was administered by the Kronstadt Soviet of

Workers', Sailors', and Soldiers' Deputies. In this body the Communist Party was dominant, largely, the sailors thought, because the Communists rigged the elections. Thus the Party organization in the Baltic Fleet was the power behind the scenes, and the commissars which it appointed to the various ships and barracks were both its ears and its voice.

The sailors' protest

At the end of February a sailors' mass meeting held in the battleship *Petro-pavlovsk* to discuss the disturbances in Petrograd passed a long resolution which in essence was a list of political demands. These demands had a striking resemblance to what the revolutionaries of 1917 had believed they were fighting for, and reflected the sailors' belief that the Bolsheviks were, for ideological reasons, betraying the very people who had made the revolution.

The first item in the resolution attempted to deal with a fundamental grievance: it stated that, since the existing soviets did not genuinely reflect the wishes of the Russian workers and peasants, new elections should be held, and by secret ballot. Then followed other demands: for freedom of the press and of speech for the



workers were ready to rise at the slightest sign of armed support. Accordingly, during the next two weeks more reliable troops were brought up, arrangements were made to feed them better, and they were stiffened with a sprinkling of Red cadets and delegates from the Party Congress. On 16th March the preliminary bombardment began and at dawn on the 17th the assault troops, dressed in white, advanced across the ice in two columns.

One column was almost totally destroyed or drowned when it marched in close formation into a minefield laid on the ice. However, the other column, after hours of bitter fighting, entered the streets of Kronstadt. By this time the rebels were disorganized and the street fighting assumed the character of a massacre. On the 18th the battleships were captured and the Kronstadt Rising was over.

The lies about Kronstadt

From the rebel prisoners a handful were carefully selected by pedigree and shot as alleged ringleaders. This enabled the announcement of the execution to denounce the leaders as former landowners or priests. Those of the genuine leaders who had not escaped over the ice to Finland, together with other participants, were imprisoned and shot quietly in batches during the succeeding months.

Soviet history books still cloud the facts of the Kronstadt Rising, even though an objective account would surely reveal how much damage Trotsky was doing to the Party at this time. Many of the policies against which the sailors revolted were Trotsky's policies: the army strike-officials, the appointment of unparliamentary commissars with a thirst for regimentation. It was Trotsky who composed the ultimatum which left the rebels no room for compromise. It was Trotsky who supervised the assault on Kronstadt. And no doubt it was Trotsky whose fertile imagination invented many of the lies about Kronstadt which were put out for public consumption and are still in circulation.

The Rising was not a White conspiracy aiming at the restoration of the monarchy. Nor was it an anarchist or Menshevik or Socialist Revolutionary conspiracy. It was a protest made by simple men with simple aims, and it is always easy to accuse the simple, honest, and outspoken of all kinds of complex machinations. The case of Petrichenko exemplifies this. He was a leader of the Kronstadt sailors and fled to Finland. In enforced exile there he remained pro-Soviet and attracted the attention of the Finnish police. Then in 1945 Finland sent him back to Russia, where he was immediately gaoled. In gaoled he lasted only a few months.

ships to Petrograd, where mutinous ice and before the rebels could move their infantry could still attack across the had to be taken before the thaw, while Trotsky sympathized with the rebels.

On 3rd March the government arrested and shot naval airmen at a mainland base south of Kronstadt, who were preparing to support the rebels. On 5th March an ultimatum from Trotsky was delivered, Tukhachevsky, the hero of the Red Army's Polish campaign, acting on Trotsky's orders, launched an infantry assault across the ice. This failed, because the troops sympathized with the rebels.

On 2nd March, the local commissars, who had continued to threaten the sailors, were arrested by the latter - although they were never ill-treated. The rebels published their own *Izvestiya* in which, unlike Party's statements on the Kronstadt argument were presented (in fact, since the situation were already denouncing the whole issue as a plot hatched by White officers, their publication in Kronstadt only strengthened anti-Party feeling).

On 1st March, Kalinin, the popular and earthy Party stalwart, was sent to Kronstadt to calm the sailors at a mass meeting. But he was ineffective, while his supporting speaker, the Baltic Fleet's commissar, made things worse by threatening the sailors. Especially menacing for the regime was that many Party members of some even resigned from the Party. But until 2nd March there was nothing which could be termed a rising; there was just a mass of servicemen no longer ready to obey the Party without question. But on 2nd March a start was to be made on arranging new elections to the Kronstadt Soviet, and the men were adopting procedures which would allow them to vote secretly for candidates of their own choice; the Communists were no longer to have undue influence in the electoral process.

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At its face value, this resolution was not anti-Bolshevik because for the most part it only repeated the aspirations of 1917, which had never been formally repudiated by the Party. But it did draw attention to the differences between the Party's promises and its performance. It was especially menacing because the Kronstadt sailors had always been considered the guardians of the 'conscience of the Revolution'. Moreover, the Baltic sailors had access to the outside world, and their activities and demands could less easily be concealed than the peasant and urban disturbances which at this time were occurring in the Russian interior.

However, the Party leaders realized that although the demands did not seem too inconsistent with the stated goals of the Party, this resolution and its upholders were perhaps the most dangerous threat they had ever faced. The resolutions plainly implied that the Bolsheviks had too much power in proportion to their numbers, that they had captured this power by arresting rivals and by rigging elections to the soviets, and that it was high time the other left-wing groups had a say in policy. The sailors, soldiers, and workers of Kronstadt at no time demanded concessions for surviving right-wingers or moderates; they were in no way interested in moderating the anti-bourgeois ideals of 1917. They certainly wanted to keep the party to have the monopoly of power. However, a monopoly of power was precisely what that one party did want, and that is why the men of Kronstadt found themselves treated not as just a pressure group, but as enemies.

Commanders of the troops who suppressed the rising after two days of bitter fighting in the streets of Kronstadt



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