

1921-2021. The Kronshtadt revolt and the workers' movement

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*This article by **Simon Pirani** describes the wave of working-class protest that swept the Soviet Union one hundred years ago, soon after the Bolshevik government had secured victory over the counter-revolutionary “Whites” in the civil war. The revolt by sailors at the Kronshtadt naval base, which started 100 years ago on 1 March, was the high point of the movement. The article details the political demands – above all, for a restoration of soviet democracy and free speech – and the economic issues that shaped the revolt. It builds on research for Pirani’s book, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat: Soviet workers and the new communist elite* (Routledge, 2008)*

1. Introduction

Working-class dissent simmered through 1920 as Soviet Russia began its post-civil-war economic recovery, and reached a climax in the spring of 1921, when a wave of strikes swept Petrograd, Moscow and other cities, and the Kronshtadt naval garrison mounted an armed revolt. The working class stood at a crossroads, and so did the so-called “workers’ state”: the breakdown of the transport system and much of the economy, the workers’ revolt and widespread, violent unrest in the countryside all combined to force the abandonment of “war communism” (based on labour compulsion and confiscation of agricultural surpluses) and the adoption of the New Economic Policy (the use of market elements to supplement the state direction of economic recovery). But more was going on than just a shift of economic policy: the state hierarchy was consolidating both politically (as a single-party dictatorship) and sociologically (as an administrative and repressive apparatus).

This article focuses on working-class motivations and consciousness during these events and suggests that, to the extent that the spring uprising had clearly-defined politics, they favoured the reform – but not overthrow – of the soviet system, and a restitution of soviet democracy, based more on class than party organisation. After the spring revolt subsided and the Kronshtadt rebels were suppressed, these aspirations were expressed in legal, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempts by workers to widen soviet democracy that continued throughout 1921 and into 1922. It is argued that a rounded appreciation of these political trends will allow stereotypes that dominated the historiography when the Soviet Union still existed, and for some time afterwards – e.g. that this was the last chance for anti-Bolshevik workers to overthrow the Bolshevik regime, and/or a “third revolution” in the making – to be abandoned.

I have researched events in Russia’s two capitals, Moscow and Petrograd, and at the Kronshtadt naval base. The situation in the capitals was not necessarily typical, and a comprehensive survey of social movements in 1920-22 across Russia and other Soviet republics remains to be done. However the capitals are certainly a good place to start: the

workers’ movement there, due to its social, political and geographical weight, was a vital factor in deciding the fate of the Soviet state.

The next section sets out the chronology of relevant events; the third section discusses the main economic and political motivations of the spring revolt; the fourth section expands on the theme of soviet democracy and its relationship to the “non-party” movement in the period after the revolt; and the fifth section discusses the way that worker dissent was reflected among rank-and-file communists. Finally some conclusions are suggested.

2. The workers’ movements of 1920-21

In 1920, the economy continued to be administered in the highly centralised, partly militarised, manner that had evolved during the civil war – and this shaped workers’ struggles. By the spring of 1920, the main White armies had been defeated, although military operations continued in southern Russia and spread westward during the Russo-Polish war. What later came to be called “war communism” continued, including compulsory, and often militarised, mobilisation of labour; requisitioning of surplus from the peasantry; widespread nationalisation; and a state monopoly of many aspects of trade. The Bolshevik leadership began in early 1920 to discuss shifting to an economic policy more reliant on market mechanisms, but decided against doing so, hoping that the “forced march” that had defeated the Whites could now produce results in peacetime construction.

Many sectors of the economy remained dormant and many factories that closed during the civil war had not reopened. During the civil war, the urban population had fallen to about half of what it had been before the first world



Sailors on the Petropavlovsk in 1917. The banner says: “death to the bourgeoisie!” Photo: wiki2.org

war, as an exodus of working-class families from the towns gathered pace and large numbers of young men joined the Red army. Bolshevik leaders’ claims that the working class had become “deproletarianised” are now regarded by most historians as exaggerated. But the scale of migrations and

the break-up of workforces weakened – although it did not destroy – workers’ organisations and political traditions.

Workers who remained in the towns were engaged in a desperate battle for survival. Key foodstuffs were rationed; apart from these rations, the principal sources of supply were (supposedly illegal) markets, barter, and any remaining family ties to the countryside. There were serious food shortages, and the rationing system naturally focused workers’ attention on the emerging Bolshevik bureaucracy that administered it, and the proliferating inequalities. These became the main source of conflict between workers and the authorities.

During the winter of 1920-21, an almost complete breakdown of the transport system, and mounting discontent in the countryside – including several large-scale armed revolts – combined to deliver what proved to be fatal blows to “war communism”. In January 1921, as the rail system literally ground to a halt, grain supplies stopped arriving in

Russia’s two capitals, and rations were cut – in Petrograd, by a third, in the last week of January; in Moscow, by various proportions first on 20 January and again on 1 February. The transport crisis also resulted in shortages of fuel and raw materials, and that led to factory closures; the city authorities in Petrograd warned of 27,000 imminent lay-offs.

Worker protest mounted. There were waves of strikes in both cities in late January. In February, workers’ gatherings began a discussion of economic issues as intense as any since 1917. The key non-party metalworkers’ conference in Moscow on 2-4 February passed resolutions demanding “equalisation of rations”, trade union control over food supply and the replacement of grain requisitioning by a tax in kind. Mass meetings at the largest factories in Petrograd went further, combining economic demands with political ones. On 23 February in Moscow, the 5000-strong, predominantly female workforce of Goznak, the state printing works, struck and marched through the surrounding

Rebel sailors on the battleship Petropavlovsk during the 1921 uprising. Photo: Granger Historical Picture Archive



district, triggering a wave of mass meetings and strikes. The next day, the Petrograd pipe works initiated a similar wave of protests in the northern capital. The “wave of action” (*volynka*) subsided within two days in Moscow, and within a week in Petrograd.

On 28 February, as this wave ebbed, a mass meeting of sailors in Kronshadt voted to support the workers’ demands and on 2 March the sailors rose in armed revolt, arresting local Bolshevik leaders and setting up a provisional revolutionary committee. This revolt, across the bay from Petrograd, combined with peasant uprisings to convince the Bolshevik leadership that it faced a short-term threat of overthrow. The White emigres assumed the same, as did the remnants of the right SR party in Russia;

they all made feverish political and military preparations to support any and every anti-Bolshevik movement. Historians generally agree that the threat seemed greater to the Bolsheviks than it really was. Nevertheless, the government acted decisively, arresting and shooting sailors at Oraniebaum who resolved to follow Kronshtadt, rounding up hundreds of members of the opposition socialist parties, and facing down worker protest with a combination of arrests (where necessary), sackings and prompt action on short-term supply crises.¹

The Kronshtadt sailors' demands for the renewal of soviet democracy were in many cases identical to those raised in the Petrograd factories, but the lack of coordination between the strike actions and the Kronshtadt revolt – which were both to a large extent spontaneous, and neither aimed at overthrowing the government – proved fatal to the latter. Although during March the strikes spread out from the capitals to other industrial areas – to the big textile factories in the rural areas outside Moscow, and to Saratov, where a general strike began on 4 March – both of the capitals' workers were back at work throughout the Kronshtadt revolt. Anarchist and left SR activists at one Moscow factory, the Bromlei engineering works, convinced its workers to strike in support of Kronshtadt's demands, but they were unable to convince other workers to join them. The suppression of the Kronshtadt revolt on 16-18 March provoked protests, but no action.

In subsequent weeks and months, the workers' uprising spread to other large urban conurbations: there was unrest in Aleksandrovsk (present day Zaporozh'e), and Ekaterinoslav (Dnipropetrovsk) – with a political strike erupting in the latter in June 1921.² But there was no national co-ordination. Neither is there any significant evidence of organised contact or co-ordination between workers' movements and peasant uprisings.

That the workers' revolt was highly political, and not only economic, is evident not only in the resolutions adopted by workers' assemblies (discussed in the next section), but also in the Bolsheviks' defeat at the hands of non-party (*bezpartiinye*) candidates in many of the soviet elections held shortly afterwards. Non-party meant *not* non-political, but an aspiration to workers' – as opposed to Bolshevik – political power, exercised through soviets.

The Bolsheviks suppressed the Kronshtadt rebels who used armed force to press this demand, and were no less vigorous in quelling organised non-party groups who pursued this aim legally. In April 1921, in the aftermath of the revolt, the Petrograd Bolsheviks, fearing the consequences of Soviet elections, postponed them to the autumn and channelled discontent into a non-party workers' conference, ensuring that it had only an advisory rather than a decision-making role. In Moscow, the Bolsheviks retained control of the soviet with the support of white-collar

employees in the state apparatus, who helped to vote down the large factories that elected non-party delegates.

A wave of opposition activity within the Bolshevik party itself, gathering momentum during the “tops and the ranks” debate of summer 1920 and reaching a climax around the tenth party congress in March 1921, not only coincided with the workers' movement but was linked to it politically in significant ways. Many of the worker Bolsheviks who supported the oppositions would have distanced themselves from “unconscious” workers who went on strike or otherwise disrupted the “workers' state” – but the very issues that provoked strikes, including the inequalities in that state and the lack of political space to address such issues, were reflected in inner-party discussions. During and after the spring revolt many of these rank-and-filers streamed out of the party, with a minority joining quasi-Bolshevik opposition groupings.

The party leadership used a dual approach to survive the revolt: political repression (e.g. in Kronshtadt) and cynical bullying (e.g. in Moscow) was combined with the economic policy decided on at the tenth party congress, that was designed to ensure for most workers a consistent improvement in living standards, which had suffered a calamitous collapse throughout the years of war and revolution since 1913. This helped to isolate the significant number of politically active workers who continued to aspire to a wider type of soviet democracy and during 1921-22 to complete the consolidation of single-party rule.

3. Economic and political motivations

Three trends in working-class thinking and action stand out, and can be traced from the expanded volume of primary source material now available: (i) the advancement of economic demands that, due to the state's close involvement in the economy, also addressed political issues; (ii) the adoption of wider political platforms, mostly calling for wholesale renewal of soviet democracy; and (iii) the focus by some workers on survival, on ensuring the best for their families and themselves, rather than seeking solutions through collective action.³

Before giving examples of these trends, it is worth emphasising that, like all mass social movements, the spring revolt had a degree of incoherence and spontaneity: there was an overwhelming feeling that things had to change, that the existing order had to be challenged, but – particularly outside the large workplaces where mass meetings took great care to articulate demands – how this change should happen was not always clear, either to participants or to the Bolsheviks who were working to control them.

For example Gazenberg, a delegate to the Petrograd soviet from the Skorokhod factory, went to Vasil'evskii

¹ A discussion of the activity of the Whites, right SRs, etc, on the basis of archives that became available in the post-Soviet period, is Iu. Shchetinov, “Vvedeniie”, in V. P. Kozlov et al., *Kronshtadtskaia tragediia 1921 goda: dokumenty. Kniga 1* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1999), 5-28. Other relevant documents in V. P. Naumov and A. A. Kaskovskii (eds.), *Kronshtadt 1921. Dokumenty* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnii fond Demokratii, 1997), 19-44

² Donald J. Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia's Civil War: politics, society and revolutionary culture in Saratov, 1917-1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 387-390 (Saratov); Jonathan Aves, *Workers Against Lenin* (London: Tauris, 1996), 153 and 154 (Ukraine)

³ Examples are drawn from archival research in Moscow at the Moscow Central Archive of Social and Political History (Tsentral'nyi arkhiv obshchestvenno-politicheskoi istorii Moskvy (TsAOPIM)) and the Central State Archive of Moscow Region (Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Moskovskoi oblasti (TsGAMO)); for Petrograd and Kronshtadt, from recently published collections of archival documents, principally Sergei Iarov, *Gorozhanin kak politik: revoliutsiia, voennyi kommunizm i NEP glazami petrogradtsev* (St Petersburg: RAN Institut rossiiskoi istorii, 1999); V. Iu. Cherniaev et al., *Piterskie rabochie i "diktatura proletariata", Oktiabr' 1917-1929. Sbornik dokumentov* (St Petersburg: Blitz centre, 2000); and Naumov and Kosakovskii (eds.), *Kronshtadt 1921*.

island at the height of the February strike movement and asked workers what they were demanding.⁴ “‘We don’t know’ [they replied]. As I stand here before you, I’m not kidding: that was their answer”, Gazenberg told the soviet. “‘Well, roughly, then, what are you demanding?’ we asked. ‘Well: more bread, purge the apparatus – there are a lot of bourgeois sitting up there ... and re-election of the Petrograd soviet. There’s our demands.’” In July 1921, when a wave of industrial disputes again washed over Moscow, hitting among others the Bromlei and Gustav List engineering plants, Cheka agents were similarly perplexed. They reported “dissent, taking forms up to and including strike action, without the presentation of any clear demands. [...] The workers themselves evidently do not know what to demand, and go from one obviously inconsequential [*nesushchestvennyi*] demand to another, equally inconsequential, or else put forward obviously unrealisable demands.”⁵

Nevertheless, the broad outlines of the revolt’s politics are still clear. The *first trend*, predominant in the period up to the middle of February 1921, was that workers’ meetings raised demands about practical economic measures that, given the state’s close involvement in all aspects of the economy, usually took on a political tone. From the start of 1921, workers proposed measures to resolve the supply



Workers, mostly women, at a meeting at the Trekhgornaya textile mill in Moscow, in the early 1920s

crisis, called for the abolition of inequalities in the rationing system, and followed up with demands for free trade and free movement of labour. Such basic building-blocks of the shift to the NEP were envisaged in workers’ resolutions well in advance of the Bolsheviks’ tenth congress, where they were adopted. Then came protests against repression, and, from the Moscow metalworkers, calls for greater trade union participation in industry. Finally, in early February 1921, workplace meetings in a large number of Petrograd factories advanced demands for (i) the re-election of the soviet, the convocation of a city-wide non-party workers’ conference,

or both simultaneously, and (ii) freedom of speech and an end to Cheka arrests of workers.

This powerful striving for the renewal of soviet democracy, the single most widespread political current in the spring revolt, was closely related to *bezpartinost’* – which took on a meaning not just of “non-party-ism” (the literal translation, and one commonly accepted meaning at the time) but also of “workers’ democracy through soviets, without party constraints” – which is discussed in section 4 below.

The most widespread demand at the start of the spring revolt was for the “equalisation of rations” – implicitly political in that implied the abolition of a large number of special ration categories that the nascent bureaucracy had created for itself. This demand had already been a feature of workers’ movements in 1920; it was the main issue in the most significant strike in Moscow that year, by tramworkers. As the transport crisis worsened over the winter, and rations were cut in both the capitals, it was repeated with added force. During the first strike wave of 1921 in Moscow, at the end of January, the issue of unequal rations was reported to be one of the main causes, provoking a nine-day sit-down stoppage at the Gustav List engineering works; a similar strike at the machine building works in Zamoskvorech’e, which triggered solidarity action in other plants nearby, was caused more simply by an *absence* of rations.⁶

“Equalisation of rations” was a key theme at the Moscow metalworkers’ conference on 2-4 February. It resolved that all special ration categories be abolished and “goods distributed equally, identically for all working people”, excepting only factories with dangerous production processes. The conference minutes reflect the influence of two main political tendencies apart from the Bolsheviks: egalitarian-workerist and Social Revolutionary. The first group called for food distribution and supply to be taken over by the trade unions; the second eschewed all together the issue of ration privileges, arguing that the root of the republic’s problems were economic policy, and grain requisitioning, rather than distribution.⁷

“Equal rations” also figured widely in Petrograd: supply to workers of essential goods, along with concerns about fuel and lay-offs, and bureaucratism, were the main causes of discontent in the early February 1921 in Vasileostrovskii district, according to Bolshevik officials there. Women workers at the Vyborgskaia clothing factory, who demonstrated en masse on 12 February, summed up the problem, shouting: “They stuff themselves [obzhiraiutsia], while we starve”.⁸

Demands on supply were often presented together with calls for the abolition of grain requisitioning, free trade with the countryside, the lifting of patrols that constrained such trade, and the free movement of labour between factories (which in Petrograd took on extra force, given the presence

⁴ Gazenberg was the head of factory security at the Skorokhod factory and later the head of an action group formed to support the Kronstadt uprising. Cherniaev et al., *Piterskie rabochie*, 275.

⁵ Iarov, *Gorozhanin*, 76; TsAOPIM, f. 3, op. 2, d. 48, l. 59.

⁶ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi federatsii (GARF) f. 393, op. 43a., d. 1714, l. 253; TsGAMO f. 66, op. 12, d. 879, l. 26; TsAOPIM f. 412, op. 1, d. 5, l. 3; Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat: Soviet workers and the new communist elite* (London: Routledge, 2008), 73-74.

⁷ Minutes of the meeting, TsGAMO f. 180, op. 1, d. 236, ll. 6-66 and d. 235; other materials, TsGAMO f. 180, op. 1, d. 237.

⁸ Mary McAuley, *Bread and Justice: state and society in Petrograd 1917-1922* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 304; Iarov, *Gorozhanin*, 83-84; Tsentral’nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Istoriko-politicheskikh Dokumentov Sankt-Peterburga (TsAIPD SPb) f. 4, op. 1, d. 527, cited in Cherniaev et al., *Piterskie rabochie*, 234 (Vasil’eostrovskii); Tsentral’nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sankt Petersburga (TsGA SPb), f. 6255, op. 5 d. 20 l. 1-10b, cited in Cherniaev et al., *Piterskie rabochie*, 238 (Vyborgskaia).

of 8000 industrial conscripts and 11,000 labour army troops in the city). The phrase “labour freedoms” (*svobody truda*) was used widely, as L.V. Borisova has pointed out, usually to mean the simple right to move from one workplace to another, rather than in the wider, more political sense of a free labour market attached to it by the Mensheviks.⁹ The Moscow metalworkers’ conference called for the abolition of requisitioning and its replacement by a tax in kind.

In Petrograd, factory resolutions in early February more and more often combined similar demands for a shift in economic policy with calls for re-election of the city soviet, which had lost workers’ confidence, for freedom of speech and for the liberation of arrested workers. In mid-February, Cheka agents highlighted the demands for free trade, free movement of labour and better rations as ubiquitous. Party officials at DiuMO included all these issues (and more) when listing the causes of worker dissatisfaction in mid-February. On 10 February, workers at the Baltiiskii works – who had already back in January called for the abolition of grain requisitioning, privileged rations and patrols – fleshed out demands for the re-election of the soviet, the convocation of a non-party workers’ conference and restraints on the Cheka’s powers of arrest. The next day, the Arsenal works combined demands for the abolition of privileged rations, and the election of a commission of workers to inspect all state bodies, with calls for “freedom of speech and of the press, since without these it is impossible to combat corruption”, for an end to bureaucratism and appointmentism (the practice of appointing, instead of electing, officials).¹⁰

This link between supply issues, free trade and soviet democracy was key to the strike movements that erupted in the last week of February.

Two limitations within which this transition from economic to political demands was taking place are clearly discernible. Firstly, demands were focused mainly on the Petrograd and Moscow soviets, or other local bodies, rather than national ones. Secondly, the workplace meetings addressed their demands to the existing bodies of government, and suggested only that those bodies were re-elected or supplemented by new ones, but not dismantled.

For example, on 27 January, a mass meeting at the Baltiiskii plant, one of the centres of protest in Petrograd, specifically rejected a call to strike over supply issues, instead giving the Petrokommuna, the Bolshevik-dominated executive body that controlled the city, an ultimatum to sort out the most serious problems within ten days. Once the deadline had expired, and none of the problems were solved, a further mass meeting on 10 February called for the re-election of the Petrograd soviet and e.g. dismissal of soviet delegates from positions such as canteen management, where they could influence supply. This meeting set up a commission of the plant’s own workers to determine the root causes of the supply problems, which again turned to

existing organisations: it called on the metalworkers’ union to campaign for the re-election of the soviet, the convocation of a non-party workers’ conference, restraints on the Cheka’s powers of arrest and a more rapid transition to free trade.¹¹ The Moscow non-party metalworkers’ meeting of 2-4 February also focused on shifting the policy of existing government: Lenin himself participated in the session on food supply and drafted the tenth congress resolution on abolition of grain requisitioning a few days later.¹²

These limitations on the political and geographical scope of demands were swept aside by the *second trend* in working-class politics, which asserted itself from mid-February: the adoption of much more sweeping demands – mostly for wholesale reform of the soviet system and abolition of the single-party dictatorship. Such proposals were often, although not always, adopted by factory meetings on the initiative of left Mensheviks and members of other non-Bolshevik socialist parties.

In Petrograd, the first such resolution, adopted on the proposal of the Menshevik activist V. Kamenskii at the Novyi Lessner works on 14 February, demands the “complete abolition of terror in the cities and the countryside”; “the complete restoration of free speech, the free press, of habeas corpus [*neprikosnovennosti lichnosti*]” and the right of workers and peasants to form “independent organisations and political parties”; and prompt secret, direct elections to all the soviets and organs of the republic – rather than to the Petrograd soviet as had been sought previously.¹³ In a minority of cases, SR activists won workers’ support for demands to reconvene the constituent assembly.

Sergei Iarov notes that during the spring revolt these far-reaching demands were usually proposed by political activists, rather than growing out of the discussion of economic problems; and that mass meetings usually adopted them without much discussion, but then spent a great deal of time on the detailed wording of more immediate, practical demands.¹⁴ And yet there is abundant evidence in workers’ speeches to meetings that their belief in the revival and widening of soviet democracy was deep-rooted. Perhaps some workers were happy to leave the wording of such resolutions to socialist activists because they valued them not so much as an immediate guide to what might happen next, but as a means of threatening the government and raising the stakes in their conflict with it. We know, too, that, in the months after the spring revolt, both Moscow and Petrograd workers intensified their efforts through legal channels to achieve a renewal of class-based soviet democracy (see section 4 below).

It is worth rethinking, now fuller archival sources are available, the idea of the spring revolt and Kronshtadt as the start of a “third revolution”.

⁹ Iarov, *Gorozhanin*, 68-70; L.V. Borisova, *Trudovye otnosheniia v Sovetskoii Rossii (1918-1924 gg.)* (Moscow: Sobranie 2006), 143-144.

¹⁰ Naumov and Kosakovskii, *Kronshtadt 1921*, 26 (Cheka agents); TsGA SPb f. 6276, op. 6, d. 218, ll. 68-69, cited in Cherniaev et al., *Piterskie rabochie*, 244-247 (DiuMO); TsGA SPb p. 4591, op. 5, d. 13, ll. 24 and 26-28, cited in Iarov, *Gorozhanin*, 99-100 and 106-107 (Baltiiskii works); TsGA SPb p. 4591, op. 5, d. 13, l. 174, cited in Iarov, *Gorozhanin*, 109-110 (Arsenal).

¹¹ TsAIPD SPb f. 4, op. 1, d. 527, cited in Cherniaev et al., *Piterskie rabochie*, p. 235 (27 January meeting); TsGA SPb p. 4591, op. 5, d. 13, ll. 26-28, cited

in Iarov 106-7 (10 February meeting); *ibid.*, ll. 42-42 ob., cited in Iarov, *Gorozhanin*, 107-8 (commission)

¹² TsGAMO f. 180, op.1, d.236, ll. 54-57; Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, 75.

¹³ TsGA SPb p. 4591, op. 5, d. 12, ll. 167-168, cited in Cherniaev et al., *Piterskie rabochie*, 243 (Novyi Lessner)

¹⁴ Iarov, *Gorozhanin*, 70-71

The Kronshtadt rebels' proposals to renew and democratise the soviet system were similar to those made in the factories. Their main platform, the resolution adopted by the first and second ships crews' on 1 March, called for new soviet elections held by secret ballot; freedom of speech "for workers and peasants, for anarchists and left socialist parties" (and by implication, not the bourgeois parties); freedom of assembly for workers and peasants; the convocation of a non-party workers' conference; and liberation of political prisoners. The focus was not only on widening soviet democracy but on destroying the basis of single-party dictatorship: the resolution urged the abolition of state-funded political departments, "since no one party should get privileges for the propaganda of its ideas or receive state funds for that purpose", and the provision of state funding for locally-elected cultural and educational commissions. There were also economic demands including "full freedom of action" for peasants on their land.¹⁵ A propaganda article in the rebels' newspaper on 8 March went further, emphasising that the struggle for these aims meant a life-and-death confrontation with Bolshevism: "Here in Kronshtadt has been laid the first stone of the third revolution, striking the last fetters from the labouring masses and opening a broad new road for socialist creativity." A leaflet issued by the provisional revolutionary committee on 15 March declared that its struggle was for "the overthrow [sverzhenie] of the party yoke, for genuine soviet power".¹⁶

However, by the time these calls were made, the prospect of workers in the two capitals making common cause with Kronshtadt – surely the only way that the "third revolution" could have taken on any meaning – was receding.

The workers' spring revolt was over; the government had already warned that it would retake Kronshtadt by force if necessary. When it did so, on 16 March, workers' response was muted. Detailed reports of the Petrograd factories' mood on 17-19 March, by political and military officials and Cheka agents, indicate that some workers arrived at the factories saying that they could not sleep, and would not work while the sailors were under fire; at well-organised workplaces (the Baltiiskii works, pipe factory, etc), most walked off the job. Elsewhere, though, workers were indifferent; fear of repression surely also discouraged open protest. On the other hand, some workers cheered what they perceived as the end of a threat to soviet power.¹⁷

All this bears out Sergei Iarov's conclusion: "The 'workers' February [revolt] and the 'sailors' March were two explosions at different times, and the difference in their amplitude, combined with differences in their political and social character, meant there would be no repeat of the 1917 scenario."¹⁸

There is as yet no evidence that Russian workers saw these events as the start of a "third revolution"; the sailors



Top: Red army soldiers crossing the frozen bay to attack Kronshtadt, March 1921. Above: Bolshevik forces led by Pavel Dybenko (centre) in Kronshtadt after putting down the uprising

who had set out to renew soviet democracy broached the question in that way momentarily, in their most desperate hour.

The feeling that their action was revolutionary, in the sense that it threatened the Bolshevik government, was clearly widespread among Bolsheviks at the time – as it was among White emigres and others who hoped for such an outcome. It turned out, though, that the government was more secure than its members believed at the time.

The phrase "third revolution", however, really belongs to the historiography. The anarchist writer and activist Voline (Vsevelod Eichenbaum), who visited Kronshtadt during the revolt, described it as "the first step towards the third and social revolution";¹⁹ more recently, right-wing historians offered an interpretation of the whole spring revolt as a "revolutionary situation" that is not justified by the evidence.²⁰

A third trend that formed an integral part of the workers'

¹⁵ "Rezoliutsiia sobraniia komand 1-y i 2-y brigad korablei ot 1 Marta 1921 g.", *Kronshtadt 1921: dokumenty*, 50-51. The resolution, first published in the *Izvestiia vremennogo revoliutsionnogo komiteta* at Kronshtadt, is reproduced in English in Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, 73-74.

¹⁶ "Za chto my boremsia", *Izvestiia vremennogo revoliutsionnogo komiteta*, 8 March 1921, republished in *Pravda o Kronshtadte*, pp. 82-84. See also Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 243; "Vozzvanie Kronshtadtsev", 15 March 1921, republished in Kozlov et al (eds.), *Kronshtadtskaia tragediia. Kniga 1*, 447-448

¹⁷ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv voenno-morskogo flota (RGAVF), f. r-93, op 1, d. 2, cited in Cherniaev et al., *Piterskie rabochie*, 272-274; series of archival documents cited in Iarov, *Gorozhanin*, 168-178

¹⁸ Iarov, *Gorozhanin*, 79 and 114-133.

¹⁹ Voline [Vsevelod Eichenbaum], *The Unknown Revolution 1917-1921* (Chicago: Black & Red Press, 1974), 538. Voline characterises Kronshtadt as "the first entirely independent attempt of the people to liberate itself from all yokes and achieve the social revolution".

²⁰ See Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, p. 86. The phrase "revolutionary situation" was used by Orlando Figes, *The People's Tragedy*:



A Soviet poster from the civil war: “we won’t give up Petrograd!”

movement, but which historians have found difficult to integrate into the narrative, is the individual actions that large numbers of workers took to defend and promote their individual and family interests, including: chronic absenteeism (sometimes in order to practice informal economic activity),²¹ theft from the workplace (often in order to barter the goods) and expeditions to the countryside (to trade, to help on farms with which they had a family connection, or simply to escape dire urban shortages).

There is no indication that these practices, ubiquitous during the civil war and in 1920, faded either during the spring uprising or in the first few months of NEP. Some historians have sketched the extent of such actions (for example Igor Nar’skii, who has studied the Urals in the first years of Soviet power²²). Motivations are harder to ascertain; here I suggest that the place to start is in the attitude of workers’ collectives to individual actions.

A good example, from the spring of 1920, is a long, bitter industrial dispute at the Skorokhod footwear factory in

the Russian Revolution 1891-1924 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), 758-759.

²¹ Statistical agencies estimated that absences averaged well over one day per week per worker: in Moscow, 71.2 days per worker in 1920, and in Petrograd 65.4 days per worker in 1920 and 77.2 days in 1921. See Markuzon, “Polozhenie truda v g. Moskve v 1921 godu”, *Voprosy truda* 2: 1922, 144-146; *Polozhenie truda v Petrogradskoi gub v 1918-1923 gg: Statisticheskii atlas* (Petrograd, 1923), 11. Trade union officials frequently reported much higher rates of absenteeism at large workplaces.

Petrograd, where workers demanded the right to take away large quantities of leather and shoes for trading purposes. While factory managements quite often paid workers in kind when other forms of payment broke down, the difference in this case was that the collective formally demanded this type of payment, and workers’ representatives mounted a tenacious defence of the practice against Bolshevik officials who denounced the workers as irresponsible.²³

In 1921, at the Nevskii plants in Petrograd, the collective (in the form of a workplace mass meeting) mounted a vigorous defence of absenteeism (*proguly*), by warning the city authorities and management not to implement a system under which absentees’ ration cards would not be validated. The meeting, on 2 April, i.e. in the immediate aftermath of the spring uprising, demanded that rations be distributed without any validation of cards, and specifically rejected proposals to delegate the issue to the factory committee, union and local government bodies for further discussion.

Pankin, one of the most vocal opponents of the proposal to halt absentees’ rations, said that it confirmed that the workers’ situation was worse than it had been under tsarist autocracy, since workers had absolutely no civil rights (*grazhdanskie prava*). Vashchinin from the electrical workshop, supporting a proposal from the minesweeper repair shop to block the new system, said that “on no account can bread be taken from families” and that absenteeism would have to be punished in some other way. Several speakers turned the argument round, demanding that the priority in economic reconstruction was to fight not absenteeism, but bureaucratism and red tape: one of these, Vasil’ev, said that the economy’s main problem was not absentees but “those parasites [*tuneyadtsy*] who drive round in cars [...] and cosy up in the [administrative] centres, living better than in the old days of the bourgeoisie”. Grachev, the metalworkers’ union official who introduced the proposal – which he said had been advanced “after much hesitation” and only because attendance rates in the city were below 50% – was booed and interrupted.²⁴

There is every indication that many workers who did attend the factories were unhappy with absentees: for example a report from the Vyborg district at around the same time (19 March) listed, among the subject of workers’ complaints, the “injustice” of absentees receiving the same rations as others. This was not in the context of an unambiguous endorsement of Bolshevik industrial policy, though: another complaint concerned the “lack of trust shown towards non-party workers” by the party. Nevertheless the vigorous resistance to using rations as a lever of compulsion bears out Jonathan Aves’s assertion that collectives, and party officials at factories, tolerated absenteeism in practice.²⁵

During the spring uprising collectives frequently raised the demand for free trade (which in practice often started

²² Narskii, Igor’, *Zhizn’ v katastrofe. Budni naseleniia Urala v 1917-1922 gg.* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2001), e.g. pp 343-348, 465-468

²³ TsGAIPD SPb f. 1 op. 1 d. 1024, ll. 3-4, cited in Cherniaev et al., *Piterskie rabochie*, 201-204; TsGA SPb, f. 6276 op. 5 d. 41 ll. 60-79, cited in Cherniaev et al., *Piterskie rabochie*, 208-223.

²⁴ TsGA SPb, p. 4591 op. 1, d. 13, ll. 93-95 ob, 96-99 ob, published in Iarov, *Grazhdanin*, 196-205.

²⁵ TsAIPD SPb, f. 2 op. 1 d. 490 l.1, published in Iarov, *Grazhdanin*, 178-179; Aves, *Workers Against Lenin*, 30 and 51.

with factory workers bartering goods with peasants in nearby areas), and for the abolition of roadblock detachments that sought to prevent such trips. In Petrograd, workers' collectives sometimes included in their lists of demands the right to hunt animals and the return of sequestered hunting weapons.²⁶

In the months after the uprising, when serious shortages persisted in the factories – but the tenth congress had sanctioned a measure of free trade – workplace collectives took a leading role in organising procurement trips to the countryside. In Moscow, the organisation of such trips became a central issue of *collective* discussion in factories and was advocated by non-party socialists, Mensheviks and Bolshevik activists alike.²⁷

Michael Seidman, who has researched in detail individual workers' responses during the Spanish revolutionary upheavals of the 1930s, in a recent article compares the Spanish and Russian experiences and argues that in both cases “the priority for most workers was the personal rather than the political. The liberation of labour was often interpreted as the liberation from wage labour.”²⁸ In my view, this is too sweeping a statement. Nevertheless, Seidman is right to draw attention to a key aspect of workers' activity to which much historiography – which has focused on the relationship of economic and political demands as articulated in workers' resolutions and slogans – has paid too little attention.

Provisionally I suggest (i) that workers' pursuit of individual (and individualist) strategies was undiminished, and probably intensified, during the spring uprising; (ii) that when the nascent elite sought to discipline such workers, collectives (such as at Nevskii) often came to their defence; and (iii) the archival record reveals little about consideration by workers, either individually or collectively, of alternative systems of work that might be counterposed to the emerging system of labour relations – i.e. a discussion of the liberation of labour and/or the liberation from labour. This is not to say that workers were not thinking about such issues – only that research has yet to reveal much about what they thought. The controversies of 1918 on worker management were not repeated in 1921. To the extent that workers offered a challenge to the political and economic system under construction, they focused on resisting the emasculation of soviet democracy, which they saw as the greatest danger.

4. The battle over soviet democracy and the non-party movement, 1921-22

I have argued above that in the heterogenous spring revolt, if any political trend stood out it was the striving for soviet democracy free from the encroachments of single-party authoritarianism. This striving continued, taking mainly legal forms, e.g. attempts to gain representation on soviets

and factory committees, throughout 1921. It faded only during 1922. Although during the spring revolt workers frequently called for political freedoms for non-Bolshevik workers' parties, their aim was less *multi*-partyism than *non*-partyism, i.e. the conviction that workers should organise on class rather than party lines. Between 1917 and 1921, non-partyism (*bezpartinost'*) usually carried this meaning, i.e. it implied an aversion to the very conception of political ideologies brought to the workers by parties dominated by intellectuals, not only Bolsheviks but e.g. Mensheviks and SRs too. Only after 1921, when it became clear that the imposition of single-party dictatorship was irreversible, did non-partyism carry the sense of “non-Bolshevik”.²⁹

To contextualise the calls for wider soviet democracy, the changing function and character of the soviets needs to be borne in mind. Even before the civil war began, Bolshevik party organisations took over functions that constitutionally belonged to the soviets. In early 1918 in Petrograd, the Menshevik-influenced Emergency Assembly of Factory Representatives gained support among workers who resented the Bolshevik erosion of class-based soviet democracy. During the civil war, assaults on soviet democracy (including the closure of soviets dominated by opposition parties and the arrest of delegates) were often justified by military exigencies. Resistance to single-party domination of soviets seems to have been mounted mainly by opposition parties, rather than non-party workers,³⁰ but perhaps further research will clarify that. Nevertheless, both non-Bolshevik socialists and many Bolsheviks held out hopes that the trend to dictatorship would be reversed after the civil war.

In the winter of 1920-21, as the spring revolt neared, workers protested against the single-party dictatorship by voting for non-partyists at elections. Non-party groups won a majority at city workers' conferences in Rostov in January and Kharkov in February. Soviet elections in Smolensk in February returned from industrial workers' constituencies a majority of non-party candidates.³¹ And when the post-civil-war revival of the workers' movement peaked in the spring revolt, the issue of soviet democracy came to the fore.

That the issue of renewing soviet democracy was in Moscow and Petrograd workers' minds during the revolt, and also central to the Kronstadt rebels' demands, has been discussed above. Paul Avrich contended that the Kronstadt sailors never sought “soviets without communists”, a slogan raised by some peasant rebels,³² and nothing has emerged from the Soviet archives to contradict him. Moreover, the rebels' newspaper, in one of its final issues, called for “power to the soviets, not to the parties”. It denounced the Bolsheviks' “party dictatorship”, but stressed that “whichever party might come to power, it will not avoid the role of dictator”; a coalition of parties would be “even worse”. Only “freely elected soviets” could prevent the

²⁶TsGA SPb, f 4591, op. 5, d. 14, ll. 11-11ob, cited in Iarov, *Gorozhanin*, pp. 212-214 and *ibid* ll. 188-188ob, cited in Iarov, *Gorozhanin*, pp. 219-221

²⁷ Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, p. 112

²⁸ Michael Seidman, “Productivist Brothers: Anarchists and Marxists Confront Workers in the Russian and Spanish Revolutions,” in Philippe Kellermann, ed., *Begegnungen feindlicher Brüder*, vol. 2 (forthcoming, Unrast Verlag, Münster, 2012).

²⁹ For a discussion of the evolution of non-partyism, see Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, pp. 93-96

³⁰ See Brovkin, *The Mensheviks*, 126-160, 220-293

³¹ In Smolensk industrial workers' constituencies returned 59 non-party candidates, 22 Mensheviks and Menshevik sympathisers, and 21 Bolsheviks and Bolshevik sympathisers. Employees (*sluzhashchie*) and agricultural labourers' constituencies returned 22 non-party candidates, 15 Mensheviks and Menshevik sympathisers and 94 Bolsheviks and Bolshevik sympathisers. *Sotsialisticheskii Vestnik* 1921, no. 5, 15 and no.17, 9.

³² Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, p. 181.

proliferation of “battalions of bureaucrats”.³³ In the months that followed the suppression of Kronshtadt, the workers of both Russian capitals *intensified* their efforts to renew soviet democracy by legal means; the Bolsheviks organised effectively to prevent this.

In Moscow, the mood was reflected in the April elections to the city soviet, where the big factories delivered a crushing defeat for Bolshevik candidates and victory for non-party socialists. At the first meeting of the newly-elected soviet, the non-party fraction comprised a large minority – 533 out of 2115, along with 1543 Bolsheviks and a handful of opposition party representatives – but spoke for most of the large factories, while the Bolsheviks depended on the large white-collar workforce, much of it in government administration, to make up numbers. Nevertheless, the Bolshevik fraction, led by Lev Kamenev, refused the non-party fraction’s proposals that it should share positions on the executive, on the basis of agreement on the need to rebuild the economy. The soviet was thus stillborn as a forum for political debate between the Bolsheviks and other working-class political tendencies and real decision-making power was consolidated in the city’s party organisation.³⁴

In Petrograd, the Bolsheviks postponed the soviet elections, fearing with good reason a similar humiliation, but acceded – with some delay – to the demand to convoke a non-party conference. The conference, held between 10 and 20 April, was preceded by elaborate manoeuvring by the city’s Bolshevik party organisation to ensure that only practical and economic matters, and not overtly political ones, were included on the agenda. Firstly, senior party members drafted an instruction to delegates, and mobilised the entire party organisation to push it through workplace mass meetings, thus tying many attendees’ hands in advance – although some factories, e.g. Diumo and the construction and repair works no. 5, simply went ahead and adopted political demands anyway. Secondly, at the Nobel’ works, where a mass meeting insisted that delegates raise at the non-party conference a demand to free all workers arrested during the uprising, Bolshevik activists at the factory convened a (smaller) delegate meeting to reverse the decision; this, too, was resisted, and the delegates ended up being instructed to raise, at least, the case of a jailed Nobel’ worker.³⁵

Evidence from outside the two capitals suggests that non-partyism was strong much further afield. At the height of the general strike in Saratov, mentioned above, the local Bolsheviks agreed to set up a commission to check on the activity of economic authorities and of the Cheka. Of the 270 commission members elected at workplace assemblies, only 10 were Bolsheviks; when the body convened, it called for open elections to the soviet and the liberation of political prisoners. independent unions, and freedom of speech, the press and assembly. The Bolsheviks responded by declaring martial law and arresting more than 200 worker activists.³⁶ Workers in the Russian empire’s third city also took a non-

partyist stance: non-party candidates won the majority of industrial workers’ mandates to the Kiev soviet in April, according to a Menshevik correspondent.³⁷

The Bolsheviks’ refusal to concede even a minimal degree of participation in decision-making to the non-party workers was the main cause of the soviets’ rapid decline as a forum for discussion and action. The soviets changed their function: delegates’ meetings became formal, ideologised affairs, while their proliferating apparatuses became organs of municipal administration that oversaw infrastructure and services as the economic revival got underway.

With the effective outlawing of opposition parties, elections became effectively meaningless, and widespread abstention became a major issue. In Moscow, the authorities were already concerned at low turnouts in the December 1922 soviet elections; by November 1923, turnouts at Moscow factories frequently fell to between 50% and 10%. In 1922 another survey of eight provinces showed average turnouts of 36% in urban areas and 22% in the countryside.³⁸

Ultimately, even most politically active workers were unwilling to consider the type of violent confrontation with the Bolsheviks there had been at Kronshtadt. Moreover, the government offered, in the shape of economic reconstruction and the NEP, a policy that could provide steadily improving living standards. These were guaranteed in every Bolshevik statement of early and mid 1921 and very soon began to make a tangible difference to working-class families. Elsewhere I have argued that a “social contract” evolved, under which workers were expected to maintain discipline and improve labour productivity, and cede real decision-making power to the Bolsheviks – who in return would ensure a consistent improvement in living standards. This persisted until 1926-27.³⁹

5. The communist rank and file

The ferment among worker members of the Communist party in 1920-21 is best understood in the context of the broader crisis in the relationship between workers and the “workers’ state”.⁴⁰ While historians very often treat the Bolshevik party as a more or less monolithic entity, in 1920-21 it was anything but that. The evidence does suggest that ideological vanguardism – the belief that the party’s leadership role conferred upon its members rights and responsibilities that others did not have – pervaded most of the membership. But beyond that there were deep-going differences.

The starting point for understanding these is to consider the party sociologically, rather than politically. The national party membership was found in a survey in October 1920 to be very masculine (89% male), and as military as it was political (70% of these male communists had completed military training, “the majority in combatant units”). Moreover, these people had almost all joined the party

³³ “Stat’ia ‘Vlast’ sovetam, a ne partiiam!”, Naumov and Kosakovskii (eds.) *m Kronshtadt 1921. Dokumenty*, 141-142.

³⁴ Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, 96-107.

³⁵ Series of documents reproduced in Iarov, *Gorozhanin*, 219-220, 232-233, 234-254 and 307-308; TsGA SPb f. 6276, op. 6, d. 86, ll. 79 and 87-87 ob, cited in Cherniaev et al., *Piterskie rabochie*, 275-278.

³⁶ Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War*, 387-389.

³⁷ *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* 1921, no. 17, 9.

³⁸ Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, pp. 155 and 208; Gimpel’son, Efim G., *Formirovanie sovetskoi politicheskoi sistemy* (Moscow: Nauka, 1995), 168.

³⁹ See Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, 90-93.

⁴⁰ Drawn from Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, chapters 2 and 5.

during the civil war – 33% of them between the October revolution and August 1919, and 56% of them between August 1919 and October 1920. These post-October communists outnumbered by nearly nine to one those who had joined before the October revolution.⁴¹

The oppositions formed during and after the civil war (the Democratic Centralists (led by Valerian Osinskii and Timofei Sapronov) in 1919, Efim Ignatov's group and the Workers Opposition (led by Aleksandr Shliapnikov) in 1920) are arguably important not only for the programmes put forward by their experienced leaders – a greater role in government for the soviets, in the Democratic Centralists' case, or the trades unions, in the Workers Opposition's case – but for the actions taken by their rank-and-file supporters.

In 1920, many of these arrived back to Russian cities as communists for the first time, having joined the party during service in the Red army. In Moscow, their arrival fuelled a wave of anger at party meetings about elite privilege, known at the time as the question of the “tops and ranks” (*verkhy i nizy*). So powerful was the support generated for the three opposition groups mentioned above by this issue that in



Bolshevik party members at the Moscow institute of prosthetics, 1922. The banner says “long live the international Red army”

November 1920 they jointly came within a few votes of deposing the leadership of the party's Moscow committee dominated by Lev Kamenev and other allies of V.I. Lenin. The party oppositions embraced a conception of equality between communists that in principle excluded non-communists and therefore the vast majority of outsiders. But the anger that they vented against elite privilege was unmistakably coloured by the derision expressed by non-party workers over “special” rations and other forms of bureaucratic privilege.

Politically, some vocal sections of the party rank-and-file had an ambitious and voluntarist conception about the post-civil-war development of Soviet Russia shaped to some extent by the “forced march” in which they had participated during the civil war. Their sense of invincibility, and their extreme optimism about rapid progress towards socialism – which meant different things to different party members – was fuelled by such events as the formation of the Communist International and the war with Poland. Such

visions of fresh victories were cruelly disrupted by the economic crisis of the winter of 1920-21 and the workers' spring revolt. Worker communists' loyalties were split. At Kronshtadt, Trotsky and Smilga estimated that 30% of party members had supported the rising and 40% had adopted a neutral attitude. In Moscow, pro-worker sentiments were expressed not only by protest speeches at party meetings, but by a stream of resignations. (The Moscow party lost about one-fifth of its 50,000 members between January and September 1921, prior to a reregistration drive that resulted in a further reduction.)

The discussions on more democratic statecraft initiated by the Democratic Centralists, and on greater empowerment of trades unions initiated by the Workers Opposition, were supposed to be brought to an end by the decision of the tenth congress, which voted down their proposals by a large majority and adopted a ban on factions. Dissident activity within the party did not cease, of course: for example in the Bauman district of Moscow, where a local group loosely affiliated to the Workers Opposition had taken control of the district in the summer of 1920, it took the Bolshevik leadership until the end of 1921 to restore a semblance of political loyalty.

In the months after the spring workers' revolt, a series of communist opposition groups were constituted outside the Bolshevik party structure, and suffered varying degrees of repression.

The most notable, the Workers and Peasants Socialist Party led by Vasilii Paniushkin – one of the leaders of the Bauman group, who quit the Bolshevik party in March 1921 – urged wider soviet democracy in terms similar to those used during the spring revolt, and actively sought common cause with the non-party fraction on the Moscow soviet. It attracted 2-300 former Bolsheviks but was effectively destroyed by a round of arrests in June 1921.

Workers Truth, a smaller group comprising civil war veterans and with a high proportion of women members, was formed in September 1921 among students at the new universities formed to provide education for workers. It issued several leaflets and a platform document before it, too, suffered a series of arrests.

Former members of the Workers Opposition were prominent in the Workers Group, led by Gavriil Miasnikov, which was formed in 1922 and broken up by arrests in 1923.

6. Conclusions

It was a fundamental contradiction of the “workers' state” that, in rebuilding the ruined Russian economy after the civil war, it reinforced the very type of hierarchical social relations that revolutionary socialists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had sought to overthrow: a centralised state, an elite that soon began to accumulate material privileges, and a bureaucratic apparatus through which that elite marshalled society. In the workplaces, the alienated labour relation characteristic of capitalist societies was reproduced. Labour discipline of which no capitalist state would have been ashamed was ubiquitous.

⁴¹ Sekretariat TsK RKP(b), *Materialy po statistike lichnogo sostava RKP* (Moscow, 1921), pp. IX and 62-63. In Moscow, the proportions of party members who joined during the civil war was just slightly lower than it

was nationally: 32% between the October revolution and August 1919, and 51% between August 1919 and October 1920.

What were the alternatives? The economic ruination caused by seven years of European war, revolution and civil war left little room for manoeuvre. Russia's embryonic industry had been damaged and its labour force dispersed. Peasant revolts continued to rage across large parts of Russia. Restoring production, and on that basis restoring trade with the countryside, loomed as matters of life and death. The Bolshevik leaders believed that if they failed to implement such measures they would be overthrown by counter-revolutionaries. They probably overestimated the danger they faced from the right-wing conspirators who took hope from the 1921 spring revolt – but the Reds had only defeated the Whites recently and narrowly, and restoration was a possibility.

At the crossroads of early 1921, then, the most obvious alternatives were still a White dictatorship or a Red dictatorship. And yet, as the research above has shown, the prospect of a third way – a democratising reform of the soviet system – appeared very real to the workers of the two capitals, who had in 1917 been the decisive force in achieving a shift to soviet power.

The striving for democracy was rarely linked to any alternative view of the way forward for the economy. In 1920, and during the spring revolt, workers' organisations had advocated lifting restrictions on trade and on the labour market, and opposed requisitioning – and the government acceded to these demands with the introduction of NEP. As for ideas about how industry should be managed, there were only faint echoes of the discussions of 1917-18 about the role workers might play in this, e.g. in the Moscow metalworkers' resolution on trade union control of production. As I argued at the end of section 3, workers may well have thought about the liberation of labour, and liberation from labour – but discussions of such issues were rarely articulated in the archival record.

Moreover, the workers of both capitals, and the Kronshtadt sailors, essentially sought not the overthrow of the existing soviet system but its reform. Some of the Kronshtadt rebels may have claimed that they were laying the first stone of a third revolution, but there is little evidence that other workers saw the spring revolt that way. And it is very clear that the sailors' rebellion, the workers' revolt that had preceded it and the peasant uprisings were too isolated from each other and too inchoate to comprise a "revolutionary situation" or a real threat to the soviet order.

However, while the movement may not have been revolutionary in this sense, it is nevertheless evident that many among the workers and sailors were inspired by a vision of a renewal of soviet democracy, with an emphasis on class, rather than party, representation. The immediate trigger for the spring strikes was the aggravation of the already poor supply situation by the transport crisis, but in both capitals workers' gatherings repeatedly moved on to democratic issues. And their view of soviet democracy was clearly articulated in resolutions and decisions: it meant the unrestricted re-election of soviets; freedom of speech and assembly for all tendencies in the workers' movement; an

end to political repression; and the abolition of any privileges for the Bolshevik party.

Both main internal opposition tendencies in the Bolshevik party, the Democratic Centralists and the Workers Opposition, advocated the broadening of decision-making in terms much more circumscribed than workers' meetings. They at no point abandoned their assumptions about the Bolshevik party being an ultimate arbiter in the workers' state. But if the oppositions – and the considerable number of resignations that followed their defeat in 1921 – are viewed sociologically, as an expression of discontent among the mass of worker members who joined the party in 1917-20, there is a clearer link with the non-party workers' movement.

To sum up: it might have been difficult or impossible to implement wider soviet democracy in the economic conditions that prevailed. But there was an overwhelming mood among, at least, the workers of Russia's two capitals, to attempt this course. And at no time – either during the spring revolt, or after it when workers expressed their view by supporting non-party candidates in elections – did the Bolshevik leadership consider acceding a greater measure of soviet democracy.⁴² This was a key turning-point in the consolidation of a hierarchical, bureaucratic form of government and in paving the way for the emergence and consolidation of the Soviet elite. Workers, as well as peasants, were in principle excluded from key decision-making processes; soviet democracy was to go no further.

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⁴² For further discussion of these issues, see *International Socialist Journal*: Kevin Murphy, "Conceding the Russian Revolution to liberals", *International Socialism journal* no. 126, April 2010 <<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=643&issue=126>> (accessed June 2012); and Simon Pirani, "Socialism in the 21st century and the Russian

Revolution", *International Socialism journal* no. 128, October 2010 <<http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=687>> (accessed June 2012)