

HISTORY: REVOLUTIONS

Russian Revolution – Area of Study 2

Research Report

*Kronstadt Revolt and Lenin's NEP

Creating a New Society

Introduction

From October 1917 to the early 1920s, Bolshevik rule was threatened by a variety of external and internal challenges, that somewhat lead to the ideals of the regime, and the revolutionaries themselves, to change over time and in response to events. Wars of foreign intervention, civil war, political discontent and economic breakdown all challenged the Bolshevik regime, and proved to result in ideological compromise in order for the Bolshevik's to maintain power. The event of the Kronstadt uprising (7th-18th March, 1921), and the introduction of the New Economic Policy in March 1921, saw the Bolshevik Party compromise their original revolutionary ideals in response to crisis. Not only this, but Bolshevik response to crisis can be said to have in some cases, be reminiscent of practices that existed under the Tsarist regime of 1894-1917.

Crisis and Response

The Kronstadt revolt (7th-18th March 1921), was a revolutionary movement, opposed to the Bolshevik's single-party state and resenting their failure to revive the economy after the failure of War Communist (1918-1921). It was introduced as a response to the economic crisis in late 1917, where the peasants' seizure of large estates led to an immediate disruption of rural production, as these large farms had been the most efficient producers of grain. This worsened the traditional problem of maintaining food supplies to the cities, including the major cities of Moscow and Petrograd. Under War Communism, the state took over all means of production, including mines, factories and railways. Food requisitioned from peasants was redistributed in towns by a ration system controlled by a food commissariat, favouring industrial workers over the bourgeoisie. The initial impact of War Communism was disastrous, causing slumps in agricultural, industrial and transportation production. The attempt to nationalise virtually everything led to the emergence of an unwieldy state bureaucracy, and the repression of workers is seen to display continuity from the tsarist regime, with poor working conditions and long hours commonly endured. As well as this, workers were soon pressured to participate in 'voluntary' work on their days off, known as 'Communist Saturdays' (subbotniki). This, along with the many other Bolshevik measures taken under War Communism, including Lenin's "crusade for bread" and attempts to eliminate the kulaks, ultimately led to the implementation of requisition squads. Between 1917 and 1921, the amount of land under cultivation dropped by 40% as a result, with harvests being around only 37% of the usual yield, (reducing food production by 30% from 1913 levels). Ultimately, it can be seen here that the Bolshevik implementation of War Communism saw some continuity from the tsarist regime. As suggested by Bruce Lincoln, the workers of this time did not work in factories, but the "forced labour prisons of tsarist times".

After claiming that the Bolshevik's had failed to improve political, social or economic conditions enjoyed by the ordinary working people, the sailors from Kronstadt resumed opposition in 1920. Previously amongst the most loyal supporters of the revolution, among their demands were freedom of expression, end of food requisitioning, and the end of a single-party state. The initial Bolshevik response to crush the rebellion swiftly and brutally through the use of Trotsky's Red Army, allows us to question the degree of which the Bolshevik regime mirrored that of the tsar. Trotsky's immediate reaction to eliminate the 'counter-revolutionaries' can be compared with the tsar's attempts to

suppress the people during the revolution of 1905, both through the use of force and violence. This military response not only displays continuity, but also confirms the sailors' belief that the "sickle and hammer – have actually been replaced with the bayonet and barred window", as written in the Kronstadt sailor's letter 'What we Are Fighting For' (March 1st, 1921). The suppression of Kronstadt was the point at which the Bolshevik Party broke their last true links with the working class and with the ideals of October; the revolutionaries had turned on their own. As suggested by Sheila Fitzpatrick, Kronstadt was a "symbolic parting of the ways between the working class and the Bolshevik Party". It was made clear that the Bolshevik regime would respond to any challenge made to their authority with brutal oppression, with anarchist Emma Goldman describing it as a "funeral... for humanity's hope".

Following the events involved with the Kronstadt revolt, the Bolshevik's undertook a major economic response. Lenin introduced an economic program for a compromise on War Communism, in March 1921. Known as the New Economic Policy (NEP), Lenin was seen to respond to the Kronstadt rebellion by modifying state control over the economy. The NEP was a partial return to capitalist economy; an attempt made to restore, consolidate and get the national economy "back on its feet at all cost" (Lenin, 1921). Its essence was the re-establishment of private trade, and a relaxing of centralised state control over the economy, hence improving peasant-farming. The New Economic Policy however, did not reflect the Marxist ideology of state-owned means of production, as markets and private trading were legalised and smaller factories were sold by the government to private owners. In addition, rationing and distribution of food was phased out, and grain requisitioning abandoned, thus appearing to be unfaithful to Bolshevik ideology of "all power to the masses". That is, as suggested by members of the Communist Party, the NEP was a "betrayal of the proletariat" and a break with "true revolutionary strategy". This concept of ideological compromise is further described by Revisionist historian Martin McCauley, where he claims the NEP to have been "a leap out of socialism". The NEP proved to be a noticeable step back from the principle of total, centralised control over trade, and a move towards a mixed economy, where "capitalism existed alongside socialism" (Lauren Perfect). In fact, because of this, the NEP can be seen as a crisis of ideology for the Bolshevik Party, with the basis of Marxist-Leninism encapturing the idea of bypassing the capitalist phase to communism. Therefore, it can be seen that Lenin's response to economic downfall saw a compromise of the original ideals and beliefs of 1917.

Historiography

The Kronstadt uprising saw the Bolshevik regime take a turn for the worst. Their response to political challenge was brutal, and unjustified in relevance to their ideological stance. While the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) claims the Kronstadt sailors were "counter-revolutionaries" who sought to "exploit the discontent of the petty bourgeois...in order to overthrow the power of the soviets", this view is only somewhat useful in telling us the Bolshevik justification for brutal mutiny. This view is highly idealised in favour of Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolshevik movement, and fails to consider the peaceful nature of the Kronstadt sailor's demands for an end to the "totalitarian dictatorship in Russia" (John G. Wright). As suggested by historian Victor Serge, the Bolshevik's were "threatened in no way". Rather, the Kronstadt target was the "increasing totalitarian nature of the single party dictatorship"; they were not demanding an end to the revolution! Bolshevik rule was ever-increasingly turning into the "re-incarnation of the Tsarist regime". Hence, the Bolshevik brutal and swift military response to the 'rebellion' displayed the Bolshevik's as seeking "only to crush Kronstadt...from the very beginning" (Anton Ciliga). As stated by revisionist historian Sheila Fitzpatrick, "the Soviet regime, had turned its guns on the revolutionary proletariat", and the cause of the Kronstadt rebellion was "the complete fault of the Bolshevik party" (Richard Pipes).

The introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1921 was originally claimed by the CPSU as a "temporary retreat", with the return to the policies of War Communism on the agenda. As claimed by Lenin himself, the NEP was necessary in order to "secure" the economy and "provide [Russia] with an adequate base". However, whilst displaying the supposed intentions of returning to 'pure'

communist policies later on, these perspectives fail to acknowledge the earlier failure of War Communism; the whole reason of adapting Russia's economic policy in the first place! As suggested by revisionist historian Orlando Figes, "eventually, Lenin saw the NEP not as a temporary policy, but as a means to achieve socialism". Hence, an evidence compromise in the original ideals of the Bolshevik Party is evident. In fact, the NEP was a "clear admission... they could not exercise control over the countryside" (Graeme Gill). That is, Lenin's introduction of the NEP saw him change his focus of ideology in response to challenges facing the regime. Hence, the NEP eventually saw ideological compromise, failing to deliver the communist, utopian state, promised earlier in 1917.

Conclusion

The nature of Bolshevik society from October 1917 to the early 1920s did not uphold all that was promised in 1917. External and internal military, political and economic challenges that faced the emerging new order, such as the Kronstadt rebellion and failure of War Communism, saw the alterations and modifications of original Bolshevik ideology, in a desperate attempt to maintain dictatorial power. The Kronstadt revolt marks the point which the Bolsheviks broke their last true links with the working class and with the ideals of October, with 5000 Kronstadt sailors being killed, and over 6459 imprisoned or sent to labour camps. Though claiming that the 'reddest of the red' had turned on the Party, the Bolshevik's refusal to negotiate and immediate violent response shows them to be following the slogan "All power to the Bolsheviks!", rather than "All power to the Soviets". The Kronstadt claim to end grain requisitioning and military-style working conditions (seen to lead to workers strikes) and to address the increasing numbers of unemployed workers, saw no real threat to the revolution (supposedly what the Bolshevik's really cared about). Therefore, Bolshevik response to political challenge in 1921 revealed the Bolshevik greed for totalitarian power, not unlike that of the tsar, earlier in 1917.

Although seemingly necessary in order to defend his Party's authority, Lenin's introduction of the New Economic Policy in March 1921, following the Kronstadt revolt, highlights the ideological instability of the Bolshevik Party. The NEP saw a break with true Bolshevik revolutionary strategy, and to some extent, a betrayal to the proletariat. That is, promises made to create an equal society, giving "all power to the masses" was taken away in what was claimed to be an "economic breathing spell" (Lenin). It is because of this that it can be claimed that the Bolshevik response to the economic challenges facing them in 1921 proved the ideals of the regime – and the revolutionaries themselves – to have changed over time.

Finally, it is evident when focusing on, and addressing the Kronstadt uprising and Lenin's NEP as developments of the revolution, that measures taken by the Bolshevik's in response to both external and internal challenges faced from October 1917 to 1921, were unfaithful to the original ideals of the regime. Ideological compromise was apparent and in some cases, continuity of the nature of society created under the tsarist regime was evident. If not only through the ways of dealing with 'counter-revolutionary' forces, the nature of the society created by the Bolshevik's by 1921, was evidently characteristic of that under tsarist rule.