

To what extent did the Kronstadt Rebellion of 1921 influence the development of Soviet Russia as a totalitarian state?

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Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation aims to explore the influence of the Kronstadt Rebellion on the development of Soviet Russia as a totalitarian state. The scope of the study will be limited to examining the significant impacts that the Kronstadt Rebellion had on state control within 1921.

The first source selected for detailed analysis is “My Disillusionment in Russia”, a autobiographical book written by Emma Goldman and published in the USA in 1923. This source is particularly relevant to this investigation as it provides an eyewitness account of the Kronstadt Rebellion and its impact on Soviet Russia due to the Bolsheviks’ reaction.

As the source originates from an anarchist author, its purpose can be deduced as being a leftist criticism of Soviet Russia. Thus, it provides the valuable historical perspective of the events from a political viewpoint similar to that of the Kronstadt sailors. However, her sympathy towards the Rebellion is also a limitation, as it makes the source one-sided and biased against the Bolsheviks, intending to portray them as unjustified through assumptions of their intentions. The content of the source recounts the events of the rebellion, and her consequent reaction to them. Goldman relies upon anecdotal evidence and emotive language. Although this is valuable as it provides insight and nuance regarding the reactions of the people at the time, it is also limiting. It examines Kronstadt’s impact mostly on an individual level; thus, her evidence cannot be easily verified, and long-term or large-scale impacts are not quantified. This account alone is insufficient to evaluate the overall impact of the Rebellion on the establishment of Soviet Russia as a totalitarian state, but is valuable in combination with other sources to evaluate the impact experienced by the population.

The second source selected for detailed analysis is “Kronstadt, 2021,” a book by Paul Avrich published in the USA. As a secondary source, it is relevant to the investigation as it examines the Kronstadt Rebellion within the framework of Soviet Russia’s development, with its content detailing the Rebellion’s impact from the perspective of both the Bolsheviks and those sympathetic with the Kronstadt sailors.

Being published almost fifty years after the Rebellion, the source is valuable as it considers the long-term effects with the benefit of hindsight. However, the time of origin also poses limitations, as Soviet documents surrounding the Kronstadt Rebellion had not yet been released/declassified. Therefore, the perspective of the Bolsheviks was inferred through sources that the Soviet state had made publicly available, which are likely intended to be propaganda. This creates ambiguity about the factuality of the Bolsheviks’ viewpoints. As a source originating from a historian researching during the Cold War, it may be further limited due to bias against the Bolsheviks caused by the prevalent historical perspective in the West which emphasized criticism of the Bolsheviks¹. Nevertheless, as a reputable historian of anarchism and the USSR, Avrich’s established credibility and specialization in analysis of similar movements is valuable as it bolsters the source’s reliability.

(Word Count: 492)

¹ Shorey, “Struggle for Self-Representation”, 11

Section 2: Investigation

On March 2nd, 1921, the Kronstadt sailors began a rebellion against the Bolshevik state despite previously being supporters of the October Revolution. They issued fifteen demands regarding political and economic freedom in the Petropavlovsk resolution.² By March 18th, the Rebellion had been brutally suppressed³. Revisionist historians such as Fitzpatrick and Cohen have interpreted the Rebellion's impact as a key turning point towards the development of totalitarianism in Soviet Russia, as it had forced the Bolsheviks to reevaluate ideology surrounding the revolution.⁴ Western historians such as Avrich and Schapiro have interpreted it as a continuation of Soviet Russia's descent into totalitarianism, emphasizing the importance of the policies passed as a response.⁵ Through these perspectives, this essay investigates the influence of the Kronstadt Rebellion on the formation of Soviet Russia as a totalitarian state⁶ by examining the alienation experienced by the peasantry and the policies passed, and argues that the Western perspective is, ultimately, more convincing.

As the 10th Congress of the Russian Communist Party occurred within the time frame of the Kronstadt Rebellion⁷, the policies proposed and implemented were heavily influenced by the context of the ongoing crisis. During the 10th Congress, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was passed. The NEP permitted a mixed economy, a profit incentive, and replaced requisition with taxation⁸. This policy partially reflected changes that the Petropavlovsk Resolution had

² Goldman, "My Disillusionment in Russia" (see Appendix A)

³ Avrich, "Kronstadt, 1921", 3; Pipes, "Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime," 380-382

⁴ Shorey, "Struggle for Self-Representation", 12-13; Cohen, "Bukharin," 107-108

⁵ Shorey, "Struggle for Self-Representation", 11-12

⁶ Totalitarianism is here defined as a system of government under which every aspect of individual life is subject to control

⁷ Pipes, "Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime," 382

⁸ Lenin, "Collected Works" (See Appendix B)

demanded, one clause of which was to ‘to permit free [...] production by one's own efforts.’⁹ The correlation between the Rebellion and the policy can be shown in “The Tax in Kind,” where Lenin points to the ‘political situation in the spring of 1921’ as justification for the necessity of the NEP,¹⁰ referring to the unrest caused by the Kronstadt Rebellion. Because this policy allowed the free market to a greater degree, this could be interpreted as the Bolsheviks compromising their ideology¹¹; the NEP was regarded by both Viola¹² and Avrich¹³ as a concession. Although this may be considered a temporary retreat from complete control as it decreased Bolshevik power in the economic sphere, Western historians claim that the change in party policy was necessary for the securing of monopoly political power. Schapiro argues that news of the NEP was needed to conciliate the Red Army—maintaining the support of this previously ‘hesitant’ institution directly strengthened Bolshevik power.¹⁴ Moreover, the population was appeased and further rebellions were prevented. Through this, totalitarianism was upheld as control was maintained.¹⁵

However, this concession was not necessarily a direct result of the Kronstadt Rebellion. The NEP had been outlined by Lenin on 8th February, prior to the outbreak of the Rebellion.¹⁶ Therefore, the design of policy was not based on the Petropavlovsk resolution—in fact, Goldman deemed the NEP to be more ‘reactionary’ than the demands made by the Kronstadt sailors.¹⁷ Furthermore, the ‘political situation’ Lenin referred to also encompassed other protests that had

⁹ Goldman, “My Disillusionment in Russia” (see Appendix A)

¹⁰ Lenin, “Collected Works” (See Appendix B)

¹¹ Schapiro, “Origins of Communist Autocracy”, 308

¹² Viola, “Peasant Rebels under Stalin”, 18

¹³ Avrich, “Kronstadt, 1921”, 225

¹⁴ Schapiro, “Origins of Communist Autocracy”, 309

¹⁵ Shorey, “Struggle for Self-Representation”, 11-12; Schapiro, “Origins of Communist Autocracy”, 295

¹⁶ Avrich, “Kronstadt, 1921”, 221.

¹⁷ Goldman, “My Disillusionment in Russia” (see Appendix A)

occurred previously or simultaneously to the Kronstadt Rebellion, such as the February 1920 protest in Petrograd and the armed peasant uprising in Tambov.¹⁸ As one of many rebellions, Kronstadt was significant not because it was the only source of unrest, but because it acted as an indication of prevalent discontentment. Avrich argues that the Kronstadt Rebellion did not significantly influence the design of Lenin's policies, and did not cause changes in economic ideology.¹⁹ Rather, the Rebellion demonstrated to the Bolsheviks the need for immediate action, merely accelerating the NEP's implementation.²⁰ In contrast, Cohen argues that the NEP could have led to experimentation and Social Democracy; the Bolsheviks had adapted to social conditions to align policy with the population's demands.²¹ However, this view is less convincing; even as the economy became less controlled, the political sphere simultaneously became more oppressive.

In addition to the NEP, Resolution No. 12: "On Party Unity" was passed during the 10th Congress. This legislated the banning of factions in the Party, abolishing oppositionist groups and allowing the expulsion of CPSU members.²² Lenin utilized fears partially fuelled by the Kronstadt Rebellion (which the Party had maintained was a White Guard movement²³) to propose the resolution, using Kronstadt as an example of an 'internal dispute[s] exploited by the forces of counterrevolution'²⁴. This policy resulted in the development of totalitarianism in the political sphere due to the centralization of power through ideology and the elimination of criticism and political opposition. Schapiro argues that the resolution resulted in the removal of

¹⁸ Daniels, "Dynamics of Revolution," 241

¹⁹ Avrich, "Kronstadt, 1921", 228

²⁰ Schapiro, "Origins of Communist Autocracy", 308

²¹ Shorey, "Struggle for Self-Representation", 13; Fitzpatrick, "Revisionism in Soviet Russia", 83

²² See Appendix C

²³ Lenin, "Collected Works" (See Appendix B); Avrich, "Kronstadt, 1921", 3

²⁴ See Appendix C

Party members who had advocated for political freedom.²⁵ As a result, before 1921 ended, all previously tolerated political opposition or factions that held power or influence, including that from within the Party, were driven underground.²⁶ Contrarily, Revisionist historian Fitzpatrick argues that conflict between factions was more so due to a struggle between class values of each faction than it was an attempt to implement totalitarianism, therefore being a decision made by the Bolsheviks that was not closely correlated to Kronstadt's impact.²⁷ Nevertheless, the passing of the policy resulted in the Bolsheviks obtaining a greater stranglehold on the political sphere, thus facilitating totalitarianism.

However, totalitarian characteristics in the political sphere had been present in Soviet Russia before the events of the Kronstadt Rebellion—the suppression of Kronstadt had been preceded by other instances of oppression against opposition or political dissent. Left-wing political opposition faced persecution, despite being permitted officially.²⁸ In the Petropavlovsk resolution itself, the Kronstadt rebels had demanded freedom for jailed leftist opposition.²⁹ Political freedom for the population was already limited; this resolution specifically targeted 'factions' within the Party.³⁰ Western historian Avrich argues that Soviet Russia had already set course towards totalitarianism before the Kronstadt Rebellion; he has 'no objections' that totalitarianism had been the Bolsheviks' goal when they seized power in 1917. Avrich and Schapiro agree that the resolution was only seen as decisive in hindsight—at the time, the suppression of factionalism seemed to be the next logical step for the culmination of central

²⁵ Schapiro, "Origins of Communist Autocracy", 295

²⁶ Avrich, "Kronstadt, 1921", 226

²⁷ Fitzpatrick, "Bolshevik's Dilemma," 605

²⁸ Schapiro, "Origins of Communist Autocracy," 170

²⁹ Goldman, "My Disillusionment in Russia" (see Appendix A)

³⁰ See Appendix C

control.³¹ Although this policy did facilitate the political control needed for totalitarianism, the Kronstadt Rebellion was not the sole or direct cause of its implementation—intentions of totalitarian control were integrated into Bolshevik ideology.

Through the revisionist perspective, the inherent totalitarianism in the Bolshevik ideology can be contested; to many spectators at the time (including Goldman), the suppression of Kronstadt was seen as an anomalous turn to totalitarianism. This suppression demonstrated that the Bolshevik government had ceased to be the popular movement; Soviet Russia consolidated itself as totalitarian through the oppression of popular demands, thus alienating the population. The Kronstadt Rebellion, dubbed the ‘Third Revolution,’ was seen as a continuation of the Soviet revolutionary tradition, this time turned against the Bolsheviks. Members of the CPSU itself considered the suppression of the Rebellion as a turning point, some pointing out the dangers of the alienation caused.³² Goldman, who had initially sympathized with the Bolsheviks, notes that Kronstadt’s suppression was what ‘broke the [...] thread that held [her] to the Bolsheviks.’³³ Although Kronstadt was not the sole example of a revolt, nor was it the sole cause of alienation, the Bolsheviks’ choice to crush it contributed to the more defined separation between the ruling and working class. Revisionists emphasize this split: Fitzpatrick argues that the Bolsheviks’ own sense of legitimacy was undermined by the working class’s rejection of their government; consequently, it was at this distinct point that the Bolsheviks turned against the working class.³⁴

³¹ Avrich, “Kronstadt, 1921”, 228; Schapiro, “Origins of Communist Autocracy,” 359

³² Daniels, “Dynamics of Revolution”, 251-253

³³ Goldman, “My Disillusionment in Russia” (see Appendix A)

³⁴ Fitzpatrick, “Bolshevik’s Dilemma,” 608-610

In conclusion, the Western historiographical perspective regarding Kronstadt's impact is more convincing; the Rebellion did not drastically shift the intended course of Bolshevism, nor was it the sole factor that steered Soviet Russia into totalitarianism. However, despite the events of the Kronstadt Rebellion not being the direct cause of the development of the totalitarian state, it does hold historical significance. When considering the policies passed during the 10th Congress of the Russian Communist Party, the Rebellion was regarded as a key factor both by Western historians and by the Bolsheviks at the time. These policies, which were influenced by the Kronstadt Rebellion, consolidated centralized Bolshevik control, and would go on to shape the way the Soviet Union would develop as a totalitarian state in the later years.

(Word Count: 1353)

Section 3: Reflection

Through this study, I gained an insight to both the methodology used in historical investigations and the challenges that a historian faces.

To me, the investigation highlighted the way that the study of the history of a totalitarian state is hindered immensely by censorship and propaganda in the political realm. I saw this limitation reflected in my search for primary sources, as well as in the range of information that a historian has used to create secondary sources. In this case, the true perspective or motivation of the Bolsheviks is difficult to pinpoint. While their official stances are widely available, the truth of these documents needs to be questioned. For instance, while the historically significant perspective of Lenin may be understood through his writings, it must be considered that these writings were also meant to influence public opinion to Lenin's advantage; thus he may intentionally obscure or mislead. In this case, Lenin publicly maintained that Kronstadt was a revolution supported by the White Army, but the degree of which he truly believed this can be debated. Thus, a historian investigating a totalitarian state is likely to face the challenge of primary sources that were created with the intention of not being transparent, which leads to lack of factual information regarding the leaders' true perspectives.

Additionally, this demonstrated the ambiguity inherent in the investigation when quantifying the significance or the impact of one singular factor in history. The direct consequence of (or how the course of history had changed due to) one event is difficult to trace and to isolate. In most instances, the way a significant change or a 'turning point' takes place is

dependent on multiple interlinked factors. The importance of each factor can be interpreted and evaluated differently, leading to the development of a variety of historiographical perspectives. The correlation between one event as a cause of change and the change that follows it is not direct, not objectively measurable, nor even necessarily meaningful. Therefore, evaluation of significance in history can always be subject to debate—there is no unquestioned truth that can be deduced.

(Word Count: 346)

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Appendix A

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/goldman/works/1920s/disillusionment/ch27.htm>

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Appendix B

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Appendix C

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