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Speech at an Emergency Session of the Petrograd Soviet on the Question of Kronstadt

Leon Trotsky
10 June 2017

This speech was delivered by Trotsky at an emergency session of the Petrograd Soviet dealing with attacks by the Provisional Government against the increasingly restive sailors at the Kronstadt naval base. When some directives of the Provisional Government had been defied by the sailors, they were unjustly accused of intending to have Kronstadt “secede” from Russia.

Two separate newspaper accounts of Trotsky’s speech differed so much that the editors of his Works included both in this publication. The first was originally published in Novaia zhizn’ (New Life), No. 33, 9 June (27 May) 1917. The second was published in Izvestiia, No. 76, June 9 (May 27) 1917. [1]

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Trotsky delivered a major speech. [2] His speech was interrupted by noise and protests by some, and stormy applause by others. He showed that the four resolutions of the Kronstadt Soviet, adopted on 16, 21, 24 and 25 May, [3] did not contradict each other, and were not directed against [4] the Provisional Government, but were a natural consequence of the situation that had developed, when neither the Provisional Government nor the Petrograd Soviet possessed power—a situation that Trotsky characterized as “dual lack of power” [*dvoebezvlastie*].

Later, in reference to an article by Rozhkov, Trotsky pointed to the counterrevolutionary activity of the government commissars within Russia, and expressed his perplexity: why were the socialist-ministers wasting time subduing Kronstadt, instead of directing attention to the organization of local power, by removing the Black Hundred commissars who in the coming counterrevolution would play the role of the revolution’s executioners?

The bad organization of local power aroused the fully legitimate distrust of the Kronstadters toward the Provisional Government, and so long as the government has not armed itself with an iron broom and has not begun to sweep away all the Black Hundred filth, conflicts like the one at Kronstadt are inevitable.

Trotsky proposed that people refrain from inflaming passions, or sharpening the conflicts, but adopt a resolution [5] declaring the incident resolved and pointing to the necessity of the immediate organization of revolutionary power in the localities.

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Comrade Trotsky indicated that if one adopted the standpoint of Tsereteli, then there would be a colossal contradiction between the declarations of the Kronstadt Soviet and what was being ascribed to it. The Provisional Government, the majority of the Executive Committee, and the bourgeois press, which supports the Executive Committee, all claimed that Kronstadt had seceded from Russia, but the Kronstadters said that this was not so. After the visit by Tsereteli and Skobelev, the press interpreted the results of their visit as a victory of the Provisional Government and a surrender by Kronstadt of its positions. The Kronstadters declared, however, that they had surrendered nothing, that there had been no victory by the Provisional Government, and that what had been achieved was an agreement which the newspaper “Voice of Truth” interpreted as a victory of the Kronstadt Soviet over the undemocratic principles of the Provisional Government. Without doubt, the agreement had not been violated.

The resolution by the bureau of the Executive Committee cannot be accepted, since it is filled with threats to the Kronstadters. This is a case where the old regime is interpreting any movement as a product of the activity by agitators. But we say that movement is caused by life, and the movement in Kronstadt is provoked by the fact that many Black Hundred representatives of power have remained at their posts, which explains the distrust toward the ministries. Our socialist-ministers are not fighting the Black Hundred danger, but are declaring war on the Kronstadt sailors and soldiers. If reaction triumphs, then the Black Hundred commissars will prepare a noose for us, and the Kronstadt soldiers will die along with us. People talk about dual power, but what we have is dual lack of power, since the Provisional Government has no firm power, and you have not decided to take it.

Trotsky proposed the adoption of two resolutions: (1) acknowledging the Kronstadt incident resolved due to the agreement that has been achieved, and (2) obligating the executive Committee to adopt all measures with revolutionary urgency for the all-round democratization of local power.

Notes:

[1] This question was raised at a session of the Petrograd Soviet in connection with the conflict that had arisen between the

Kronstadt Soviet and representatives of the Provisional Government at Kronstadt. The initial cause of this conflict was the fact that our party headed the Kronstadt Soviet; it is completely natural that the coexistence of bourgeois plenipotentiaries and the local revolutionary regime could not help but lead to conflicts. The unwillingness of Kronstadt to submit to several directives given by the government commissar provided a pretext for the bourgeois social-compromise press to begin howling about the supposed “secession” of Kronstadt from Russia. The session of the Kronstadt Soviet was held in order to influence the Kronstadters. This was preceded by the visit of Tsereteli and Skobelev to Kronstadt, made in the name of the Provisional Government. The result of this visit was the resolution provided below (see note 3).

[2] In view of the fact that a transcript has not been preserved, and the account of the speech in “Novaia Zhizn’ [New Life]” and “Izvestiia” differ in content, we are providing both versions. One must keep in mind that the presentation of speeches in these newspapers often were reportorial, i.e., the speeches were given both in the first and third persons.—The editors [of Trotsky’s *Works*].

[3] Unfortunately, we have not managed to locate all the resolutions. We are providing only the following ones (from 21 May):

In response to the question from representatives of the Provisional Government, minister I. G. Tsereteli and M. I. Skobelev, about the attitude toward the central authorities, the Kronstadt Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies declares: being in agreement with the resolution of the majority of the revolutionary democracy of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, which has acknowledged that the present Provisional Government is invested with full state power, in common for all revolutionary Russia, we, on our part, fully recognize this power. Recognition does not of course exclude criticism and the wish that the revolutionary democracy create a new organization of central power, having transferred all power into the hands of the Soviet of Soldiers’ and Workers’ Deputies. We hope that, by ideological pressure on the opinion of the majority of democracy, we will manage to direct this majority onto the path which we recognize to be the only correct one. But since this has not been achieved, and the majority is not in agreement with us and supports the present Provisional Government, we recognize this government and consider that its directives and laws apply just as much to Kronstadt as to all the remaining parts of Russia. We decisively protest against attempts to attribute to us the intention of separating Kronstadt from the rest of Russia in the sense of organizing some kind of sovereign or autonomous state power within a united revolutionary Russia, in opposition to the present Provisional Government.

195 votes for the resolution, 26 against, 22 abstaining.

On the question of representation of the Provisional Government in Kronstadt, the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies declares that it chooses for this post the head of affairs for the civilian part, who will be subject to confirmation by the Provisional Government and be responsible to it.

202 votes for this resolution, 9 against, 26 abstaining.

All military and navy heads are guided by the directives of the

high command. Relations between the local command staff and control organizations within it remain as before.

213 for, 9 against, 14 abstaining.

On the question of the need to quickly introduce democratic organs of local self-rule and judicial bodies on common foundations for all Russia, the Kronstadt Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies declares that these laws, as general state laws, cannot meet any impediments on its part.

203 for, 7 against, 18 abstaining.

On the question of the arrested officers, the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies declares that it will cooperate with the investigative commission appointed by the high court, given mutual work in it by representatives of the local investigative commission from the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies of the city of Kronstadt, during the preliminary investigation in Kronstadt so that the people whom this commission will put on trial are sent for trial to Petrograd along with representatives of the interested command from Kronstadt engaged in investigating the case. Those who prove to be innocent in the process of investigation are to be freed in Kronstadt by the investigative commission, and this shall be communicated to the Executive Committee of the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’

Deputies and all units of the garrison.

160 for, 57 against, 16 abstaining.

In view of false information spread by several organs of the press that the arrested officers are held in exceptionally harsh conditions and are being tortured with instances of death, the Soviet invites representatives of parties, social organizations and press to visit the prisoners and personally see them to become convinced of the absurdity of such rumors. Permission to visit is given by the Executive Committee, without delay, at any time except holidays. The visitor must be supplied with credentials from political parties, a social organization or the press.

[4] Here, the report of the speech is clearly wrong. From L. D. Trotsky’s entire position on this question, and from the actual status of things, it is clear that he could not have said that the resolutions of the Kronstadt Soviet were not directed against the Provisional Government. Trotsky’s main idea was that Kronstadt had no intention of seceding from Russia, as was being reported by the majority of the compromisers and by the reptilian press. This, by the way, is clearly evident from the report of the same speech given by “Izvestiia.”

[5] Unfortunately, these resolutions have not been found. “Izvestiia” only reports that comrade Trotsky removed one of the two resolutions that had been introduced, but since the chairman did not want to present the second to a vote, declaring that the question of the democratization of local power was not on the agenda, the Bolsheviks and the united Social-Democrats left the hall where the session was being held.



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