

Kronstadt and Kyrgyzstan: A Tale of Two Revolutions

By Jaime Fitter

Nestled in the Gulf of Finland, only a short distance from the city of St. Petersburg, sits the quiet, picturesque fortress town of Kronstadt. The name of the town is maybe mostly unknown but even less well known are the striking similarities that the history of this small island town has with the titular mountain nation of Kyrgyzstan. Shaped by revolution and democratic upheaval, the legacy of freedom has defined both these places.

Kronstadt and Kyrgyzstan have more in common than just the letter K - they burn brightest with the flame of revolution.

A Call to Action:

There are few countries and societies in the world that have a stronger tradition of autocracy and authoritarianism than Russia. This does not, however, mean that there is no tradition of revolution against authority and oppression - in fact, in the former Russian and Soviet empires, the two were tied at the hip, so much so that it took almost five years of brutal, bloody fighting, and even longer weeding out of anti-authority factions to pacify it totally - and in Kyrgyzstan, this legacy took until 2005 to explode onto the world stage.

The small island Kronstadt sat comfortably at the entrance to St. Petersburg in Northern Russia, is the site of one of the only pro-democracy uprisings in the entire Soviet Union. Built in the early 1700's, the fortress remained one of the most heavily fortified places in Russia for several hundred years, and operated as both a Red and White naval base and guardian against invasion of the former capital. It was here that the revolution in 1917 first gained meaningful military support, with the soldiers and sailors fighting with such

ferocity that Leon Trotsky, then Commissar for War, called them “the Pride and Glory of the Revolution”. It is perhaps ironic then, that he was the coordinating force behind crushing the rebellion.

Kyrgyzstan, as a nation, is dwarfed in both geography and population by the much more authoritarian Uzbekistan, with a colossal population of almost 30 million, and both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have populations larger than Kyrgyzstan by several million. It is fairly surprising then, that Kyrgyzstan is the most democratic nation of the Stans, even ones as far south as Pakistan and Afghanistan. The only country in West Asia with any form of Parliamentarianism, the only one to have had not one, but two, presidents deposed by popular uprisings, and the only country to have had a president willingly step down from the position; even more impressively, she was the first female president in all of West Asia.

Now, to understand the connections between the two, there are important motivating factors that are crucial to wrap our heads around before spotting the similarities. Our first port of call (ha ha) is a break-neck return tour of the island of Kronstadt, so grab your Budyonny helmets, winter coats and Mosin rifle, a revolution is brewing in the Baltic sea!

The Powder Keg:

A small island by Russian standards, Kronstadt is a mere 19 kilometres squared. But this little place is rich in history, and soaked in blood. For a few fateful months in 1921, Kronstadt was the focal point of a major row that threatened to tear apart the fledgling Soviet Union.

The policy of War Communism, deemed necessary by the Soviet government during the Russian Civil War, was immensely unpopular among the Russian peoples, especially those working as farmers. The policy, basically, entailed that the Red Army could seize whatever food and resources it required from farmers and peasants in the Russian countryside. At a time of massive social upheaval and armed civil conflict, this program was endured by the peasant population of Russia. But when the policy was continued after the expulsion of the final White forces in 1920, it became increasingly unpopular.

It was to the backdrop of this policy, and the other internal issues dividing the Soviet Union such as the war against Marshal Pilsudski’s Polish forces, that lit the flame of revolution in Kronstadt.

In late February 1921, the crews of the battleships Petropavlovsk and Sevastopol announced their intentions to chair a "Provisional Revolutionary Committee" to oversee a transition of "All Power to the Soviets", a phrase used widely by Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin in the October Revolution four years previously. It was in these meetings that a series of demands, known as the Petropavlovsk Resolution, were first drawn up and distributed to the Red Army soldiers, Red Navy sailors and the other proletarian groups within Kronstadt.

The exact inflammation of tensions in Kronstadt is widely attributed to a reduction in the supply of fuel and food on the island - something that both demoralised and demotivated the population. This is not to say that there was a lack of energy or enthusiasm amongst the sailors, soldiers and workers of Kronstadt. On the contrary - the rapid organisation and mobilisation of forces in the fortress were reminiscent to many Kronstadters of the October Revolution, and the excitement in the fortress was only exacerbated by exaggerated reports of widespread support on the mainland.

For the most part, the Soviet authorities had done nothing to try and calm this situation before it reached its tipping point with the creation of the committee and the Petropavlovsk Resolution. Three members of the higher command structure of the Bolshevik authorities were dispatched to Kronstadt to try and calm the situation, including Mikhail Kalinin, President of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, RSFSR for short. The speeches made by these representatives were at best confrontational, and at worst incendiary. Far from calming the crowds gathered in Anchor Square, the main meeting point for the revolutionaries in Kronstadt, the Soviet politicians only succeeded in confirming the suspicions of the Kronstadters that the party was deadlocked by bureaucratic rot.

The Provisional Revolutionary Committee decided in the wake of the failed attempts by the Bolshevik leadership that hunkering down in the fortress would be the best idea, and given the extreme defensibility of the town, this has been viewed as either an incredibly pragmatic decision, or one rooted in revolutionary optimism. It was this decision, and the detention of the other two Communist delegates to the island, that led the Bolshevik government to take armed action against the revolutionaries. And they mustered quite the force to deal with the uprising.

Combining the now well-known and devastating magic team of Field Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky and War Commissar Leon Trotsky, the Bolshevik forces arrayed against the defenders of Kronstadt were by far the superior of the two. With planes, artillery, well motivated and well equipped men, the Red Army forces seemed able to totally, and easily, overpower the relatively small force of sailors and soldiers on Kronstadt. However, a mixture of overconfidence, poor preparation and planning, and even sheer optimism blinded the Bolshevik military leadership. The first assault on the island was a bloodbath for both sides, with the heavy guns of the Petropavlovsk and Sevastopol being powerful weapons against the advancing Red Army forces.



Victorious Red Army Soldiers stand aboard one of the captured Kronstadt ships, after retaking the island.

(<https://www.rferl.org/a/crushing-of-kronstadt-uprising-lenin/31102658.html>)

It was the second attack, a couple weeks later, which sealed the fate of the defenders. On 16 March, the Bolshevik forces mounted their final attack, and by the end of the day had secured the town and her outlying forts. It was in this climate that what was left of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee fled across the ice to safety in Finland, where they were placed into refugee camps, and were subsequently interviewed by both international and local journalists, raising global awareness of the internal instability plaguing the Soviet Union.

This legacy of revolution and anti-authoritarianism is a streak that is fairly uncommon within Russia itself and the other post-Soviet states. That is not to say that there are no examples of anti-regime movements or groups within the former Soviet Union, more so that the success of these groups follows the pattern set by that in Kronstadt almost 100 years earlier. I am, of course, talking about the West Asian nations, sometimes referred to colloquially as “the Stans”. The best example of successful anti-regime and anti-authority movements in this part of the world is to be found in the country of Kyrgyzstan, a tiny nation bordering the states of China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Between a Rock... and a Harder Rock:

Like most nations defined by mountains, Kyrgyzstan is a very high country - its average elevation is 2750 metres, and 80% of the land is over 1000 metres above sea level. Its elevation is matched by its lofty ideals, with democracy and accountability forming a large part of the national identity.

More presidential dictators have been deposed in this country than have held the position of president in three of the other countries of Central Asia - Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The first of these dictators were deposed in 2005, during the so-called “Tulip Revolution”, after having ruled from independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. His name was Aksar Akayev, and after his deposition he fled to Russia, where he was given political asylum. Following this, his successor Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who ruled from 2005 to 2010, was also deposed after allowing the armed forces to fire on pro-democratic protests in the so-called “Melon Revolution”, something that Akayev refused to do. The deposition of Bakiyev led to his fleeing to Belarus, where he was also granted political asylum.

Starting to see a pattern here?

The following president was the one to break the chain of bad luck, and Roza Otunbayeva became the first - and only - female president of a Central Asian country. She was also the first to step down from the position, and yielded power to the overwhelmingly popular candidate Almazbek Atambayev, who won the presidential election with a 60% landslide vote.

He was later imprisoned on corruption charges after being voted out, was freed during election protests in 2020, suffered a failed assassination attempt, his third, and has been imprisoned on the aforementioned corruption charges.

He, in turn, was succeeded by Sooronbay Jeenbekov, who was replaced by Sadyr Japarov in 2021. He is the sixth, and current, president of Kyrgyzstan.

To date, Kyrgyzstan has endured three democratic revolutions, with the most recent taking place in 2020 following the elections, where claims of widespread fraud motivated the now extremely politically active population to take proactive steps in making their voices heard. It was during these protests that Atambayev was freed from prison, and is commonly referred to as the Third Kyrgyz Revolution.



Kyrgyz Pro-Democracy Protesters, in 2010.

(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8608458.stm>)

While Kyrgyzstan is still a very young nation, her history and already prominent position as the only democratic nation in Central Asia has become a source of inspiration for opposition and pro-democratic groups across the entire region. But there is still a long way to go for the democratisation and liberalisation of the other Stans, and even in neighbouring Uzbekistan, peaceful democratic movements are greeted with brutal repression and police and military violence against protestors, in a way not dissimilar to the Soviet government in Kronstadt.

Through the Looking Glass:

Despite being separated by almost 100 years, the uprising in Kronstadt and the many revolutions in Kyrgyzstan have plenty in common - primarily, their

opposition to authoritarianism and wish to return to a more democratic form of representation and governance. This desire for greater freedom in choosing who governs and administers who, is prevalent in both Kyrgyzstan's massive leaps forward towards democracy and a more fair and equal society, namely in establishing a parliamentary system of governance and balance within the country, and in the brave sacrifices of the Kronstadt sailors and soldiers for the ideal of "All Power to the Soviets", a concept which, to them, had been betrayed by the very people who had sworn to ensure its execution.

From the perspective of someone living in a mostly free, mostly democratic country, one cannot help but be inspired by the continued struggle for freedom and rights that is one of the very few connective threads that has united peoples from all over the world. Whether it be in a post-colonial, sub-Saharan state, or a small mountainous republic, or a tiny speck of land that sits on the jugular of the Russian bear, the sacrifices and decisions that these revolutionaries fought and died for, their iron-willed determination to ensure a better and freer world for those who came after them, is one that we should all aspire to live up to.

While we sit here in our small island nation off the periphery of the European continent, it can be all too easy to take our freedom for granted. The ideals of the Kyrgyz and Kronstadt peoples are evidence for just how grateful we should be.

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