

‘A Battleship, Maggots and Revolution’

[Mutiny aboard the Russian imperial battleship POTESKIN, June 27, 1905]

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“Revolutions have never lightened the burden of tyranny: they have only shifted it to another shoulder.”

George Bernard Shaw’s Preface to ‘The Revolutionist’s Handbook.’

“The export of revolution is nonsense. Every country makes its own revolution if it wants to, and if it does not, there will be no revolution.”

Joseph Stalin, interview, 1936

The great battleship POTESKIN, finest and most powerful of the imperial Russian fleet sporting the latest 12 inch guns, rested easily with her newly painted black hull, deep yellow upper-works, black-banded funnels after anchoring in Tendra Bay on the Black Sea, June 26, 1905. Captain Eugene Golikov dispatched Lieutenant Baron Klodt von Jurgensburg to the port of Odessa in the 100 ton torpedo boat N267 for groceries: flour, potatoes, wine and delicacies for the officer’s wardroom, big carcasses of beef for the general crew’s diet of meat borsch—enough to last the ship until general maneuvers on July 4<sup>th</sup>. The beef hung from hooks on the spar deck in the open. Rot had already set in not noticed until the morning four-to-eight watch when the smell was detected with white active maggots. “What about a few maggots? The beef can be washed with vinegar and water,” pronounced Dr. Smirnov, the ship’s surgeon. Sailors had complained for centuries over food, grueling duty in all kinds of weather, lack of shore leave, months if not years from home and loved ones commanded by often brutal officers with all locked in the class systems they knew so well ashore. With men in close quarters the social, political, economic events of the day were more condensed, ready to boil over with the disgruntled often fired by agitators aboard known as ‘sea lawyers, deck plate philosophers.’ Discipline in the Russian navy then no better or worse than that of Great Britain, France, Germany or United States, then emerging as a great naval power by President Theodore Roosevelt from his ‘bully pulpit.’

Russia had been ruled by the Romanov dynasty since 1613 and the eleventh year of Tsar Nicholas II, Supreme Autocrat of all the Russias. “Above the Kremlin is the Tsar and above the Tsar is but God” even if the imperial capital was in far northern St. Petersburg. Fears of uprisings, revolts, if not open revolution had been a threat to Russia for some years now made even more ominous by the demoralizing, disastrous defeat of the Russian Pacific fleet at the Straights of Tsushima by the Imperial Japanese navy in 1904 with horrendous loss of life and Russian ships. Unrest in the rapidly emerging industrial classes and peasants on the land spread rapidly. In these years the revolutionary movement was solidly a socialistic one far removed from the later Bolshevik version that bloomed into Lenin’s revolution of 1917—with Lenin termed a “bacillus” by Winston Churchill. The fleet was a troika: the norther Baltic fleet, the now decimated Pacific fleet and the important Black Sea fleet bound within the waters of a sea some 700 miles long, 300 miles wide. The Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878 and the empire’s loss, followed by the Treaty of Berlin, blocked all but Turkish warships sailing through the Bosphorus, kept the fleet contained but no less vital with just one enemy being Turkey. Since the recent Russo-Japanese war and defeat the empire’s southern provinces, the Ukraine and the Black Sea port of Odessa were rich fields for the sowing of socialist, anarchist and revolutionary propaganda. This is where we find the stage set for events soon to unfold with murderous intent aboard the POTESKIN.

Commander Ippolit Giliarovsky, second in command, tough disciplinarian, a young and handsome aristocrat, was the most feared and hated officer aboard the ship who left his “dine-

and-wine” call in the officer’s wardroom to tour the crew mess finding the men even more threatening over the maggot infested beef that had spread like wildfire aboard the ship all day. The crew mess was in an uproar with shouting, defiance, beating their eating irons on the tables with the threat of a riot at any moment. The huge caldrons of meat borsch were ready with none of the six-hundred plus men not touching it. “You see, sir, they will not eat...only bread butter water and tea,” informed the cook Ivan Daniluc. “Silence! Why do you not eat our borsch? The meat is good with just maggot eggs washed off with vinegar and water! Very well! Order the drums beaten for roll call on the quarter-deck.” With now six hundred, seventy crew on deck and only Commander Giliarovsky attending with the other officers remaining in their wardroom, he launched into an attack with haughty demeanor. “Disorders like this are utterly forbidden in a warship of the Imperial Navy. For stirring up a demonstration you can be hung up at the yard-arm.” When asked to eat the borsch, only a few older crew members and bosun mates shuffled forward with the remaining ship’s crew standing silent. “Reform ranks—at attention! Bosun, call out the guard and bring the tarpaulin!” Commander Giliarovsky was bluffing with a sense of false confidence calling up the firing squad. Nothing could have played out better in the flaming eyes of POTEMKIN sailors Torpedo Master Afanasy Matushenko, prime revolutionary leader and Social Democratic voice aboard ship, Fyodor Mikishkin, Josef Dymtchenko who had long worked converting followers in the crew with power and fanaticism. “So, it’s mutiny, is it?!” Giliarovsky shouted selecting at random twelve men to be brought forward, covered with the tarpaulin intended to blind them to the firing squad, catch spattering blood.

With the moment ripe, Matushenko worked through the ranks to the front. “Don’t shoot your own comrades—you can’t kill your own shipmates! Don’t fire comrades!” Then other voices, “Get yourselves rifles and ammunition! We’re taking over the ship!” “You’ll obey orders or—“ the commander shouted with the first shot ringing out, men breaking ranks running for the armory in a mounting stampede of intent with others running confused with no present purpose. Commander Giliarovsky returned fire challenging the advancing men like wolves until another shot rang and he fell to the deck dead. No other mutiny in history had flared up so quickly in searing flames and intent. Officers daring to come from the wardroom were instantly shot with Gunnery Officer, Lieutenant Neoupokoev, one of eighteen officers besides the captain, the next being tossed over the side, then Midshipman Liventzov shot with cruel laughing as the murderous packs searched the ship. Those not routed and shot point blank were tossed or jumped on their own over the side to swim for their lives while mutineers stood at the rail shooting fish in a barrel, shot making little water fountains, blood boiling up from floating bodies. The one remaining was Captain Golikov found in his cabin, led on deck begging for his life, promptly shot, tossed over the side. Other officers admitted being supporters of the socialist movement—or so trumped up to save their lives—were put under guard with all signs of rank cut from their uniforms. Baron von Klodt, witnessing the events from his anchorage, was arrested under revolutionary guard and ordered in his fast torpedo boat to head for the city and port Odessa some eight hours away to relay the news. With the ship secured by the key mutineers, decks washed of blood, debris tossed over the side, the question now in the POTEMKIN’s revolutionary leader and now commander Matushenko’s mind was what next? Where do we go?

Securing the ship in revolutionary hands turned to haranguing those not committed to the mutiny. Older sailors and noncom officers were still loyal to the regime. Many still undecided with Matushenko and his men holding long propaganda meetings on deck and below in the mess hall. Cooperating officers and noncoms in vital departments of the ship from navigation to

engineering, gunnery would be needed to man the ship for further action. The ship would continue her need for coal, fresh water, food supplies, allies ashore with her guarded safe bulging with gold rubles, paper currency. No mutiny is ever secure with those not aligned prone to assume control, arrest or kill the leaders and their followers. One authority was replaced by another with Matushenko as supreme leader setting watches as usual, orders as before. The old order on the ship replaced by a new one. Word would soon spread to Odessa with Vice-Admiral Kreiger deploying the squadron to intercept and possibly destroy the POTEMKIN. Would the fleet respond as ordered or throw their allegiance in with the mutineers with revolution in the Black Sea coastal cities? There was no turning back with all aboard comprehending their actions and consequences. Their punishment would be instant after a trial facing a firing squad or hanging unless amnesty offered for surrendering the ship.

That evening steam was raised on the POTEMKIN, anchors raised and with the traditional imperial standard of the blue and white cross of St. Andrew lowered and the large red flag of revolution run up, she steamed for the Ukranian port of Odessa. The ship christened bearing the name of Prince Gregori Alexandrovich Potemkin, Catherine the Great's favorite and ruthless first minister. In 1905 the city of Odessa was fourth largest in the empire with a population of half a million, rich in ship building, trade, manufacturing, food processing, universities, culture, art museum and now a large seething population ripe for social unrest and revolution following the Russo-Japanese War. The city, similar to Cincinnati, sat atop the rising banks by the sea with the famed long granite steps from the quay leading up to the boulevard.

Already on June 27, massive riots had broken out in the city with military reinforcements from the army and the dreaded Cossacks being rushed in to quell the disorder with many deaths. Imagine if you will, a massive battleship, with powerful twelve inch guns gliding up the Ohio River into Cincinnati, dropping anchor as spectators watched her guns slowly swing to port directed at the city, her red flag of revolution on her stern post. Revolutionary elements in the city rowed back and forth to parley with the mutineers, harangue the still uncommitted crew with revolutionary zeal. Odessa university student and Social Democrat Constantine Feldman rowed from shore to board firing them up with his oratorical skills. International news agencies reported the possible revolution with Lloyds of London sending cables to ship companies putting the Mediterranean Sea to Gibraltar under high alert. The People's Committee negotiated ashore for free access to coal, food, supplies along with a treaty to bury the body of mutineer Gregori Vakulinchuk killed in the shooting aboard ship.

Massive bombardment of the city by the ship's guns was expected--demanded--by the revolutionaries working the crew on the ship and ashore to rally the thousands streaming in the city streets and along the high bank. The ship was capable of raining 20,000 tons of explosive shells in any military engagement. But how? Gunners aboard had no detailed map of the city streets, vital buildings to accurately lay their shots with crew members aboard shouting, "We can't fire upon our own people!" Again imagine a ship desiring to aim guns on our City Hall, Federal Building, Court House, Federal Reserve Bank within steps of our own Literary Club. A list of six demands were sent ashore with one to bury sailor Vakulinchuk in required Russian Orthodox tradition. One warning shot roared out from the POTEMKIN and a second aimed striking the roof of the concert hall where army officers were convened in a strategy meeting. The threat to destroy the city was possibly imminent. The expected bombardment ended with no real results.

With sailor Vakulinchuk's body on show at the base of the long granite steps by thousands of mourners, the dreaded horse mount Cossacks came into action brandishing their

rifles, deadly swords, bayonets storming through the throng with deadly intent cutting down men, women and children in a murderous act like “an efficient, mechanical harvester” in the words of a journalist that fired revolutionary intent ringing down through the years in Russian history. The sailors ashore sped back to secure their ship, prepare the guns for battle with shots ringing over, around striking several. Ashore massive riots broke out with burning, looting of shipyards, wharves, warehouses, residences, with the usual pogrom against the city’s Jewish population destroying nearly one-fourth of the central city ending in some 6,000 deaths on the low estimate.

On June 30, Vice-Admiral Krieger prepared his battle squadron ROTISLAV and GEORGE THE CONQUEROR, to sail from Sevastopol to encounter and recover the POTESKIN from her mutineers instituting the biggest court-martial in the history of the Russian Navy. The Tsar himself had ordered the “elimination of this shameful blot on the honor of his fighting forces.” The POTESKIN’s wireless picked up a signal from the ROTISLAV, “Men of the Black Sea Fleet, I am appalled at your conduct. Surrender immediately. Only by immediate capitulation will you be spared.” As the ships closed in quickly for an anticipated battle, silence prevailed on the POTESKIN prepared for massive salvos from her squadron. At five hundred yards there was no response but from the GEORGE THE CONQUEROR when hatches, deck turrets were thrown open with her crew streaming on deck waving their caps, shouting, “Hurrah for the POTESKIN! Greetings to our comrades! We wish to join in your mutiny!” Revolutionary leader and now ship Commander Matushenko, seeing officers on the GEORGE’s bridge, coyly hove off suspecting a possible trick. Vice Admiral Krieger’s remaining squadron raced off to the safety of Sevastopol at fifteen knots to avoid a possible encounter.

No mutiny at sea has ever been a total victory with the leaders and crew of the POTESKIN now realizing their failure and possible total defeat with bloody consequences. The ship’s central committee informed the sailors of their plight with gathering forces ashore and soon from the arriving fleet, dwindling coal, water and food stores aboard with no way to replenish other than by dishonorable thievery ashore. The prospect of full-scale war and bombardment ashore, open revolution in southern Russia with terrible consequences prompted the crew to return to Sevastopol, throw themselves on the mercy of the Commander In Chief. With no mercy expected facing the firing squads, hanging noose or labor battalions in Siberia, they shouted, “To Rumania! We’re off to Rumania!” But could the Rumanians be trusted? How long could they steam with diminishing coal and fuel now living on bread, lentils and water. Matushenko and associate Kirill discovered documents in the ship’s library on international law stating, “deserters were invariably subject to extradition and return to their own country.” Here was the answer with them only stopping in Constanza to shop for supplies; then on possibly to the Caucasus where a peasant revolt had broken out.

Rumanian King Carol was in a diplomatic and possibly military dilemma with his Russian neighbor in how to handle the mutineers and the POTESKIN. Originally begging them to surrender with the promise “not to send them home,” the Russian Ambassador demanded the ship and crew be promptly handed over summarily. For the king to give additional support and provisions could lead to a diplomatic confrontation. To return the battleship to Russia and allow her crew to remain in his country the best compromise under the situation. They would surrender at Sevastopol and end their glorious mutiny in the name of the people. That evening, exhausted, hungry, broken in spirits a ceremony was held at sea with the red flag of revolution cast over the side with “tears and broken hearts,” as Matushenko later recalled. But a change in heart had them steaming back to Constanza on July 8<sup>th</sup> to surrender to the terms offered and acquire

Rumanian nationality living as long and freely as they wished in the kingdom. The POTEMKIN slowly began to settle in the harbor after a devoted squad of mutineers opened her sea cocks determined she would never again sail as a unit of the Russian Imperial Navy.

Arriving naval forces worked for two days pumping out the POTEMKIN'S hull to raise her again. On October 9, Tsar Nicholas decreed the newly refurbished, repaired ship's name be changed to PANTELYMON or "Low Peasant" as a disgrace. Later as war threatened, she was again rechristened BORETZ za SVOBODU meaning "Fighter for Freedom." On April 25, 1919 she was sunk at Sevastopol by her officers within a few hours before the arriving Bolshevik forces took over the port.

On August 7, sixty plus officers and crew in the courtroom at Sevastopol ended with only seven executions of the ringleaders, nineteen more sent to servitude in Siberia and thirty-five imprisoned up to twenty years. Socialist agitator Feldman escaped from a civil jail making his way safely to Austria. The trial surprised the public for its leniency. Eighty-five mutineers remained in Rumania where they married, settled down until they became suspect as marked men. All found life in depressed Rumania worse than in provincial or industrial Russia. A number were caught at the Russian frontier, sent to Siberia. Matushenko and four friends accepted the terms of amnesty offered by the government in 1907. At the frontier he was taken captive and hanged as a traitor. His companions sent to Siberia. Right hand man, Josef Dymtchenko fled Rumania in 1908 with thirty-one companions, wives and children struggling on to London where British Friends of Russian Freedom took them over with an appeal for funds to allow the ex-mutineers to seek refuge in Argentina with the aid of George Macaulay Trevelyan, his brother Charles, and Arthur Ponsonby. Today their names and genetic lines are traced in that South American land.

Tsar Nicholas, his family and a few retainers, set out on their own exile and ship of death twelve years later where they met their fates in the basement chamber of a town house in Ekaterinburg, July, 1918 within days of arriving liberating White Russian forces. Were there other battleships playing a role in the evolving Russian Revolution?

October 25, 1917 (Old style calendar) the battlecruiser AURORA, veteran of the Russo-Japanese War under the command of Committee member Aleksander Belyushin, her captain, fired a blank shot from her forecastle gun signaling the assault on the Winter Palace heralding the Bolshevik revolution; forcing Alexander Kerensky and his Provisional Government out of power and his exile to the United States and a fellowship at the Hoover Institute for War Revolution and Peace at Stanford University. The AURORA today is undergoing an intense renovation as a naval vessel museum with the Russian Navy to be finished this year. Never stricken from the naval lists, she will be fully functional as a ship—even if for tourist.

On April 7, 1919 the British battleship HMS MARLBOROUGH arrived at Sevastopol with orders from Queen Alexandra of England, mother of then King George V, to carry out of Russia her sister Dowager Empress Marie, mother of Nicholas II. Surviving members of the Romanov imperial family not previously arrested, shot by the Bolsheviks, boarded the MARLBOROUGH in haste with some thirty-six servants and staff for a total of one hundred exiles. A number jumped from their automobiles with engines still running to board the ship. It was later joked there were enough luxury autos on the dock for every officer on the MARLBOROUGH. Their 200 tons of personal luggage, and rumored millions in Romanov imperial jewels and other valuables, were shaved down to the bare bones. With distant gun fire, sounds of field guns advancing in the rear, the ship sailed on a windy, stormy day for England

where the imperial refugees were scattered to their own fate and destiny like dry leaves before a mounting gale.

But what about the long dreaded Cossacks? My first memories of the Cossacks, now nearly forty-seven years ago on my first trip to then Soviet Russia. At a dismal Intourist Hotel on the outskirts of Brest Litovsk, Russia, a regiment of Cossacks had made camp for a night across the road in the stubble of a recently harvested wheat field. I walked across the road wearing a long trench coat against the chill wind more resembling a CIA operative than a visitor. An older officer bristling with weapons approached, saluted tentatively as we shook hands. Around me were other mounted Cossacks sitting tall, proud in their saddles with capes, high caps, rifles, long swords at their sides, murderous curved knives stuck in the tunic belts behind. Today's reorganized Cossack regiments are proud, dedicated, carefully chosen from age sixteen and trained, naturally, from ethnic Cossack origins. With horse mount, they are supported by modern military vehicles. "Ah, Amerika, yes?" he asked as the circle closed around me. I pointed to the west saying "New York, England, Belgium, Poland, Germany, East Germany at Check Point Charlie." He looked in wonder, smiled, repeating to his men in Russian what I said as they shifted from one foot to the other with wide eyes. Then he laughed with that obscene finger gesticulation to the western horizon. "Ah, East Germany dogs...we treat visitors like you in our Russia much better!"

On December 21, 1925 the movie 'The Battleship Potyomkin' premiered at the Bolshoi Theater after much propaganda blow and show. Director Sergei Eisenstein, in his twenties, was already famous considered a genius in the art of emerging cinema. No doubt many of you here have viewed this world classic in movie making. Turned into a great historical turning point of history, Eisenstein did alter some events while focusing on the power of the surging masses. Who seeing it can forget the abandoned baby carriage flying down the granite steps of Odessa during the riots and assault by the Cossacks? The fruits of the uprising were presented for all to see by those specially invited, ranking audience composed of new aristocrats of the Soviet order. The premier gala was carefully timed for the birthday of Joseph Stalin, who by 1925 had a firm grip on power. The great Stalin sat in his box with his frigid wolf eyes surveying not only the film but the audience around and below him. Little did they know that most attending Stalin's audience that night would shortly be gathered in his hands for murder and exile to Siberia when his Great Terror would take the lives of untold hundreds of thousands.

But there are times when revenge can be served up both hot and cold. Ivan Bishoff, a POTEMKIN mutineer, survived not only the mutiny itself but the revolution, fall of Imperial Russia, Reign of Terror, World War II down to nearly the end of the Soviet Communist era. Bishoff, by charm and guile, escaped the fate of his fellow shipmates making his way to England. During the emerging Soviet years he became an agent for an English-Russian chemical concern. Later he owned a successful fish and chips shop in Dublin, Ireland where he died at age 105, October 27, 1987. I began with quotes and end with one hoping to pin the tail on this donkey of a paper.

"Now don't mistake me. I'm not advising cruelty or brutality with no purpose. My point is that cruelty with purpose is not cruelty—its efficiency. Then a man will never disobey once he's witnessed his shipmate's backbone laid bare. He'll see the flesh jump, hear the whistle of the whip for the rest of his life."

Actor Trevor Howard as Captain Bligh  
'Mutiny on the Bounty'

