

The *Potemkin* Mutiny - Part I

by Hank Foglino

The mutiny aboard the *Potemkin* was one of the incidents that occurred during the development of the 1905 Russian Revolution. The war with Japan, with its tragic results, was drawing to a close and discontent was on the rise among the various classes. This first revolution was a realization within the masses that they could not improve their lives through prayer and lawful solicitations. The workers and peasants were held down by the Tsarist Government together with the landlords, and the only way to improve their lot was with force.

The *Potemkin* as a pre-dreadnought battleship commissioned in 1904. It was named for Grigori Aleksandrovich Potemkin, a military figure in the 18th century, and a favorite of Catherine the Great's. On June 25 the *Potemkin* received orders to sail to Tendra Bay to test the new linings of her 6 and 12-inch guns. Arriving on the 25th, she found sea conditions too rough for test firings. Captain Eugene N. Golikov anchored in the bay and sent his accompanying 100-ton torpedo boat to Odessa for supplies, among which were whole beef carcasses. They were to be used to make meat borscht, a staple for the crew and were hung below.

The next morning a sailor swabbing down

There was only one officer aboard who did not think the affair was over. Second in command, Commander Ippolit Giliarvosky was a strict disciplinarian. He conducted an unscheduled inspection of the mess deck and discovered that the crew was refusing to eat the borscht. When he demanded to know why it was not eaten, he was told to eat it himself, followed by the jeering of the crew. Backing down, he reported the seriousness of the situation to the captain. Golikov called for all hands on deck, and when he arrived, the entire ship's company of some 670 men, less some of the officers, who remained in their cabins, were assembled. Since, except for the petty officers and a few old hands, the majority of the crew was illiterate and crude, and were it not for the war with Japan they would still be turning the soil at home, he assumed that they would be subdued easily. He assured the men that the surgeon had deemed the meat fit to eat, and in a stern voice he said that he had had enough of this nonsense and ordered all who would eat the meat to step forward.

For a moment there was silence, and then a few petty officers and older men stepped forward. More dead silence. The situation was getting critical. The captain backed down, saying that he had no other choice than to send a sample of the meat to the Commander-in-Chief for evaluation and that he would decide what would be done with the malcontents.

Second-in-command Giliarvosky was horrified. This giving the crew the upper hand would make managing them in days to come impossible. Without consulting the captain, he leapt onto the capstan, called for reformed ranks, called out the guards and asked for a tarpaulin. Only the experienced seamen knew what this implied. Under old navy disciplinary action, now no longer applicable, a captain could call out the firing squad, have a sailcloth thrown over mutineers, keeping the affair impersonal, and have them shot.

Giliarvosky, in all probability, was bluffing. Under current rules he could only order 15 lashes for a seaman or a month's imprisonment and knew he would be tried for overstepping his authority. The guard of 12 men armed with fixed-bayonet rifles appeared and Giliarvosky ordered that the ringleaders be brought to him. Two members of the guard and the bosun walked through the ranks picking a dozen men at random. He ordered that they be placed under the tarpaulin.

While all this was going on, Afanasy Matushenko, a revolutionist, was working his way towards the tarpaulin. It will never be known if Giliarvosky was bluffing, for when Matushenko reached the tarpaulin he shouted, "Don't shoot your own comrades - you can't kill your own shipmates. Don't fire, comrades".

The appeal, taken up by the crew and repeated in loud voices all over the ship, became a threat and finally came the cries, "Get rifles and ammunition. We're taking over the ship."

Able seaman Gregori Vakulinchuk was

the first to arrive from the armory with a loaded rifle. He fired the first shot, which may have been fired high only for effect. As he raced across the deck, he was shot and killed by Giliarvosky. Matushenko, leading a group of armed men, arrived on deck at the same moment, killed Giliarvosky and took control of the ship. Most of the officers were killed, some hid below decks, while some were able to swim to the torpedo boat anchored nearby. The torpedo boat tried to escape, but the *Potemkin's* six-inch guns quickly brought the torpedo boat to bay. The *Potemkin* was now under command of the mutineers and Matushenko was elected Chairman of the Ship's Committee. Since the crew was used to obeying orders more from officers than from Marxist extremists, the remaining officers, engineers Kavalenko and Kalujny, remained in charge of the engine room and Lt. Alexeev was appointed captain under the supervision of the committee. With the battleship under their command, the committee decided to take the ship to Odessa and join up with the sympathizers of the rebellion. With the torpedo boat at her stern, the *Potemkin* dropped anchor just outside the harbor entrance at 10 o'clock on the evening of June 27.

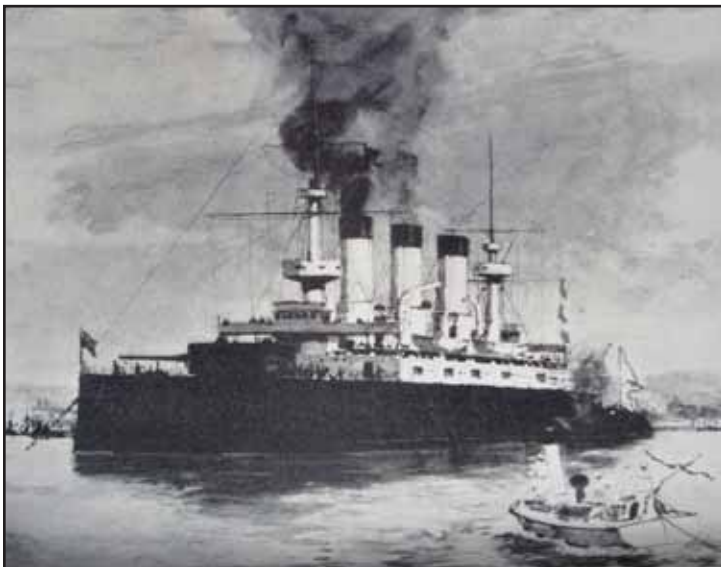
Meanwhile in Odessa, the rift between the working classes and the capitalists was growing and a general strike was in effect. There had been several clashes among the workers, soldiers and police. Several workers had been killed by Cossack sabers and gendarme bullets. The situation was becoming hopeless for the workers, but the arrival of the *Potemkin* and her fire power changed hopelessness to bold confidence. Fearing a full-scale uprising, the commander of the troops in Odessa, General Kokanov, sent for reinforcements.

The next morning Gregori Vakulinchuk's corpse was brought up from sick bay and lowered into a cutter. The lid had been removed from his coffin and secured to his jumper was a notice to the workers:

"Before you lies the body of Gregori Vakulinchuk, a sailor savagely killed by a senior officer of the battleship *Potemkin* for complaining the borscht was bad. Let us make the sign of the cross and say 'Peace to his ashes.' Let us revenge ourselves on our oppressors. Death to them and hurrah for freedom."

The body was taken ashore and placed under a white tent on the seaside quay. It became a rallying point for the revolutionary factions in the city. The quay filled with hundreds of mourners and agitators. As long as the crowds were concerned only with paying homage to the dead hero, General Kokanov held back his Cossacks. However, the crowd turned into a mob, the focus turning from mourning to rebellion, and started towards the city via the Richelieu Steps, the formal entrance into the city from the direction of the sea. The steps are some 25 yards wide and made up of 12 flights, each of 20 steps, 240 steps in all. Each flight was separated by an area 20 feet deep. At the top of the steps is a statue of Odessa's first mayor, Duke de Richelieu. Feeling he had no choice, Kokanov set his Cossacks against the crowd.

The police and gendarmery had handled the demonstrating and rioting occurring in the past, while



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Reference: Hough, Richard, *The Potemkin Mutiny*, Pantheon Books, New York, NY, 1961.

the spar deck noticed a vile, putrid odor. Tracking it down, he found that it was coming from the carcasses loaded the previous evening. They were rotten and infested with maggots. Word spread below decks, and during the change of watch, there were more than 100 sailors in an unorganized protest demonstration. The captain heard about the unrest and was not overly concerned. He considered himself a tolerant commander and complaints about the food were common in all the services. He sent the ship's surgeon, Dr. Smirnov, to investigate. It should be noted that in the Russian navy the seamen were all from the lower classes while the officers were aristocrats and there was little love between them. There was loud mumbling around the carcasses. The crew had already seen the ship's butchers take enough of the rotten meat to prepare dinner. The surgeon's inspection was brief and cursory. He declared the meat excellent and said all it needed was to be washed with a little vinegar and left to give his report to the captain, who then considered the matter closed.

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