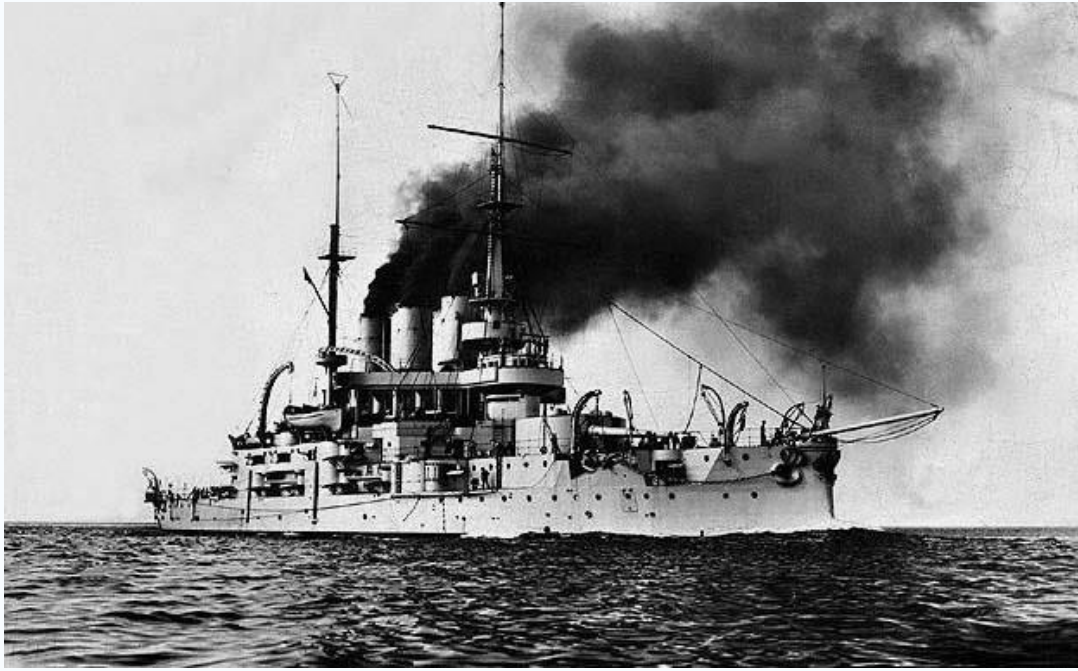


Russian battleship Potemkin



The *Potemkin* (Russian: Князь Потёмкин Таврический, *Knyaz' Potyomkin Tavricheski*, 'Prince Potyomkin of Tauris') was a pre-dreadnought battleship (*Bronenosets*) of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. It was built at the Nikolayev shipyard from 1898 and commissioned in 1904. The name is in honour of **Grigori Aleksandrovich Potemkin**, a military figure of the 18th century.

The ship was made famous by the **Battleship Potemkin uprising**, a rebellion of the crew against their oppressive officers in June of 1905 (during the Russian Revolution of 1905). It later came to be viewed as an initial step towards the Russian Revolution of 1917, and was the basis of Sergei Eisenstein's silent film *The Battleship Potemkin*.

The uprising

Origins

In 1905 The Central Committee of the Social Democratic Organization of the Black Sea Fleet started preparations for a simultaneous crew uprising on all of the ships of the fleet some time in the autumn of 1905. However, at the time of planning *Potemkin* was away for firing exercises at Tendra Island, and the rebellion broke out on its own on 27 June [O.S. 14 June] 1905, spontaneously and prematurely.

The uprising was sparked by the second in command of the battleship, who allegedly threatened reprisals against a number of the crew for their refusal to eat meat found to contain maggots when it was delivered to the warship. Reportedly he mustered the crew on the quarterdeck near where a tarpaulin was laid out and armed marines were drawn up. The sailors assumed that a group execution was pending and rushed the marines (themselves sailors), calling on them not to shoot. The actual events sparking the mutiny remain uncertain and have been overshadowed by the version depicted in the famous Sergei Eisenstein film *The Battleship Potemkin*. Certainly discipline in the Imperial Navy was harsh and morale was low following their defeats in the Russo-Japanese War.

The mutineers killed seven of the *Potemkin's* eighteen officers, including Captain Evgeny Golikov, his second in command Ippolit Giliarovsky and the medical officer who had certified the meat as fit to eat. The surviving officers were placed under arrest, as were those of an accompanying torpedo-boat, the N267. One sailor Grigory Vakulenchuk was fatally wounded during the fight. The seamen organized a Ship's Commission led by Afanasi Matushenko.

Arrival in Odessa

In the evening of that same day, the rebellious battleship came to Odessa flying a red flag. A general strike had been called in Odessa and there was some unrest, for which the arrival of the battleship provided a focus and incentive. However, the representatives of the contact commission of the Odessa Social Democratic

parties were not able to convince the battleship crew to land armed sailors and help workers to get weapons and act together. There was division and confusion amongst both sailors and strikers.

On 29 June [O.S. 16 June] 1905, Vakulenchuk's funeral turned into a political demonstration. Demonstrators crowded on the flight of steps leading from the port area to the centre of the city were reportedly fired on by dismounted cavalry, a scene that forms the dramatic highpoint of the film "Battleship Potemkin". There is some controversy over whether the encounter on the Odessa Steps actually occurred but *the Times* of London correspondent and the resident British Consul reported a number of clashes between demonstrators and troops throughout the city and heavy loss of life. The evening of the following day *Potemkin* fired two shells at the part of the city containing the headquarters of the imperial military authorities. One civilian was killed and the city suffered limited damage. The Imperial military sent reinforcements to Odessa in order to suppress the civil disorder. The government issued an order either to force the *Potemkin* crew to give up or sink the battleship. Two squadrons of the Black Sea Fleet were sent for this purpose. They gathered at the Tendra Island on 30 June [O.S. 17 June] 1905. *Potemkin* faced the joint squadron and — refusing to give up — sailed through the centre of it. This "silent battle" ended victoriously for *Potemkin*: the crews of the joint squadron refused to fire at the battleship and one of the battleships — *Georgiy Pobedonosets* — joined *Potemkin*. The joint squadron went to Sevastopol. The three rebellious warships headed for Odessa. The Central Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party tried to provide support for the *Potemkin* uprising. However, Mikhail Vasilyev-Yuzhin, who came to Odessa at the request of Vladimir Lenin to lead the uprising, found the battleship had left the port.

Voyage to Romania

In the evening of 1 July [O.S. 18 June] 1905, the battleship sailed for Constanța (Romania) together with the torpedo boat N267 for fuel and supplies (by that time, *Georgiy Pobedonosets* had surrendered to the authorities). On 3 July [O.S. 20 June] 1905, the Ship's Commission issued appeals "To all civilized world" and "To all European powers", proclaiming the crew's firm decision to fight against the Tsarist regime. Romanian authorities refused to permit supplies to be sent to the battleship. The same happened in the Russian port of Theodosia on 5 July [O.S. 22 June] 1905 where a landing party from the warship was fired on by troops. On 8 July [O.S. 25 June] 1905, *Potemkin* returned to Constanța and its crew handed the ship over to the Romanian authorities.

Aftermath

The Romanian government then returned the battleship to the Russian navy. In October of 1905 it was renamed to *Panteleimon* (*Пантелеймон*). In April of 1917 the ship was renamed to *Potemkin-Tavricheski* (*Потёмкин-Таврический*) once again, however, in May they changed it to *Borets za svobodu* (*Борец за свободу - Freedom Fighter*). In 1918 it had been captured by the Germans, then recaptured by the White movement. In April of 1919, the interventionists blew it up in Sevastopol so it wouldn't fall into Bolshevik hands. After the Russian Civil War, the wreck of the *Potemkin* was raised from the bottom of the sea and dismantled because of irreparable damage.

The majority of the mutineers chose to remain in Romania after 1905, at least until the revolution of February 1917. Of those who returned to Russia in the immediate aftermath of the mutiny, seven were executed as ringleaders while fifty-six were sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment. A number of petty officers from the *Potemkin* were able to successfully argue that they had acted only under duress, while the crew of the *Viekha*, a support vessel caught up in the mutiny when it encountered the *Potemkin*, were acquitted after it was established that they had successfully argued for the release of their own officers.

Amongst the six hundred former members of the *Potemkin* crew who remained in Romania in 1905 and generally merged into the local population, was the leader Afanasy Matushenko. Together with four colleagues Matushenko returned to Russia under promise of an amnesty in 1907. He was however arrested and hanged. Another leader, Joseph Dymtchenko, fled Romania in 1908 with thirty-one other sailors and settled in Argentina. At least one sailor, Ivan Beshoff, made it to Ireland via Turkey and London (where he allegedly met Lenin). He set up Beshoff's fish and chips in Dublin, Ireland. He died on October 25, 1987, aged 102, likely to be the last survivor of the crew.

Lenin wrote that the *Potemkin* uprising had had a huge importance in terms of being the first attempt at creating the nucleus of a revolutionary army, especially since a part of the imperial armed forces had sided with the revolution. Lenin called *Potemkin* an "undefeated territory of the revolution." The *Potemkin* uprising had a significant influence on the revolutionizing process in the Russian army and fleet in 1917.