

JUGGERNAUT OR BUFFOON?
AMERICANS OBSERVE THE SOVIET NAVY, 1917-1941

By Charles J. Weeks, Southern Technical Institute

During the years between the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the entry of the United States into World War II in 1941, American naval intelligence was unable to produce a reliable estimate of Soviet naval capability. While this failure was partially attributable to the secretive nature of the Soviet regime as well as to the absence of an American diplomatic mission in Moscow until 1933, it was also a product of the U.S. Navy's inability to analyze objectively the information it did obtain. The tendency of the U.S. Navy high command to base its judgments on a mutually exclusive mixture of ideological preconception, ethnic stereotype, and wishful thinking produced at best a confused assessment of the strategic significance of the Red Fleet.

Since the rise of modern industrial Russia beginning in the 1880s, both the Tsarist regime and its Bolshevik successor had sought to enhance the status of their nation by building a world-class fleet. Both governments endorsed the notion that powerful nations must have formidable navies and though the rise of the Soviet Navy might, at first glance, appear to be a recent phenomenon, a closer examination reveals that the growth of Russian sea power is the result of a long and relentless effort to overcome countless obstacles and frequent, seemingly irreversible, setbacks. By the 1880s most European naval experts regarded the Tsarist navy as the world's third greatest sea force, and on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 Jane's Fighting Ships still rated the Russian Navy as the world's fourth strongest fleet.¹ But the ensuing Russian naval debacle in the Russo-Japanese war, which culminated in the annihilation of the Baltic Fleet at Tsushima and the mutiny of the Black Sea Fleet, destroyed any international prestige the Russians had enjoyed before the war. Opinion of the Imperial Navy sank so low that American journalists on occasion referred to the Russians as "dangerous fools [who were] so clumsy that they ought not be allowed at large with lethal weapons."²

Not long after the cessation of hostilities with Japan in 1905, the Russian government set out to rebuild its navy. In 1909 the Imperial Navy began the construction of four Italian-designed dreadnoughts, each displacing 23,000 tons, and in 1912 it launched an ambitious naval shipbuilding program which included four enormous 32,000 ton dreadnoughts.³ Before the Russians were able to make any extensive progress in resurrecting their navy, however, war and revolution intervened to destroy it once again.

When the Russian Revolution broke out in March 1917, the Imperial Navy erupted in a torrent of violence and mutiny. Later, during the October Revolution (1917) and the Civil War (1918-1921), the navy grew increasingly impotent as a sea-going force, but, at the same time, achieved new significance as the Bolshevik's internal police force. Sailors of the Baltic Fleet terrorized Lenin's enemies, and Trotsky lauded the bluejackets as "the flower and pride of the Revolution."⁴ By 1921, however, after three years of civil war and War Communism (Lenin's attempts to establish a Marxist state conforming with Party ideology), the loyalty of the Baltic Fleet at Kronstadt had begun

to wane. The subsequent rebellion of the Kronstadt sailors proved disastrous for the young Red Navy. Immediately after the suppression of the mutiny, Lenin proposed that the Fleet be scrapped because of its dubious military value and its political unreliability. Only the intervention of Trotsky saved the Red Navy from total extinction.⁵

Between 1921 and 1933 Soviet leaders attempted to lay the foundation for a modern navy by stabilizing the existing fleet and increasing its efficiency. Its resources diminished by the Revolution and far down on Lenin's list of priorities, the navy was so weak in the early 1920s that it could only maintain a strategy of passive coastal defense. By 1925, however, the Soviets had progressed sufficiently to develop a small but relatively efficient nucleus fleet, and the navy's mission was expanded to include an "active defense."⁶

During the 1930s the Soviet Union made its initial surge toward becoming a great sea power. After the general stabilization of the government and economy during the 1920s and the resultant advance in heavy industry after the First Five Year Plan, the navy was ready to move from a period of maintaining the status quo to one of rapid expansion. Although doctrinal disputes, political intrigue, an underdeveloped shipbuilding capacity, and a shortage of technical expertise impeded the navy's progress, it was able to make impressive improvements, including the construction of the world's largest submarine force. Stalin included a substantial shipbuilding and procurement program in the Second Five Year Plan, and in 1936 Deputy Defense Commissar Mikhail Tukhachevsky declared, "we are building a powerful navy. . . . Primarily we are concentrating on submarines but in the future. . . we shall consistently increase the regular fleet."⁷ By 1938 Soviet leaders had begun to announce publicly their intention of producing the most powerful navy in the world. Using all means at its disposal, the Red Fleet continued to move toward its goal until World War II intervened to delay the realization of Russian dreams once again.

In evaluating the Russian naval potential during the years between the Russian Revolution and World War II, the U.S. Navy engaged in some rather interesting mental gymnastics. While on one hand the Bolsheviks were to be feared for their diabolical treachery, on the other hand the Soviet system was deemed incapable of producing anything but chaos. Moreover, since the Russians were not a "seafaring race," Americans questioned how they could be expected to build an efficient navy.

The last time that American naval intelligence was able to obtain a comprehensive first-hand view of the Russian Navy came during the February Revolution (March 1917 Gregorian). The vivid and essentially accurate accounts of American naval officers inside Russia chronicled the violent disintegration of the Imperial Navy. Typical of the descriptions of the often senseless violence of the Revolution was a dispatch from the American Naval Attache in Petrograd, Captain Newton A. McCully:

One officer, Captain Protopopoff, was arrested and had quite an argument with the men. He proved that he had never done anything of which they could justly complain and they listened without passion. They answered, "We know you are a good man, and have never done us any harm, but we must kill you..." and then killed him.⁸

After observing the pathetic condition of the Russian Pacific Fleet in November 1917, American Admiral Austin M. Knight reported from his flagship USS Brooklyn that the Russian Navy had collapsed as completely in the east as it had in the Baltic and Black Seas.⁹ The Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917 did not abate the Navy's deterioration, and in February 1918, McCully's Successor, Captain Walter S. Crosley reported that: "The Russian Navy, as such, has ceased to exist....In my opinion, it will not be possible to consider [it] as a factor in the present war, unless it be considered as an aid to Germany."¹⁰

Nevertheless when the Bolshevik government began armistice negotiations with Germany, and it appeared that the delapidated remnants of the Imperial Navy might fall into German hands, Americans began to worry. In April 1918 naval correspondent Arthur Pollen wrote in the New York Times, "Within easy reach of the Huns lies the naval strength of Russia, a considerable force in ships of excellent design and modern construction which have been rendered completely defenseless by the demoralization of the personnel in the Russian Navy."¹¹ Meanwhile, the Commander in Chief of U.S. Naval Forces in European Waters, Admiral William S. Sims, offered no objections when he learned that the British were plotting to destroy the Soviet Baltic and Black Seas fleets to deny them to the Germans.¹² In July 1918, the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral William S. Benson, announced that the Navy Department was "unable to form any accurate estimate of the present strength of the German Battle Fleet and every effort to obtain positive information in regard to the whereabouts of the [Russian] Baltic and Black Seas Fleets" had met with failure.¹³ Since the Navy Department suspected that a "large number" of Russian ships had been captured by the Germans, it was able to obtain congressional approval for a large dreadnought and destroyer construction program in 1918.¹⁴ It seems ironic that when the Russian Navy was an ally, Americans had hardly taken notice, but when it became a potential enemy, the former Tsarist fleet assumed the status of a flotilla of formidable warships.

Throughout the Russian Civil War the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) received numerous reports detailing the poor condition of the Soviet fleet from observers aboard ships participating in the Allied intervention, as well as from agents in Sweden and Finland.¹⁵ Lacking fuel, spare parts, and ammunition, few ships of the Red Navy were even able to get underway, and the entire fleet was rated "non-mobile."¹⁶ Nevertheless, the Bolshevik fleet was still looked upon with deep suspicion, even after the withdrawal of American troops from Russia in April 1920. Consequently, when Washington ordered two warships to Estonia in August, 1920, to show the flag during the Russo-Polish War, flotilla commander Admiral H. McL. P. Huse, requested permission to regard all "Bolshevik submarines" as hostile. Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels tersely informed Huse that the United States was "not at war with Russia," and no hostilities were to be undertaken unless attacked.¹⁷

During the 1920s the Navy Department found information concerning the Red Navy increasingly difficult to gather. Lacking an attache in Moscow and hampered by Soviet secrecy, Naval Intelligence could only obtain information from American naval attaches in Germany, the Baltic States, Japan, and Turkey. In spite of these handicaps enough information was available to permit a realistic appraisal of Soviet naval progress.

Unfortunately the evaluation of this data was hampered by the American world view in the 1920s. The specters of

Bolshevism, disarmament, navalism, big power rivalry, and isolationism combined to produce a confused evaluation of Russia's naval role. For instance, although the final evacuation of Japanese troops from Siberia was on the agenda of the Washington Conference in 1921, the Soviets were not invited because, according to a spokesman of the Harding Administration, the United States "naturally could not be expected to negotiate with any government now maintained in Russia."¹⁸ In 1926 the Office of Naval Intelligence concluded

Russia's Navy has shared the fate of her industry, and reconstruction in every field of endeavor is what the country needs today. Unfortunately for her, this same reconstruction cannot take place in any appreciable degree without assistance.¹⁹

Later in 1928 another ONI summary concluded that the "Russians are not a sea faring race, and to lower educational standards is added a political control which does not go hand in hand with military disciplines." Ironically, the report attributed the lack of military discipline to "the ascendancy of the political over the military."²⁰

On the other hand, some naval leaders used the threat of Bolshevism as an argument against disarmament. For example, when ridiculing the "fallacy of disarmament," Admiral Hillary P. Jones, Commander of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet, warned there was little possibility of world stability because

the vast mass of Russia, with a population whose culture is Oriental in derivation, [is] dominated by an autocracy which has avowed its enmity to the social structures of civilization...It would seem a time to be prepared for inevitabilities.²¹

In the 1925 prize essay in the Naval Institute Proceedings, E.R. Krause warned that Russia was capable of "tremendous development" and could become a significant factor in the balance of world sea power.²²

If the latter assessments of the Soviet Navy were not sufficiently contradictory, in 1922 the General Board, the U.S. Navy's senior advisory and policy making body, recommended that an American naval mission be sent to the "Far East particularly [to] China, Russia, and [possessions of] the Netherlands" to assist in the construction of navies which might be utilized to counter Japanese hegemony in the Western Pacific. In its enthusiasm to check the Japanese and circumvent the Four Power Naval Treaty, the General Board was willing to allow "the scope of these missions to be as broad as possible" without compromising national security.²³ At this point Secretary of the Navy Edwin Denby pointed out that the Soviet Union had to be deleted from the proposal because the United States did not even recognize its government at the time.

American diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union in 1933 provided an opportunity to position a naval attache in Moscow. Still hoping to find a potential check on the Japanese, ONI was especially interested in collecting specific data on the Soviet Pacific Fleet and condition of its submarine force.²⁴ Unfortunately, the brief existence of the Naval Attache's office in Moscow was a dismal failure.

From the time of his arrival early in 1934 until his departure in February 1935, the American Naval Attache, Captain David R. Nimmer (Marines), was constantly chagrined by the Russians' "fanatical secretiveness...[and] abject terror of decisions."²⁵ In a semi-annual report to ONI, Nimmer concluded that as a possible ally, the U.S.S.R. would be a complete liability. Moreover, reported Nimmer:

It will take many generations before the average Russian will attain the ability to think clearly along practical lines and for himself; and when he reaches the zenith of his capacity to think normally he will still be sluggish as against the average American who by comparison...is single and a giant in intellect and action.²⁶

In February 1935 the American Embassy in Moscow withdrew the Office of Naval Attache, ostensibly in protest of the breakdown of World War I debt repayment negotiations but in reality because Nimmer was unable to obtain much useful information.

Similarly, when Admiral Harry E. Yarnell visited Vladivostok aboard USS Augusta in July 1937, he reported that he was unable to collect any appreciable amount of information concerning the Soviet Pacific Fleet. Yarnell was also unimpressed by Vladivostok or communism.²⁷

The most important sequence of events in Soviet-American naval relations during the 1930s came between 1936 and 1939 when the Soviets attempted to secure assistance from the United States for their shipbuilding program. Lacking the industrial capacity to produce large surface ships and the high caliber guns necessary to create a large, blue-water fleet, Stalin attempted to buy, borrow, or steal all the technology from the United States he could. Never one to think small, Stalin ordered his agent in the United States, the Carp Export and Import Corporation of New York, to place an order for the design and construction of a gargantuan 62,000 ton battleship. At 62,000 tons and carrying 18-inch guns, this vessel would have been much larger than any ship then afloat, a factor not missed by the U.S. Navy high command. In addition to the battleship the Russians also sought to purchase two modern destroyers and the specialized equipment and engines necessary to outfit them.²⁸

In Washington, President Roosevelt, supported by leaders of the American corporations involved, was favorable to the Soviet request. Roosevelt apparently felt that the business would be good for the sagging economy and resurrected the theory that a reconstituted Soviet fleet might inhibit the Japanese in the Pacific.²⁹ Meanwhile, businessmen were anxious to get their hands on the \$100 to \$200 million the Russians were allegedly willing to spend.³⁰

Despite the wishes of the President and the business community, however, influential officers within the Navy Department were able to stonewall any transactions with the Soviets. For the next two years Navy brass, most notably Rear Admirals W.R. Furlong (Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance) and Ralson S. Holmes (Director Naval Intelligence), created so many bureaucratic obstacles that the projects had to be abandoned. While many leading naval officers openly expressed their aversion to "Communism," obstruction of the purchases resulted primarily from the fact that the admirals regarded the Soviet Union as a potential foe and were therefore reluctant to

provide any material assistance. When Stalin signed the Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler in August, 1939, all Soviet-American naval negotiations came to an abrupt end, and the navy hierarchy seemed vindicated.

When Germany invaded Russia in June, 1941, however, the position of the navy changed once again. In August, 1941 Admiral Harold R. Stark, Chief of Naval Operations, recommended that the Navy Department oppose House Bill 5248 which would have prohibited Lend-Lease aid to the Soviet Union. Stark feared that the measure would "unduely [sic] restrict the freedom of action of the President."³¹ Later that year, Admiral Stark wrote to his old friend Admiral Thomas C. Hart that, although he had little information regarding the Soviet Navy, the British thought that it was "probably better than we might ordinarily be inclined to think." Stark expressed the hope that Admiral William Standley, who had just returned from Moscow, was correct in his belief that the Russians would "hold on for a long time to come."³¹

By 1941 the U.S. Navy had come the full circle since the Revolution, and Russia was again a naval ally from whom the Americans expected little. In the years between the Russian Revolution and World War II the U.S. Navy had never been able to decide definitely how to categorize the Soviet fleet or the naval potential of a "Communitistic" government. In the end, the U.S. Navy behaved like any large government bureaucracy - motivated more by the desire for organizational self-preservation than by ideology or the rational analysis of data. When it was expedient to the Navy for the Russians to be satanic "Bolsheviks," the Russian Navy was a dangerous juggernaut; but when it was better for the Soviets to be inefficient "Russians," the Soviet fleet was considered a collection of incompetent buffoons.

NOTES

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⁷New York Times, 24 May 1936, p. 6; Robert W. Herrick, "The Evolution of Soviet Naval Strategy and the Effect of the Revolution in Military Affairs," Naval War College Review, 17 (December, 1964): 10-11.

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- 14Ibid.; "Naval War Notes," USNIP, 44 (August, 1918): 1944-5.
- 15For examples of these reports see USNA (NNM), Records of ONI 1911-1927, RG 45, WA-6 and Naval Historical Center, Operational Archives, Washington, D.C., 2125-100-11520. Naval Historical Center, Operational Archives, Washington, D.C. hereafter cited as NHC (OA).
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