

Naval War College Review

Volume 24
Number 1 *January*

Article 8

1971

The Soviet Presence in the Mediterranean: A Short History

Philippe Masson

J. Labayle Couhat

Gary G. Sick
U.S. Navy

Karlan K. Sick

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Masson, Philippe; Couhat, J. Labayle; Sick, Gary G.; and Sick, Karlan K. (1971) "The Soviet Presence in the Mediterranean: A Short History," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 24 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol24/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

THE SOVIET PRESENCE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: A SHORT HISTORY

This article originally appeared in the French "Revue de Défense Nationale." It is reprinted here with the kind permission of the editors of that publication as a valuable addition to the growing body of literature concerning the naval activities of Russia in the Mediterranean Sea. The translation is complete except for certain tabular data and appendixes which were omitted due to the limitations of space. Near the end of the article, several sentences have been omitted since they dealt with speculation on matters which have been overtaken by events. These remarks were not central to the authors' thesis, and it was felt that the judgments as expressed could only detract from the consistently excellent quality of MM. Masson and Couhat's presentation.

by

Philippe Masson and J. Labayle Couhat

(Translated by Lieutenant Commander Gary G. Sick, U.S. Navy and Karlan K. Sick)

The presence of a significant Soviet naval force in the Mediterranean seems to represent a new element in international relations. However, it is intriguing to recall that the first Russian efforts to penetrate these waters occurred exactly two centuries ago.

The first appearance dates from the Russo-Turkish War of 1769-1774. Two years before the first division of Poland, the Empress Catherine, treading in the footsteps of Peter the Great, wanted to give Russia access to the Black Sea at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, which still controlled the coasts. Although the principal military operations took place on land in southern Russia and on the Sea of Azov, the expedition of an important naval force from St. Petersburg to the Eastern Mediterranean was regarded as a potent diversionary maneuver in the framework

of Catherine's "Greek Plan." After a 6-months' voyage, the Russian squadrons, under the command of Count Orlov, reached the shores of the Peloponnese. Their principal objective was to assist the Orthodox Greeks in their revolt against the Turks. As it turned out, Orlov's mission was never fulfilled. The Russians were unable to seize the strategic Greek ports, and the revolt was drowned in blood by an army of Turkish reinforcements. However, the Russian Fleet, with the aid of fire ships, succeeded in destroying the Ottoman Fleet at Cesme near the island of Chios on 19 July 1770. Then, as masters of the Aegean, the Russians first tried, without success, to force the Dardanelles, then limited themselves to a blockade. They also harassed Turkish shipping, ravaged the coasts, and attacked certain ports, including Beirut.

Orlov did not leave the Mediterranean until 1774 after the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji which ceded to Russia considerable territorial gains (including Azov) and guaranteed freedom of navigation for Russian merchantmen in the Black Sea and Turkish Straits.

This expedition, which lasted nearly 5 years, produced a considerable impression in Europe, if only for its size: three squadrons had appeared from Kronstadt, consisting of a total of 23 ships of the line, 12 frigates, and seven smaller attack vessels, not including several dozen transports with several thousand soldiers embarked. Among the nations of the Mediterranean, concern was high. Venice, Dubrovnik, and Malta refused to receive the Russian ships. In France the expedition was regarded as very dangerous, not only for Turkey which was then supported by Versailles, but also for the general balance of power in the Mediterranean. The Duke of Choiseul briefly considered intercepting the first Russian squadron in the English Channel or just outside Gibraltar.

British support of the Russian forces also disturbed the French. The English, whose Mediterranean policy was not yet firmly established, provided vital assistance to the Russian ships. The latter, hurriedly armed, often in bad condition, and fitted with improvised equipment, found the excellent facilities of the British ports of Portsmouth, Gibraltar, and Port Mahon at their disposal. Moreover, the English had actively participated in the creation of the Russian Fleet. A number of British officers served on board these ships; Admiral Elphinstone was an Englishman. It was he who directed, in spite of Orlov's misgivings, the attack of the fire ships at Cesme. Despite all this, the Russians displayed serious inadequacies which were, as it happened, amply compensated for by those of the Turks. To get some idea of the nature of this war, Frederick II is supposed to have remarked, "It would be necessary to

imagine one-eyed men exchanging blows with the blind."

Nonetheless, even if the principal objective of the expedition, the Greek revolt, was not attained, the outcome of the affair had its positive aspects. The expedition had enhanced Russian prestige, considerably embarrassed the Turks, and had facilitated the victories in the Black Sea. However, a lesson could be drawn from this experience: the necessity of having a naval base. And this would henceforth be the objective of the Muscovites.

The second intervention must be seen in this perspective. Russia intervened during the reign of Paul I—on the occasion of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign—after the English victory at Aboukir, Russia joined the Second Coalition with England, Austria, Turkey, and the Kingdom of Naples. In the autumn of 1798, a fleet under the command of Admiral Ushakov entered the Mediterranean for the first time via the Turkish Straits. With six heavy ships and seven frigates carrying 1,200 men, Ushakov ignored Egypt and proceeded to the Adriatic. With the aid of the Albanians, he seized the Ionian Islands occupied by France, most notably Corfu, on 3 March 1799. The Russians presented themselves as the defenders of their Orthodox brethren oppressed by the impious and atheistic French. And at last they had a Mediterranean base. After lengthy discussions, the Constantinople Convention of 21 March 1800 recognized the independence of the Ionian Islands, which became the Republic of the Seven Islands. In reality, the Republic remained under the suzerainty of the Porte, but its territory was guaranteed by Russia which was permitted, in the event of danger, to send troops there. And that is what happened in 1802. Alexander I, with the assistance of Count Capo d'Istria, prepared to annex the islands.

This policy provoked great anxiety on the part of the British. Nelson

62 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

deplored the lack of cooperation on the part of the Russians and wrote in November 1798, "It seems to me that they are increasingly preoccupied with obtaining bases rather than chasing Bonaparte out of Egypt."

British apprehension became even greater when Czar Paul I laid claim to Malta, where he became Grand Master of the Order of the Knights Hospitalers. The British refusal to cede the island after its surrender in September 1800 produced a provisional alliance between France and Russia, followed by the formation of the "League of Neutrals." Whatever the intricacies of the affair, at the time of the peace of Amiens the record still showed a positive gain for Russia, for she had established a protectorate over the Ionian Islands.

The final important incursion into the Mediterranean coincided with the Third Coalition. The fleet of Admiral Senyavin, with 10 ships of the line and five frigates, arrived at Corfu from Kronstadt in January 1806. With the aid of the Montenegrins, the Russians seized Kotor fjord and a number of islands off the Dalmatian coast. With the help of the British, they also waged a war against the Turks who, with the support of Napoleon, refused to permit the passage of Russian warships through the straits. A Russo-British attempt led by Duckworth and Senyavin to force the Dardanelles failed in March 1807. The French mission of Sebastiani had succeeded in establishing the defense of the straits.

This abortive partnership served only to reinforce the distrust of the British who discerned the Russian plan: to obtain bases and to dismember Turkey. In August 1804 Nelson had written, "My opinion of Russian ambitions was formed long ago; today I see that all her efforts are directed at the same goal: the possession of all of European Turkey."

The Treaty of Tilsit had the merit of clarifying matters. By virtue of this treaty the French were able to seize

Corfu and Kotor. As for Senyavin, who was upset at the British reaction, he departed the Mediterranean precipitously; but his fleet was intercepted "as a precautionary measure" at the mouth of the Tagus River at Lisbon by an English squadron. An agreement permitted the officers and crew to return to Russia; the ships were retained by the British until peace was achieved.

This harsh turn of events, with the loss of the Ionian Islands, marks a turning point in Russian policy. It was the ruin of nearly 40 years' effort. It was also the point of departure for a new British policy.

* * * * *

Henceforth, the British attitude was firmly established. Great Britain decided to maintain its command of the Mediterranean with bases in Gibraltar, Malta, and Corfu, which were occupied and held from 1814 to 1864. England also insisted on the neutralization of the straits and assumed responsibility for the protection of Turkey. The integrity of the Ottoman Empire was to become an article of faith in British policy.

As for Russia, in the absence of outlying bases she no longer contemplated action outside the Baltic. The final attempt took place in 1827 at the time of the Battle of Navarino. She tried to obtain recognition of her right of exclusive passage through the Turkish Straits, but not the freedom of passage for all, which could be dangerous to her position in the Black Sea. To attain this goal, she attempted throughout the 19th century to weaken the Porte and to dismantle the Ottoman Empire by lending her support to the Orthodox populations. But all of these attempts to obtain a privileged status in the Ottoman Empire collided with British opposition.

In 1833, thanks to the revolt of Mohammed Ali, Russia obtained by treaty the closure of the straits, in time,

of war, solely to ships moving north. But in 1841 England won the second round. The Convention of Constantinople forbade passage to all warship, even in times of peace.

In 1854 a new Russian attempt to dominate Turkey was even more unfortunate. At the Congress of Paris the closure of the straits was confirmed and the Black Sea demilitarized.

In 1870, thanks to the Franco-Prussian War, Russia reestablished her sovereignty; but at the Conference of London in March 1871 the principle of the closure of the straits was maintained. Five years later a Russian attempt to dismantle the Ottoman Empire resulted in a serious crisis and ended with a new failure. At the Congress of Berlin in 1878, the Treaties of Paris and London were once more confirmed.

The war of 1914-1918 almost gave Russia all she desired. In April 1915 and in March 1916 the Allies, fearing a separate peace, agreed to recognize, upon cessation of hostilities, Russian possession of Constantinople and the straits. However, the Revolution of 1917 permitted these promises to be annulled.

Immediately following the war, French, and particularly British, efforts to control the straits were short lived. The Montreux Convention, signed in 1936 by Turkey, the U.S.S.R., England, and France, accorded a new status to the straits which is still in effect today. Complete freedom of navigation for commercial vessels is recognized in times of peace or war so long as Turkey remains neutral. But it is not the same for warships; their passage must conform to complex rules which limit the number and armament of transiting warships and require advance notification of passage. This agreement, which no longer corresponds to the characteristics of modern ships, gives partial satisfaction to the Soviet Union.

Reappearance of the Russian Fleet in the Mediterranean. Between the two

Wars, the Soviet Fleet appeared only once in the Mediterranean. This was in 1929 when the battleship *Pariskaya Kommuna* and a cruiser which had been stationed in the Baltic went to the Black Sea. In the course of this circumnavigation, the two ships paid a visit to Brest.

After the Second World War, as soon as the fleet had been partially reconstituted, Soviet ships made some timid cruises out of their closed seas, the Baltic and Black Seas, where they normally operated. If one is to believe the Soviet maritime press of that period, these sorties were considered to be veritable exploits. But in 1955 Moscow decided to build an oceangoing fleet commensurate with the global ambitions of the U.S.S.R. From that time on, Soviet ships ventured out more and more, and an agreement was signed with Albania to construct a base at Vlone. At the end of August 1958, four 1,100-ton submarines of the "W" class and the tender *Atrek* dropped anchor at that port. One year later, four additional submarines of the same class, which also belonged to the Baltic Fleet, and a new 10,000-ton Don class submarine tender came from the Black Sea to Vlone. But political tension between Albania and Russia mounted, and finally in May 1961 this support ship and four submarines left Vlone for Leningrad. The *Atrek* and the other submarines were ceded to Albania. If they still exist, they must be in very poor condition due to the lack of spare parts and qualified personnel and are certainly not operational.* During the Soviet stay in Albania, Vlone was visited several times by units from the Black Sea, including the 20,000-ton Sverdlov class cruiser *Mikhail Kutuzov* in 1957 and the 15,000-ton cruiser *Kubishev* in 1960. It was at approximately this period, or

*Translators' Note: Recent information indicates that at least some of the submarines are still operational and do conduct occasional patrols off the coasts of Albania.

64 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

even a bit before, that the U.S.S.R. began to give naval equipment to Egypt; and since that time this aid has never ceased.

In September 1957 the Sverdlov class cruiser *Zhdanov* visited Split in Yugoslavia and later paid a call at Latakia in Syria. In October of the same year, the *Kuibishev* and two destroyers en route from the Black Sea dropped anchor in Split. In 1964 this same port received the visit of the cruiser *Mikhail Kutuzov* and two entirely new 4,000-ton Kashin class missile destroyers.

From 1960 to 1963 numerous vessels going to and from the Black Sea transited the Mediterranean. These ships sometimes sailed alone and at times in groups and in the latter case profitted from the opportunity to conduct several exercises in the Aegean Sea. In September 1962 a Sverdlov class cruiser with two 1,700-ton Riga class destroyer escorts passed through the Turkish Straits and the Suez Canal to join the Indonesian fleet, to which they had been given.

After 1964, units in transit in the Mediterranean made it a practice to spend a number of weeks there, and it is from this period that one can date the almost permanent stationing of a small Soviet force in the eastern Mediterranean. This force included a cruiser, flying the flag of an admiral, sometimes one or two missile ships, some escorts, and some submarines. After the Arab-Israeli War of June 1967, this small force was reinforced by four destroyers from the Black Sea which passed through the straits on the 3d and 4th of June to relieve those ships already present in the Mediterranean. Because of the events that followed, these latter ships remained in the area for some time.

At the end of the conflict, the Soviets decided to enlarge their Mediterranean naval force appreciably. Although the composition varies, these

forces generally include one 20,000-ton Sverdlov class cruiser which is occasionally replaced by the *Dzerzhinski*, the only Sverdlov cruiser equipped with surface-to-air missiles; one Kynda class cruiser or a Krupnyy class destroyer armed with long-range surface-to-surface cruise missiles; three to four standard Kotlin class destroyers or Kashin class missile destroyers; three to four Riga, Petya, or Mirka class escorts; three Polnocny or Alligator class landing ships; nearly a dozen long-range submarines, including some "N" class nuclear-powered attack units; and a small number of support ships (oilers, submarine tenders, et cetera, et cetera . . .). Elements of the Naval Infantry, amounting to a battalion of 500 men with light tanks, are sometimes embarked on board the amphibious ships.

The surface ships come from the Black Sea, the Baltic, and even sometimes from the Northern Fleet. The submarines, in contrast, generally come from the Northern Fleet which includes a total of slightly more than a hundred submarines. As in other navies, approximately one-third of these units are operational, one-third are in training, and the last third in repair and overhaul. Thus, by a simple count, it is evident that the U.S.S.R. maintains about one-third of its operational submarines from the Northern Fleet in the Mediterranean. This provides a good indication of the importance which she attributes to that sea.

All of these ships—surface and submarine alike—are relieved every 2 or 3 months, comparable to the ships of the American 6th Fleet.

This Soviet "Task Force," which is now the most important naval formation in the Mediterranean after the 6th Fleet, normally operates in the eastern Mediterranean, sailing between the anchorages of Hammamet off the Tunisian coast, Hurd Bank east of Malta, and Kithira Island off the west-

ern end of Crete. These ships call at Alexandria and Port Said in a schedule so regulated that there are always Soviet units present in both ports, in order to demonstrate their support of the Egyptians or to prevent the Israelis from launching reprisal raids on these sites. Certain commentators have suggested that the Soviets have convinced the Egyptians to grant them base rights in these ports. This, in our opinion, seems impossible. This would, in fact, be entirely contrary to the policy of the Soviet Government which is not at all anxious to find itself the object of criticisms which it has leveled at the Americans for their overseas bases. Moreover, it is doubtful that the states bordering on the southern Mediterranean who are so jealous of their new independence, often won at such a high price, would again accept the presence of foreign bases on their territory. However it may be, the crews of the Soviet ships which call in Egypt and Algeria must find it a welcome break in a deployment which is not always easy. Actually, the Soviet Fleet in the Mediterranean has at its disposal only a small logistic contingent to provide material support for such a large force operating thousands of miles from its home bases. The supply fleet currently accompanying the force, at least from the point of view of provisioning at sea, seems ill suited to its mission. This is due to the fact that the Soviets have placed their first priority in the naval domain on combatant ships. This shortage of specialized logistics ships certainly necessitates a wholehearted effort on the part of the crews to keep their ships constantly in good condition. And it tends to prove that the Soviet ships are very rugged.

How is this fleet going to evolve in the course of the next several years? It doesn't seem likely that it will grow numerically. Rather, its offensive power is probably going to increase very significantly as the numerous ships under

construction in the U.S.S.R. enter into service. According to well-informed Western sources such as *Jane's Fighting Ships*, *L'Almanacco Navale*, and *Weyer's Warships of the World*, there should be presently under construction in Soviet shipyards half a dozen Kresta class missile-equipped cruisers, as well as various classes of nuclear submarines, whose annual construction rate could reach four to six units.

Moreover, it is now known that the Soviet Navy possesses two helicopter carriers. The first, *Moskva*, is undergoing trials, while the second, *Leningrad*, is in the process of completion.* These two ships were constructed in the Black Sea at Nikolaev, at the mouth of the Bug River, where the Soviets have very extensive naval shipyards which specialize in the construction of commercial and war ships. *Moskva* and *Leningrad* are helicopter cruisers resembling the French *Jeanne d'Arc* but much larger. Their displacement would equal at least 20,000 tons. Their forward deck is occupied by antisubmarine weapons and at least two surface-to-air missile launchers. The after-deck is approximately 90 meters long and is fitted out for aerial takeoff and landing operations. Beneath the flight deck there is no doubt a hangar deck served by one or two elevators. Each of these ships could carry from 20 to 30 helicopters. . . .

One can thus expect that the Soviet Fleet in the Mediterranean will eventually consist of a helicopter carrier, two or three Kynda or Kresta guided missile cruisers, and a flotilla of nuclear submarines, all supported by a logistical force well adapted to its mission.

Conclusion. What significance can we ascribe to this very considerable increase in the Soviet naval potential in the

*Translators' Note: This article was published in early 1968 before the first appearance of *Moskva* in the Mediterranean.

66 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

Mediterranean? It is both political and military.

On the political level, following the tradition of the old navy of the czars, the U.S.S.R. desires first of all that everyone grow accustomed to the presence of Soviet ships in the Mediterranean, particularly the eastern Mediterranean, an area in which Russia has manifested an interest since the end of the 18th century.

This force also contributes, together with military aid and the presence of Russian technicians, to the reinforcement of Soviet influence in the region of global strategic importance, the Middle East. The U.S.S.R. is clearly determined that these nations should not fall into the orbit of another power. Like their counterparts in old Russia, those responsible for Soviet foreign policy know how to take the long view, and in their calculations they have certainly taken into account the possibility of a conflict with China. In such an event, since the umbilical cord of the Trans-Siberian Railway would be seriously threatened, the Suez Canal would be the most rapid route for the movement of troops and materials to the Far East. This is why the U.S.S.R. insists that the canal remain under the control of a power which is in no way hostile to it. Of course the canal is currently closed to navigation, but there is no doubt that the U.S.S.R. favors its reopening. Its closure effectively requires Soviet ships en route to the Far East, and notably North Vietnam, to circumnavigate Africa, which considerably lengthens the voyage.

The presence of a Soviet force in the Mediterranean facing the American 6th Fleet contributes to the creation of an equilibrium in this region which is so sensitive in world affairs. This was

clearly apparent during the Arab-Israeli War of 1967. During the entire crisis, Soviet units, including two Kashin class missile destroyers, constantly followed—either closely or at a distance—the diverse movements of the American ships. As a result, the Soviet Government was always informed on the air activity of the 6th Fleet. Thus it was able to verify how little foundation there was for Arab allegations accusing Anglo-Saxon aircraft of assisting the Israelis. This verification certainly weighed heavily in its analysis of the political situation.

On the military level, in the event of a conflict which today seems relatively improbable, in which the U.S.S.R. and the United States would risk becoming involved, the Soviet squadron in the Mediterranean would have the mission of countering the powerful 6th Fleet. This would no doubt be a suicidal operation; but in order for it to occur it would also be necessary [an eventuality which is far from certain] for the American force to remain in the face of an imminent nuclear exchange in that trap, the Mediterranean. Since the appearance of strategic missiles, and despite the fact that it continues to retain a nuclear strike capability, the principal role of the 6th Fleet has, in fact, been played in the domain of "limited war," for which it has decisive means at its disposal.

In reality, the most dangerous menace is that of the naval air forces which the Soviets have placed and continue to place at the disposition of the states on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean. For these states, without calculating all the risks, could one day be tempted to use these forces to bolster a crumbling power position or out of an exaggerated concern for their own prestige.

