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*Many students of naval strategy do not realize the extent to which the Soviet Union's newly expanded naval and maritime establishment is dependent upon the Baltic Sea for port and yard facilities. The Soviet Union, being aware of the Baltic's importance, has consistently sought throughout her history to exert control over the Baltic and its exits. The strategic importance of this body of water to Soviet maritime strategy has forced Moscow to divert considerable resources into defensive preparations along the Baltic littoral and to the development of amphibious forces capable of seizing strategic waterways leading to the North Sea.*

# RUSSIA AND THE BALTIC SEA: 1920—1970

A research paper prepared

by

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Naval Command Course

During the civil war which followed the Russian Revolution, Russia's naval power in the Baltic was reduced to insignificance. The Baltic Fleet lost the political confidence of the Government as a result of the Kronstadt mutiny of 1921, and its material and morale degenerated further in the confusion and chaos of the times. The Bolsheviks were too exhausted to continue their efforts to enforce their authority upon the Baltic States and Finland, and they accordingly accepted the independence and new frontiers of these states in 1920. The Soviet territory on the Baltic was confined to a narrow, icebound loophole at the eastern extremity of the Gulf of Finland, a foothold smaller than at any time since Peter the Great and one difficult to defend in the light of the rapid increase in aircraft technology. The Estonian boundary was less than 90

miles from Petrograd, and the Finnish boundary was but 23 miles distant.

Leningrad, thus renamed in 1924 on Lenin's death, remained a key center and the symbol of the October Revolution, even though it had ceased to be the capital since 1918. At that time the Government, threatened by a German advance, moved back to Moscow. With over 3 million people, Leningrad continued to be an industrial and cultural center of the first rank, and it became again the most significant port for foreign trade. The city in 1939 accounted for a tenth of all Soviet production. The security of this city was therefore a vital interest of Soviet foreign policy. The Soviets' first effort to increase the city's security was taken at the first disarmament conference of the League of Nations in 1925. There the Soviet delegate proposed that

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warships of nonriparian states not be allowed in the Baltic.<sup>1</sup> This effort was futile, however, as the proposal was not even discussed.

In 1927 the Soviet Government, apparently abandoning her efforts to improve her position by serious negotiation, proposed "complete, immediate, universal and simultaneous disarmament."<sup>2</sup> This tactic in later years became all too common. The Soviets sought to gain a propaganda advantage by making an apparently generous offer to which impossible and nonnegotiable conditions were attached. After the inevitable rejections, the assertion could then be made that all attempts were frustrated by the capitalistic countries.

One year later the First Five Year Plan was started, and it included a program to create a modern shipbuilding industry.<sup>3</sup> During the Second and Third Five Year Plans, shipbuilding construction was increased. Also, many seaplanes were built and bought, and great attention was given to submarine construction. By 1940 the Soviets had an inventory of about 175 submarines, and the Red navy was regarded as numerically having the strongest submarine force in the world.<sup>4</sup> Even at the time of her entrance into World War I, Russia had almost as many submarines as Germany.<sup>5</sup>

In 1931, in preparation for the disarmament conference to be held in 1932, the Soviet Union published an official account of the strength of its fleet. When the disarmament conference failed in 1933, the Soviets opened discussions with French and Italian naval architects and shipbuilders on the construction of major warships.<sup>6</sup>

In the mid-1930's a group of Soviet naval officers sought to alter the mission of the Soviet Navy from one of coastal warfare in liaison with the army to a high seas role backed by a fleet of capital ships. However, the great purge of 1937-1938 removed thousands of officers and the nation of a high seas

fleet. This drastic reduction in the Soviet officer corps adversely affected the operational readiness of the Baltic Fleet, a situation from which it was not able to recover before becoming involved in World War II.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time they were developing a naval capability, the Soviets were actively seeking security for their border areas by diplomatic means. In 1932-1933 the Soviet Foreign Commissar, Litvinoff, pressured Estonia, Latvia, and Poland into a nonaggression pact, which proved to be but a prelude to Moscow's takeover of these countries by military force.<sup>8</sup>

The rise of Hitler in 1933 presented new security problems—the indirect contest between Italy and Germany against Russia in Spain during the civil war (1936-1939), the Anti-Comintern Pact, which was signed by Germany, Japan, and Italy in 1936 and 1937, the German annexation of Austria in 1938, and the Munich crisis arising out of the desertion of Czechoslovakia. This was hardly mitigated by the apparent ineffectiveness of Britain and France in face of the fascist challenge to the security of the Soviet Union and the peace of Europe. There was evidence that these states secretly hoped that Germany would turn against the U.S.S.R. and away from Western Europe. In light of these events, Stalin apparently gave up any hope that France or Britain would take any action against Hitler and sought other means to ensure Soviet security.<sup>9</sup>

After the occupation of Czechoslovakia and Memel, Britain and France, now thoroughly alarmed at Hitler's ambitions and bad faith, began negotiating with the U.S.S.R. for a military alliance. Stalin demanded the right to send Russian troops into Poland, Finland, and the Baltic States, but these countries were naturally unwilling to allow this, and Britain and France were reluctant to put pressure upon them to agree.<sup>10</sup>

On 23 August 1939 the world was astonished to learn of the signing of a commercial treaty and a nonaggression pact for 10 years between Germany and the U.S.S.R. The Soviets placed great emphasis on a secret protocol appended to the pact which gave Moscow a free hand in Estonia, Latvia, parts of Finland, Poland, and Rumania. Germany was allowed similar liberties in Lithuania and western Poland.<sup>11, 12</sup> Upon Stalin's suggestion, this line of demarcation was amended in the treaty of friendship signed 28 September 1939. This provided for the greater part of Lithuania to be added to the Soviet sphere of interest.<sup>13</sup>

Soon after the secret treaty, Moscow demanded the right to establish bases and place Soviet troops in each country, in each instance guaranteeing freedom and political integrity of the state concerned. Each country objected strongly, but Moscow massed troops and made threats of military invasion, solemnly repeating again and again that it would not interfere with the internal affairs of these states. Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania finally succumbed to Soviet pressure and threats and allowed them the bases. Finland refused and was attacked in November 1939. Finland, though she had only 2 percent the population of the U.S.S.R., gave an excellent account of herself and staved off defeat for many months. By the time the Russo-Finnish war was concluded, the Soviets possessed the same extended coastline in the Baltic as after the third Polish partition a century and a half before. The Finnish frontier was now a hundred miles from Leningrad, the Russo-German frontier more than 500 miles.

There were other issues dividing the German and Soviet Governments. In an effort to restore the friendly atmosphere of a year before, Germany invited Molotov to Berlin to discuss further the relationship between the two countries. Molotov arrived on 11 November 1940. Hitler recognized the U.S.S.R.'s need

for safe warm-water ports and assured Molotov he was not interested in any eastward expansion.<sup>14</sup> On the following day, however, the conflicting aims of the partners became so obvious that there was little hope for a further understanding. Molotov raised points concerning security for the Soviet Union in Bulgaria, on the Bosphorus, and in the Dardanelles. Not one of his questions was satisfactorily answered by Hitler. Hitler's unwillingness to acknowledge any Soviet interests in Europe was clear in the discussions. That same evening, during a conversation with Von Ribbentrop, Molotov emphasized Soviet interests not only in the Balkans, but also in free passage out of the Baltic.<sup>15</sup>

It should be mentioned that after his return to Moscow, a memorandum concerning the questions negotiated in Berlin was handed by Molotov to the German Ambassador on 25 November 1940. The Soviet Government never received a reply. It was clear to Hitler that most of Russia's ambitions were directed against what he considered German interests. Thus on 18 December 1940, 5 weeks after Molotov's visit, he issued the famous order known by the code name "Operation Barbarossa." It began with the following words: "The German armed forces must be prepared . . . to crush Soviet Russia in a swift campaign."<sup>16</sup>

The performance of the Russian Baltic Fleet in World War II was worse than in World War I and can be omitted. Much more relevant are Stalin's political efforts to expand Soviet influence in the Baltic area after the war.

After the German attack on Russia in June of 1941 and the outbreak of hostilities between the United States and the Axis Powers in December of that year, an entirely new diplomatic situation presented itself. Many conferences took place, and in all of these the territorial claims of Russia and her desire to increase her sphere of

influence were unmistakable.

In the discussion of strategy and postwar objectives with British Foreign Minister Eden in Moscow in December of 1941, Moscow, in spite of their poor military situation, demanded considerable territorial compensations. Stalin requested the recognition of Soviet boundaries as they were before the German attack and, in addition, hinted that the Soviet Government was very interested in carrying its frontiers into East Prussia and that it needed additional air and naval bases in Finland.

Churchill, who was underway to Washington, reacted violently and telegraphed his War Cabinet: "Stalin's demand about Finland, Baltic States . . . are directly contrary to the first, second, and third articles of the Atlantic Charter to which Stalin has subscribed. There can be no question whatsoever of our making such an agreement with the United States."<sup>17</sup> But 3½ years later—in the Conference of Potsdam—the incorporation of the Baltic States and the restoration of the 1941 Finnish-Soviet frontier plus the occupation of Porkkala were no longer issues. When Stalin repeated his request of Tehran for at least one ice-free port in the Baltic and named the city of Königsberg, the capital of East Prussia, he had the sympathies of the President and Churchill.<sup>18</sup> By the displacement of Poland in a westerly direction as far as the Oder River and the establishing of the adjacent Soviet Zone of Occupation as far as the River Trave, the sphere of Russian influence in the Baltic to the west expanded as never before.

In seeking his claims for territories and influence, Stalin skillfully exploited the differences between Roosevelt and Churchill. At the last day in Tehran, when the new western frontiers of Russia and Poland were discussed, it was agreed that the "European Advisory Committee" in London would undertake the task, Roosevelt again proposed that there should be two regions of

Germany under the United Nations or some form of international control. These were:

1. The area of the Kiel Canal and the city of Hamburg.

2. The Ruhr and the Saar.

Churchill opposed and made an alternative proposal, but Stalin preferred the President's plan.<sup>19</sup> President Roosevelt also had raised the question of assuring the approaches to the Baltic Sea, having in mind some form of trusteeship to insure free navigation through the approaches. Stalin expressed himself favorably in regard to this question.<sup>20</sup>

The Kiel Canal with the city of Hamburg was again a subject of territorial negotiations in Potsdam. It is significant that on 17 July 1945 Copenhagen Radio stated, causing high tension in Denmark, that Russia had demanded at the Potsdam Conference that all the entrances to the Baltic from the North Sea, including the Kiel Canal, should be placed under international control and that the U.S.S.R. should share in this.<sup>21</sup> But the attitude of the U.S. President Truman was apparently changed, presumably by memoranda of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States.<sup>22</sup>

Not to be omitted in the Soviet claim of territory was the struggle for the island of Fehmarn in the western Baltic. As already mentioned, there existed a European Advisory Commission in London, which was created at the Conference of Foreign Ministers in Moscow in October 1943. The main task of this body was to make plans and recommendations upon the terms of surrender and the posthostilities period. The representatives of the United States and the Soviet Union were the Ambassadors in London, Mr. Winant and Mr. Gusev; the British representative was Lord William Strang.

In discussing the boundaries of the Zones of Occupation in Germany, Mr. Gusev attempted to secure the allocation of the island of Fehmarn in the Baltic to the Soviet zone. He fought

stubbornly to gain this further advance of Soviet influence in the Baltic. But Lord Strang no less stubbornly resisted, though the Foreign Office had authorized him to give way. He continued to stand fast, and Gusev dropped his demand.<sup>23</sup> It is hard to imagine what the current Baltic strategic and political situation might be had Lord Strang agreed to the Russian demand for the island of Fehmarn. The Warsaw Pact Powers could control the Kiel bay and the southern access to the important waterway, the Great Belt. The distance from Fehmarn to the opposite Danish island is 10 nautical miles, to Kiel 35 nautical miles, and to the port of Husum at the North Sea side of Jutland, 70 nautical miles. The credit for preventing a decisive step of the Soviets on their route to the North Sea and the command of the Baltic is due largely to Lord Strang.<sup>24</sup>

Summing up the results of the conferences, it is apparent that the Soviets did measurably enhance their position in the Baltic. At the Yalta Conference, Stalin was in a strong bargaining position. The military superiority of his armies had been established. President Truman went to Potsdam in July 1945 with some doubts and misgivings.<sup>25</sup> The American and British representatives recognized that they had only three choices: agree with Moscow, drop the question without decision, or come to an open break. The Soviets demonstrated with remarkable clarity an ability to obstruct any decision that impinged upon their interests, and every such issue resulted in the second choice.

At the end of the war "the Soviet Union emerged at this time [Potsdam] as the unquestioned all-powerful influence in Europe."<sup>26</sup>

In the Baltic, Moscow had gained a coastline of about 500 nautical miles under her direct control and another 350 nautical miles under the control of Warsaw Pact Powers. The 600 nautical

miles of the Finnish coastline were at least neutralized.

Never before in her history had Russia held such influence in this "Mediterranean of the North" as at the end of World War II. At once the Soviets began to consolidate their might in the conquered areas and to increase Russian influence and seapower in the Baltic. The inconvenient question of self-determination of the Baltic States and East Prussia was solved in the traditional Russian manner by expulsion, deportation, pursuit, imprisonment, forced citizenship, and Russification.<sup>27</sup>

In the eyes of the Soviets, the Baltic is a peripheral sea under the predominance of one riparian state. They are essentially claiming that the Baltic is not a part of the high seas, but is a "closed sea." For any traffic and trade in the area, the Baltic should be only the point of destination or departure, and it should not be an open sea for any other maritime operation. Warships of any other than the adjacent states should not be admitted. At the Geneva Sea Conference in 1958, Ukraine and Rumania attempted, in defining the high seas, to add the following supplementary paragraph: "For certain seas a special regime of navigation may be established for historical reasons or by virtue of international agreements."

Khrushchev manifested in 1957 that the Baltic should be a sea of peace, and the Soviet Union supported the motion of the Ukraine and Rumania. However, having no chance of acceptance, the motion was withdrawn.<sup>28</sup> The Baltic Sea remains part of the high seas, but this fact is under constant pressure by the Soviet Union.

As everywhere in the high seas, the principle of the freedom of the seas has already been reduced by the extension of the territorial sea and by the extension of sovereign rights to the Continental Shelf. The Soviet Union claims for her territorial waters, 12 nautical miles;

Sweden and Finland, 4 nautical miles; the other states, 3 nautical miles. By the enclosing of gulfs and by the establishing of basis lines, all territorial waters are now increased, and the high seas space in the Baltic has become smaller. Because the whole Baltic Sea can be classified as a "continental shelf," renewed negotiations concerning rights in the Baltic can be expected.

It is well known that the Soviet Baltic Fleet is the strongest fleet in the Baltic. The ratio between the Baltic Fleet plus the navies of Poland and East Germany as opposed to the two NATO navies of Denmark and the Federal Republic of Germany is 5:1. If the Swedish Navy were added to the Western side, the ratio would be 4:1.

There are four main categories of Russia's Baltic naval strength:

1. About 80 submarines, most of them of modern type, including nuclear submarines.

2. A large surface fleet, including cruisers and large, modern, destroyer-type vessels equipped with SAM and medium- and long-range SSM. The missiles have both conventional and nuclear warheads.

3. Nearly 200 patrol craft and ASW vessels, among them the highest number of OSA/Komar boats of all four Soviet Fleets.

4. A very modern amphibious capacity for the embarkation of at least one division, plus marine infantry to support this capability.

Although the number of Baltic ships is impressive, a great number of these naval forces are not really suitable for the special characteristics of warfare in the Baltic. Of the submarines, only a few can be employed in the eastern and middle Baltic. The others are superfluous, especially the nuclear submarines. The guided missile ships and patrol craft are too numerous for Baltic use only. There is therefore far more of this type force than is needed in the Baltic. On the other hand, amphibious

forces are well suited for assaults in the western Baltic, especially against the Danish islands and possibly against Sweden. The strength of army and air force divisions of the Warsaw Pact forces in the western Baltic area gives the Soviets the capability to seize and secure the exits of the Baltic. Should general hostilities erupt, such a strategy would insure the passage of the significant Warsaw Pact subsurface and surface forces into the North Sea and the Atlantic. Secure exits would guarantee the passage of these forces to and from the great shipyards and training centers in the Baltic.

By seizing the exits, the Soviets would have reached the goal which the Germans in two world wars could not attain—to have entire supremacy in the Baltic. The U.S.S.R. could make the Baltic a Russian internal sea and reduce the fear of attack on the northern sea flank.

Like the Mediterranean in the south, the Baltic in the north has always been a most important tradeway connecting the riparian peoples. From the Russian point of view, the Eurasian block belongs together. Western Europe is the head of this huge landmass or, as the Kremlin says, "the balcony of the great Russian house."<sup>29</sup> It seems unbearable for the Russians that the natural accesses of their mighty country to the Atlantic are still locked by small nations. Despite the gain of coastline, this coast is still threatened by potential enemies. It is an open flank of the vulnerable heartland. Therefore, the Soviets, with their traditional emphasis on a defensive role, depopulated the coastal regions and built up extensive and expensive coastal defenses, including radar and missile sites in addition to an enormous fleet.

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The Baltic Sea is important to the Soviet Union for several reasons. Its

location provides an avenue to a vulnerable flank from which the Soviet heartland can be threatened. The Soviets, fearing this eventuality, have invested sizable resources into constructing large naval and air forces capable of commanding the Baltic from the outset of any conflict. In response to the U.S. deployment of Polaris submarines and attack carriers equipped with long-range strike aircraft, the Kremlin has felt it necessary to develop a "blue water" strategy designed to engage these vessels with their lethal cargo as far from the home waters as possible. Control of the entrance to the Baltic would make it feasible for them to shut enemy warships out of the Baltic entirely.

A second reason for the Baltic's great importance is the existence of a sizable proportion of the yards, drydocks, submarine training facilities, and construction facilities which provide the logistical support of the newly augmented Soviet maritime establishment. A sizable proportion of the naval forces which would be required to intercept American carriers or submarines at a distance from the U.S.S.R. must pass through the Baltic en route to and from their bases and yards. The possibility that a small state such as Denmark could, in cooperation with NATO, effectively close the Baltic and frustrate this strategy is unacceptable to the Soviets, and they doubtless place a high priority on gaining uncontested control of this valuable area. Such control would also be a necessary preliminary to any attempt by the Soviets to seriously interfere with the maritime traffic which supplies Western Europe with vital fuel, ore, and military supplies. The Soviet Northern Fleet, handicapped by ice and a shortage of facilities, would have difficulty in accomplishing such a mission independently. While NATO forces could block the Baltic entrance with mines or other weapons, such an operation would be no simple matter unless the adjoining coastlines remained

in friendly hands.

To counter her disadvantages in the Baltic, the Soviet Union may well have contemplated an amphibious assault. Such an assault, carried out by the growing Soviet maritime capability in the Baltic and supported by the Baltic Fleet, would be difficult to counter with anything less than a major NATO naval force. An operation as such could be supported with a drive by the Red army and satellite forces into the Jutland peninsula. The Soviets have the resources to successfully conclude such an operation, and it is not impossible that they might initiate an action in this area, taking care to proclaim in advance the limited nature of their objectives. The West must be alert to the possibility of such a sortie.

Throughout its history the Soviet Government has consistently attempted to increase its influence and control in the Baltic. In recent years these efforts have been paralleled by the growth of the Soviet maritime establishment, a

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## BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Capt. Erwin M. Rau graduated from the German Naval Academy in 1939 and was first assigned to the heavy cruiser *Bleucher*. During the Second World War he served in three minesweeping squadrons

and attended the German Naval War Academy. After assisting in postwar minesweeping operations, Captain Rau was released from military service as a result of the Allied demilitarization of Germany. Since reentering the naval service in 1956, Captain Rau has commanded a minesweeping squadron, a destroyer, and a destroyer squadron. A recent graduate of the Naval Command Course at the U.S. Naval War College, he is presently serving as Type Commander Destroyers at Kiel, Germany.



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large part of which must utilize the Baltic for overhaul and logistical support. There is little difference in substance between the desires of the czars to achieve a "window" in the Baltic and

the present efforts of the Kremlin to gain control of that area. Moscow's seapower was planted in the Baltic, and a major part of it remains dependent upon it.

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