

# The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy in the Baltic, 1921–1941



GUNNAR ÅSELIUS

## THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SOVIET NAVY IN THE BALTIC, 1921–1941

This book, based on extensive work in Russian archives, investigates how strategy, organizational rivalry and cultural factors came to shape naval developments in the Soviet Union, up to the invasion of 1941.

Focusing on the Baltic Fleet, the author shows how the perceived balance of power in northern Europe came to have a major influence on Soviet naval policy during the 1920s and 1930s. The operational environment of a narrow inland-sea like the Baltic would have required a joint approach to military planning, but the Soviet navy's weak position among the armed services made such an approach hard to attain. The Soviet regime also struggled against the cultural heritage of the tsarist navy and the book describes how this struggle was overcome. In a special Appendix dedicated to the purges of 1937–38, surviving party records from the Baltic Fleet intelligence section are used to illustrate the mechanisms of the Great Terror at a local level.

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## SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

One of the main issues for those interested in the former navy of the Soviet Union was whether it behaved just as any other Navy would have done in its particular circumstances, or whether it represented a novel and wholly unique maritime force with a distinct set of beliefs that set it apart from other navies. Protagonists in this debate would often assume, and sometimes state, that the model for the conventional, normal Navy was in fact Western [usually in fact an adulterated version of the American or British navies]. This could lead to the conclusion that the Soviet Navy was defective, or mistaken, when it departed from the norm – a navy run by land-lubbers and by a General Staff dominated by the Ground Forces. This argument could even be extended to the proposition that the Navy's 'weirdness' was emblematic, that it did not proceed from the need to defend the nation's maritime interests, that it was illegitimate, basically unnatural, offensive – a threat. According to this perspective the Americans, the British and most other West Europeans were entitled to large navies because of their many maritime interests and vulnerabilities. The economically autarchic and strategically self-contained Russians were not.

This constant debate over the past several hundred years provides the context for Gunnar Åselius' detailed study of the Soviet Navy during that key part in its development in the period between the two World Wars. The Soviet Navy's Baltic preoccupations at this time provide a case study, which admirably demonstrates that through depth comes breadth. He shows that in its response to circumstances, the Soviet Navy provides a unique means of exploring the origins of naval conduct. Geography, climate, the ambitions and preoccupations of Government, the political and social system, strategic culture, the technological and industrial state of the nation all had their part to play. They combined to produce a navy that was indeed distinctive at times, but which, more to the point, shifted in its orientation as the various sources of naval conduct themselves shifted. Broadly the pendulum swung from the 'traditional' [modified to suit Russian purposes] to the 'radical' and through the Great Patriotic War (and indeed the Cold War) back to the traditional. But for all that it always remained a navy with a difference.

And as to the central question of whether there was, and is, a central model of the Navy to which Russia conformed to varying degree, two competing tendencies can

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

still be noted at the very end of the period. On the one hand, Admiral Isakov announces that '... we are no law-abiding dogmatists of the past, but the creators of a new way of life'; on the other, Admiral Belli reintroduces the study of Mahan and Colomb at the Naval Academy.

Gunnar Åselius has admirably situated this topic within the broader scholarly debate about the sources of, and influences on, military conduct and so provides us with a fascinating case study of a set of themes that are as broad as they are deep and that should fascinate anyone interested in the world's navies.

Geoffrey Till

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## ABBREVIATIONS

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| ASW      | Anti-submarine warfare   |
| BOS      | <i>Beregovoy Otryad Soprovozhdeniya</i> (Coastal Support Force)  |
| BU       | <i>Boevoy Ustav</i> (Naval Fighting Regulation)  |
| Cheka    | <i>Chrezvychaynaya Kommissiya</i> (Special Commission<br>[for fighting counter-revolution and sabotage]) |
| EU       | European Union   |
| FOA      | Försvarets forskningsanstalt (Swedish Defense Research<br>Establishment)                                 |
| GDR      | German Democratic Republic   |
| GOR      | <i>Glavny Oboronitelny Rayon</i> (Main Defense Area)   |
| Gosplan  | <i>Gosudarstvennoe Planovaya Kommissiya</i> (State Planning<br>Commission)                               |
| GPU      | <i>Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie</i> (State Political<br>Directorate)                         |
| GRU      | <i>Glavnoe Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie</i> (Main Directorate for<br>[military] Intelligence)              |
| GUPP     | <i>Glavnoe Upravlenie Politicheskoy Propagandy</i><br>(Main Directorate for Political Propaganda)        |
| IUR      | <i>Ikhursky Ukreplenny Rayon</i> (Ikhorsky Fortified Area)   |
| KBF      | <i>Krasnoznamenny Baltiysky Flot</i> (Red Bannered Baltic Fleet)   |
| Komsomol | <i>Kommunistichesky Soyuz Molodezhi</i> (Communist Youth<br>League)                                      |
| LVO      | <i>Leningradsky Voenny Okrug</i> (Leningrad Military District)   |
| MSBM     | <i>Morskikh Sil Balticheskogo Morya</i> (Naval Forces in<br>the Baltic Sea)                              |
| MTB      | Motor torpedo boat   |
| NATO     | North Atlantic Treaty Organization   |
| NEP      | New Economic Policy  |
| NKID     | <i>Narodny Kommissariat Innostranikh Del</i> (People's<br>Commissariat for Foreign Affairs)              |
| NKVD     | <i>Narodny Kommissariat Vnutrennikh Del</i> (People's Commissariat<br>for Internal Affairs)              |

## ABBREVIATIONS

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| NMO                | <i>Nastavlenie Morskikh Operatsii</i> (Instruction for Naval Operations)  |
| OGPU               | <i>Obyedinyonnoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie</i> (United State Political Administration)               |
| OLS                | <i>Otryad Legikh Sil</i> (Group of Light Forces)  |
| OON                | <i>Otryad Osobennogo Naznacheniya</i> (Special Mission Squadron)  |
| <i>OsoAviaKhim</i> | <i>Obshchestvo Oborony, Aviatsii i Khimii</i> (Society for Defense, Aviation and Chemistry)                         |
| OVR                | <i>Okhrana Vodnoga Rayona</i> (Aquatic Area Defense)  |
| PU                 | <i>Politicheskoe Upravlenie</i> (Political Directorate)   |
| PUR                | <i>Politicheskoe Upravlenie RKKA</i> (Army Political Directorate)   |
| RGAVMF             | <i>Rossisky Gosudarstvenny Arkhiv Voенno-Morskogo Flota</i> (State Archives of the Navy)                            |
| RGVA               | <i>Rossisky Gosudarstvenny Arkhiv Armii</i> (State Archive of the Army)   |
| RKKA               | <i>Raboche-Krestyanskaya Krasnaya Armiya</i> (Workers' and Peasants' Red Army)                                      |
| RO KBF             | <i>Razvedyvatelny otdel Krasnoznamennogo Baltiyskogo Flota</i> (Intelligence section Baltic Fleet)                  |
| RVS                | <i>Revolutsionny Voenny Soviet</i> (Supreme Revolutionary-Military Council/Soviet)                                  |
| RVSR               | <i>Revolutsionny Voenny Soviet Respubliki</i> (Supreme Revolutionary-Military Council/Soviet of the Republic)       |
| <i>Shtab RKKF</i>  | <i>Shtab Raboche-krestiyanskogo Krasnogo Flota</i> (Staff of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Navy, i.e. Naval Staff) |
| UMS                | <i>Upravlenie Morskikh Sil</i> (Directorate for the Naval Forces)   |
| UVMS               | <i>Upravlenie Morskikh Sil RKKA</i> (Directorate for the Naval Forces of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army)       |
| UVMUZ              | <i>Upravlenie Voенno-Morskimi Uchebnimi Zavedeniyami</i> (Directorate for Naval Educational Institutions)           |
| VMF                | <i>Voенno-Morsky Flot</i> (Navy)  |
| VVS                | <i>Voенno-Vozdushnye Sili</i> (Air Force)   |

## Part I

# INTRODUCTION



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## PREPARING FOR WAR IN THE BALTIC

About 22.00 hours on 21 June 1941, in his headquarters in Tallinn, the commander of the Soviet Baltic Fleet, Rear-Admiral Vladimir Tributs, received a long-expected telegram from the People's Commissariat for the Navy in Moscow. During the preceding weeks, tension had grown along the Soviet–German border with almost daily incursions by German ships and aircraft into Soviet territory. On the 19th, combat readiness had been raised to level 2, which meant readiness to go to sea within 4–6 hours. However, the forces along the frontiers were at the same time instructed to avoid countermeasures, which could provoke the Germans. Now, late in the evening on the 21st, Tributs was allowed to regroup his two battleships from Tallinn to the safer surroundings of Kronstadt, and to withdraw most of his remaining forces from Riga Bay to Tallinn. On the Latvian coast, only the cruiser *Maxim Gorky* and a squadron of destroyers were to remain.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly before midnight, Tributs was again contacted from Moscow, now by telephone. This time, the People's Commissar for the Navy, Admiral Nikolay Kuznetsov, personally gave the order to enter into full alert ('operational readiness level number 1'). The German invasion was to start in a few hours. Later, in his memoirs, Kuznetsov would complain about Tributs, who, on receiving this order, had asked if this meant the Baltic Fleet could now open fire against all intruders. However, when confirming that war could break out the next day, the People's Commissar still found it necessary to repeat the need for cautiousness. According to Kuznetsov, his conversation with Tributs ended at 23.35. The war diaries of the Naval Staff claim that the order to enter operational readiness level number 1 was issued two minutes later. Thus, the Baltic Fleet was the first branch of the Soviet armed forces to be alerted before Operation Barbarossa (the Nazi invasion of Russia). The People's Commissar's official order to increase operational readiness was issued at 23.50.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, with only a few hours' warning, the fleet was caught as unprepared by the German onslaught as the rest of Stalin's war machine.<sup>3</sup> After a disastrous campaign in 1941, the Baltic Fleet spent most of the remaining war behind mine-barriers outside Leningrad, supporting the besieged city with artillery fire, occasionally sending submarines into the Baltic and assisting in flank operations on the Leningrad and Karelian fronts, where sailors and naval infantry fought side by

side with the Red Army. Only in the autumn of 1944, after the armistice with Finland, could the fleet escape from its imprisonment in the Gulf of Finland. During the following months, Soviet naval forces made a major contribution to the recapturing of Estonia and Latvia, supporting landing operations against Tallinn, Riga Bay and the Moonsund archipelago. However, in spite of their return to the Baltic, they failed to prevent the Germans from evacuating more than 2 million people out of the Kurland pocket during the last months of the war.<sup>4</sup>

Very little in the Baltic Theater turned out in the way the Soviets had expected. Notwithstanding the countless examples of individual bravery from officers and men, the World War II record of the Baltic Fleet was not entirely satisfactory. Over the years, there has been an intensive debate on whether things would have turned out differently had the Soviet government reacted earlier in the summer of 1941, issued the call for mobilization in time or even launched a preemptive strike against the Germans.<sup>5</sup> But most campaigns are won and lost before the fighting starts, and in June 1941 the Baltic Fleet had to make do with the equipment and training it had acquired during the preceding decades. If it is true that the Soviet naval forces failed in the Baltic during World War II, studying developments in a longer perspective seems more fruitful than scrutinizing decision making in the months immediately prior to the German attack. As David Glantz points out in his study of the ground campaign in 1941, ‘the most serious Soviet failure was neither strategic surprise nor tactical surprise, but *institutional* surprise’.<sup>6</sup>

As pointed out by Jonathan Shimsoni, a true military entrepreneur is not only concerned with what the next war will be like, but also asks questions on how he can ‘engineer’ the next war away from that scenario, ‘so as to maximize my relative advantages and bypass those of my competitors’.<sup>7</sup> What kind of war did the Soviet Navy men expect to fight in the Baltic before World War II? How did they prepare for it? These are the fundamental questions of the present study.

The investigation starts in 1921, when the Civil War was over and the sailors’ revolt in Kronstadt had been crushed. For many years, the Bolshevik regime regarded its naval forces with the utmost suspicion. In the words of naval historian Donald Mitchell, this period represented the absolute ‘nadir of Russian naval power’. J. N. Westwood characterizes the 1920s by labeling the chapter in his book on Russian and Soviet naval construction ‘Picking up the pieces’. A British intelligence survey from the summer of 1921 describes the Baltic fleet as ‘useless as a fighting unit, there are no officers, the old experienced soldiers have been sent away ... and under the present conditions the reestablishment of the fleet is out of the question’.<sup>8</sup>

From this absolute low-point, we follow developments throughout the campaign of 1941, when the Baltic Fleet finally went to war against a Great-power enemy.

### **The end of the Cold War and the rewriting of history**

There is already quite an extensive literature on the Soviet inter-war navy. Before the end of the Cold War, the most substantial work to appear in the West was Robert W. Herrick’s *Soviet Naval Theory and Strategy* (1988), which analyzed

Soviet naval thinking up to the 1950s and used as sources contemporary Soviet naval literature, such as the maritime journal *Morskoy Sbornik*.<sup>9</sup>

Parallel to the Western literature there was a substantial Soviet historiography as well. The second volume of the official textbook on the history of naval warfare (1963) deserves mentioning, as do the above-cited memoirs by Admiral Kuznetsov (naval chief 1939–46, 1950–55). Another influential interpretation of the period was offered by Kuznetsov's successor, Admiral Sergey S. Gorshkov, in his writings on naval strategy during the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> Shortly after the appearance of Herrick's second book in 1988, the process of *Glasnost* in the Soviet Union and the opening of archives led to a flood of renewed research. Some of it was conducted by Russian scholars in commemoration of the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Russian Navy in 1696. Of special importance was a series of articles, mainly authored by Captain 1st rank Mikhail Monakov, which appeared in *Morskoy Sbornik* between 1990 and 1994. Monakov, who studied the discussions on doctrine and theory in the Soviet Navy between 1922 and 1939, was the first writer with a wide access to archival documents. Together with the German naval historian Jürgen Rohwer, Monakov in 2001 also published the volume *Stalin's Ocean-going Fleet*, which focuses on Soviet naval strategy and shipbuilding programs in the period 1935–53.<sup>11</sup>

Another officer of the Soviet Navy, Sergey Zonin, published a biography in 1991 on Admiral Lev Michailovich Galler, chief of staff in the Baltic Fleet 1921–27, fleet commander 1932–37 and chief of the naval staff in Moscow 1938–40. Zonin did not discuss Soviet naval policy in a wider context, and certain passages in his book give the impression of literary fiction. Nonetheless, his account is obviously based on archival documents and on interviews with Galler's contemporaries (even if the reader could wish for more detailed references to sources).<sup>12</sup>

Other important works to appear during the early 1990s were official histories of the Soviet Naval War College and of the Baltic Fleet during World War II, as well as V. I. Dotsenko's maritime biographic dictionary (*Morskoy biografichesky slovar*).<sup>13</sup> The British historian J. N. Westwood treated the subject of ship construction during the period on the basis of primary sources, as did the Russian naval officer and ship constructor V. N. Burov.<sup>14</sup>

Among those who hurried to the newly opened archives in Russia from abroad were also Finnish historians, eager to study their own country's dramatic history in connection with Soviet naval strategy. Ohto Manninen wrote about Finland between Germany and Soviet Russia in 1939–41, and the Helsinki historian Jari Leskinen studied Finnish–Estonian military cooperation during the 1930s. In addition, the British historian Carl Van Dyke studied the Soviet–Finnish War of 1939–40 from a Soviet perspective, giving an overview of naval operations on the basis of a former classified Soviet study.<sup>15</sup> Later, the St Petersburg historian Pavel V. Petrov added further to the picture through his dissertation on the Baltic Fleet's operations during this war.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, in 1992 the Center of Military History of the Soviet General Staff published the first volume in a series entitled *Boevaya letopis voenno-morskogo*

*flota* (The Combat Chronicle of the Navy). The volume in question deals with the period 1917–41 and had been compiled by N. Yu. Berezovsky, S. S. Bereznoy and Z. V. Nikolayeva. Apart from battle accounts, *Boevaya letopis* contains short notices on organizational changes, appointments, new regulations, maneuvers, naval visits and other important events in the life of the navy. The term chronicle in this case should not arouse associations to the well-known medieval literary genre of historical narrative. If *Boevaya letopis* is to be defined through medieval analogies at all, it bears more resemblance to the annalist history writing practiced in the monasteries. The short entries are organized in chronological order, and should be regarded as a kind of calendars or document summaries, complete with meticulous references to original documents in the archives of the Communist Party, various military agencies and government ministries.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, some volumes in the series of published documents on the history of the Great Patriotic War, which was initiated by the Center of Military History in the mid-1990s under the editorship of Alexander Zolotarev, contain material relevant to naval matters. Of special interest are volume 1 (2), treating the discussions of the naval high command in the autumn of 1940, and volume 10, containing the orders of the People's Commissariat for the Navy from 1941–45.<sup>18</sup>

In view of the vast amount of literature and document publications, the writing of yet another book on the inter-war Soviet Baltic Fleet may certainly call for some justification.

It could of course be argued that the geopolitical conditions in the Baltic region during the 1920s and 1930s in many ways appear similar to the situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The weakening of Russia after the Cold War, the reunification of Germany and the resurrection of independence in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have to some extent recreated the borders that existed in the region during the inter-war period. Although Russia today has a foothold in Kaliningrad (in former German East Prussia), it has again been deprived of most of its former coast along the Baltic, and sees its military power diminish. At the same time, its small neighboring states see this state of weakness as temporary and have tried to strengthen their ties to the West (Poland and the Baltic states joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] and Sweden and Finland the European Union [EU]).

Just as it did during the inter-war period, Russia during the 1990s regarded with some discomfort its neighbors' efforts at military integration with the West, fearing that NATO's extension westwards would mean isolation and eventually a threat to national security. In recent years, there has also been an intensive discussion on the navy's role in national defense—parallel to that of the 1920s and 1930s. Will a strategic deterrence force in the North Atlantic be enough in the future, or will ships that can 'show the flag' in foreign ports also be needed? If Russia is to remain a great power in the eyes of the world, must it reinforce its strategic submarine force with ships that can protect shipping and fishing interests at sea, and participate in international peacekeeping operations around the globe? Where could the means to create such forces be found?<sup>19</sup>

## PREPARING FOR WAR IN THE BALTIC

However, there are also important differences between the post-World War I era and the post-Cold War era. A more constructive international climate with less ideological and military confrontation, increased economic integration between states, a widened definition of national security, etc. are factors that make superficial comparisons between the two periods truly problematic. Furthermore, modern military technology has fundamentally changed the strategic conditions in the Baltic. Already during the latter half of the Cold War, the Baltic belonged to the rear areas in Soviet naval thinking, and the role of naval forces in controlling a confined water area like this is likely to become even less significant in the future.

The end of the Cold War is nonetheless a good reason for rewriting the history of the inter-war period. This is not only due to the increased access to archives, but also to the fact that much of the earlier literature on the subject is flawed, having been written in the shadow of the East–West confrontation. Western research was concerned with understanding Soviet naval developments during the 1970s and 1980s and tried to trace its origins back to the 1920s and 1930s. Soviet research aimed at pointing out proper historical lessons to justify present naval doctrine. For obvious reasons, the Baltic did not attract any special attention in any of this literature, as it was a rear area in Soviet Cold War strategy, a theater where crews were trained and new equipment was tested but mostly old or second-class ships were permanently stationed. From the 1960s onwards the Baltic Fleet's percentage of the total number of ships steadily decreased, while the main interest was focused on the Northern Fleet in Murmansk.<sup>20</sup>

However, during the inter-war period the Baltic's role was different. During the 1920s, the Baltic and Black Seas were the only theaters where the Soviets had any naval forces at all, and the Baltic was clearly where these forces were concentrated. In 1928, three out of three battleships, two out of four cruisers, 12 out of 17 destroyers and nine out of 14 submarines were stationed here.<sup>21</sup> During the 1930s, when new fleets were created in the Pacific and the Arctic and Soviet naval rearmament began, the Baltic remained a center of gravity. According to the naval construction program of 1936, the Pacific and Baltic Theaters were to get a third each of the planned tonnage. The only field in procurement planning in which the Pacific Fleet was given clear priority was the naval air arm. In 1941, at the time of the German attack, the Baltic Fleet still kept its leading position among the four Soviet fleets with two out of three battleships, two out of seven cruisers, 28 out of 54 destroyers, 71 out of 212 submarines and 656 out of 2,429 naval aircraft. About a third (311 million) of the 944 million rubles that Admiral Kuznetsov wanted for his budget this year were to be spent on the Baltic Fleet. The Pacific Fleet was 'only' to have some 230 millions.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, it is reasonable to assume that a reassessment of Soviet naval policy during the inter-war period from a Baltic perspective would yield new insights, especially in consideration of newly accessible documents. The pioneer user of this material, Mikhail Monakov, is indeed more appreciative of the Baltic's crucial importance during the period than were his Cold War predecessors. However, he studied naval policy of the era with the aim of discussing contemporary Russian

naval policies. In spite of their great scientific value, his articles also belong in the context of the 1990s Russian defense debate.

### **Three levels of military doctrine**

Apart from ambitions to increase our knowledge of military conditions in a particular part of the world in a particular historical period, I also want to increase our understanding of military thinking in general. What are the determining factors when military organizations formulate their doctrines? Here I see a second reason for writing this book.

A country's military doctrine is concerned with how its armed forces should be used to promote what national leaders identify as the country's security interests.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, military power equals the capability to fight wars. Thus, a sound military doctrine should be based on a realistic estimate of what the next war will be like. Ideally, it should contain both an analysis of the international environment and possible threats to national security, a prescription of how these threats could be countered with military means and – at the lowest level – combat instructions to the country's military forces.

These three levels of military doctrine could also be labeled strategic, operational and tactical levels of doctrine. At the strategic level, general problems of national security are dealt with (What types of military threats face the nation? Who will the enemy be? How do we know that we have won the war?). The operational level regulates the organization and use of military forces (How should we compose our forces to attain our objectives? Where and when shall they be deployed?). The tactical level deals with the winning of battles (With what kind of weaponry should we equip our forces? How should we train them in order to be successful in combat?).<sup>24</sup>

In this book, I examine Soviet naval doctrine at all these levels. As will be explained below, some dramatic doctrinal changes occurred in the Soviet Navy between 1921 and 1941. Obviously, these changes could be explained in various ways, and I have the ambition to seek a different type of explanation at each level of doctrine: at the strategic level the balance of power, at the operational level organizational rivalry within the armed forces, and at the tactical level the role of cultural factors. The exact line between these different levels of doctrine is difficult to draw, and to some extent they overlap each other. Also, my investigation of the influence of cultural factors on Soviet naval tactics deals not so much with the evolution of tactical regulations – a subject that has already been treated extensively by others – but highlights such factors as training and morale, which are nonetheless important for the tactical performance of military forces.

It could well be argued that in treating a subject like this, an author should choose one of two paths. Either he should attempt a detailed reconstruction of the past and concentrate his energy on archival research. Or the author should devote his work to a discussion of the theoretical foundations of military doctrine and regard empirical data as merely instrumental, to be conveniently obtained from

secondary literature. Traditionally, the difference between these two approaches corresponds to the disciplinary border between history and political science. For me as an historian, the choice would seem easy, especially since the existing literature has only to a limited extent made use of the archives that have become available in recent years. At the same time, however, it is impossible to reconstruct the past in a meaningful way without some preliminary assumptions and theoretical preconceptions. To do full justice to the complexities of historical reality, I have chosen to use rival theories, such as power realism, bureaucratic theory and cultural constructivism. My aim is not to compare their explanatory power, or to suggest that one perspective should be regarded as superior to the other. Rather, I find it hard to believe that we can satisfactorily understand either the inter-war Soviet Navy, or the foundations of military doctrine, without combining various perspectives and various types of sources.<sup>25</sup>

### **The development of naval doctrine during the inter-war period**

It is often said that the inter-war period marked the transition from ‘the age of the big guns’ to ‘the age of the aircraft carrier’ in naval warfare. To illustrate the meaning of this, Wayne P. Hughes’s ‘cornerstones of naval tactics’ could be cited:

- *Firepower*. On a tactical level, the goal of naval warfare is to deliver successful fire upon the enemy.
- *Scouting*. To deliver successful fire upon the enemy a capacity to detect and target him is required.
- *Command-and-control*. The transformation of firepower and scouting into successful fire upon the enemy requires an ability to direct your own forces effectively.
- *Attack first*. Naval victory is won through ‘simultaneous force-on-force attrition’. Therefore, victory goes to the side which can attack effectively first.

What happened between the world wars was that superiority with regard to fire-power could no longer compensate for inferior scouting and command-and-control functions. This in turn further accentuated the need to attack first. A symbolic confirmation of that development was the Battle of Midway in the Pacific in 1942 between Americans and Japanese. The Japanese were superior in firepower (four aircraft carriers with 277 aircraft against three American aircraft carriers with 233 aircraft). In a game of ‘simultaneous force-on-force attrition’, the Japanese should really have had the better odds, or at least managed to take most of the American force down with them. However, the Americans were superior in intelligence and staff work and managed to attack first. Consequently, the Japanese force was completely annihilated while the Americans, having failed to locate the fourth Japanese carrier in their first strike, lost only one of their own carriers. Since the end of World War II, the role of scouting and command-and-control functions in naval warfare has grown immensely. In the age of missiles and

computers, a naval commander has to direct most of his time and assets to information-processing activities, while the importance of skilful maneuvering or accurate firing has decreased through precision-guided, long-range weapons. Today, the main reason for naval ships to operate in large formations is not to combine their firepower, but to combine their intelligence resources and their means of warning and protection against incoming missiles.<sup>26</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, ‘the age of the big guns’ had just begun, and concentration of force – superiority in firepower – still seemed the key to tactical victory. The doctrines of the leading naval powers were strategically offensive, in line with the ideas of the American strategist Alfred T. Mahan (1840–1914). According to Mahan, throughout history command of the sea had laid the foundation of all great empires. In keeping with this thesis, it was argued that the primary task of any Great power navy should be to defeat the enemy in a decisive battle, or to paralyze him through an effective naval blockade. The principal tool to achieve this goal, it seemed, was the battleship, a huge weapon platform that could deliver as well as receive massive barrages of heavy shells. In the naval race between the Great powers, the number and caliber of guns were therefore believed to be crucial factors. Also, a ‘Big Ship’ navy could serve as an impressive and highly mobile instrument for diplomacy and colonial expansion.<sup>27</sup>

There were, however, also defensive notions of sea warfare at the time. Although American and British admirals saw the battle between heavy artillery ships as the apogee of naval conflict, admirals in other Great power navies thought differently. In France, for instance, naval thinking was for a long time dominated by the *Jeune École* (Young School), with Admiral Théophile Aube as its most prominent spokesman. France could not challenge the Royal Navy in battle, but according to Aube and his followers, a weak naval power could always fight a stronger enemy by raiding his shipping or coastal areas. Cruisers and torpedo boats would always be faster than heavy battleships, and those big, costly vessels always ran the risk of running aground in coastal waters or being sunk by comparatively cheap weapons, such as torpedoes and mines.<sup>28</sup>

On the other side of the English Channel, Julian Corbett (who taught history at the Royal Naval College in Greenwich from 1902) questioned that territorial control was at all possible to attain at sea. As long as an inferior power had a single ship left in operational condition, it could always dispute the stronger power’s command of the sea. Instead, naval strategy must be directed at controlling the sea-lines of communication. This, Corbett believed, was certainly attainable, ‘for in maritime warfare the lines of communication of either belligerent tend to run approximately parallel, if indeed they are not identical’. In contrast, on land the belligerents’ lines of communication ran in opposite directions, joining only in the theater of operations. Therefore, to attack and threaten the enemy’s supply lines in ground warfare always meant exposing one’s own supply lines. At sea, however, the securing of one’s own communications as a rule meant denying the enemy the use of his.<sup>29</sup>

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Just like Carl von Clausewitz before him, Corbett argued that the defensive in fact represented a stronger form of warfare, as it had the potential for neutralizing an imbalance in strength. In naval warfare, this was especially true after the introduction of torpedoes and mines. Drawing inspiration from Clausewitz's distinction between limited and total wars as well as from his famous definition of war as a continuation of politics, Corbett also doubted that an encounter between two Great power battle fleets was likely to be decisive. Blockade warfare, in which the enemy was engaged at a distance, would be preferred instead, being less risky and with greater prospects of damaging the enemy's society as a whole. The main instrument of blockade warfare, however, would not be the battleship but the fast-going cruiser/surface raider. From Corbett's reading of Clausewitz also stemmed his refusal to see naval strategy in isolation from continental strategy. Apart from destroying the enemy's commerce, Corbett argued, one of the main advantages of controlling the sea was that it allowed for the safe and speedy deployment of armies. Here, in the projection of power ashore, he saw the principal role of the battle fleet: escorting troop transports, protecting amphibious landings or – as a 'fleet in being' – deterring the enemy from invading the homeland.<sup>30</sup>

To some extent, the experience of World War I proved Corbett right, although it was the submarine, not the surface raider, which came to revolutionize blockade warfare. Only one major engagement between battle fleets was fought during the conflict – the Battle of Jutland in 1916 between the British and the Germans – and it failed to produce a decisive outcome. Instead of fighting each other, navies made their main contribution during the war by fighting the supply lines of the enemy. During the inter-war period, Corbett's ideas were developed further by the British Admiral Herbert Richmond and the French Admiral Raoul Castex. German Rear-Admiral Wolfgang Wegener reasoned along similar lines when he criticized the battle-oriented German naval strategy during the war for having neglected the role of sea-lines of communications and the need for strategic bases.<sup>31</sup>

After World War I, the role of the battleship seemed uncertain, while the submarine and the aircraft carrier appeared as the future rulers of the oceans. The latter category of ship had been introduced during the final stage of the war, and in 1921 the US Army Air Force General William Mitchell made a spectacular demonstration of air power at sea against a captured German battleship (similar demonstrations were later repeated against other scrapped battleships). Furthermore, international treaties (Washington 1922, London 1930) for many years limited the number and size of battleships in the Great power navies. By the mid-1930s, however, when the obligations of the disarmament treaties had ceased and the naval arms race began with renewed speed, battleship construction was again prioritized. The defenders of battleships argued that anti-air artillery and sonar could protect them from dangers from the sky or from under the sea. Because of their superior size and firepower, battleships would also last longer in combat than any other type of warship. Only World War II effectively demonstrated that the battleship era was over.<sup>32</sup>

## RISE AND FALL OF THE SOVIET NAVY IN THE BALTIC

It was against this international backdrop that Soviet naval doctrine developed during the inter-war period. Indeed, parallel positions to those of Mahan, the *Jeune École* and Corbett could also be found in the Soviet debate.

The years before World War I had seen the predominance of Mahanian ideals in Russia. Although the country had no colonies overseas and most of its navy had been destroyed during the Russo-Japanese War, in 1912 the Duma approved a naval construction program which in 18 years would produce a navy of 24 battleships, 12 battle cruisers, 24 light cruisers, 108 destroyers and 36 big submarines.<sup>33</sup>

When the Bolsheviks came to power, they thus inherited the uncompleted remnants of an ocean-going fleet to be. Consequently, the early Soviet period (1920–28) was dominated by the Mahanian concepts of the Tsarist era, with dreams of a ‘Big Ship’ navy and command of the sea. Its opponents labeled this strand of thinking the ‘Old School’. However, the severe losses of ships and competent people, the massive industrial devastation suffered during the period of war and internal turmoil (1914–21), as well as the reduction of Russia’s coastline through the dissolution of the Tsarist Empire, made the idea of an ocean-going navy seem unrealistic. Although tradition continued to rule at the Naval War College in Leningrad, where most of the teachers had been educated in the tsarist navy, these ideals were gradually called into question. Open criticism of the ‘Old School’ began in 1927–28. By 1930, the struggle had been more or less won, when a new Naval Fighting Regulation (BU-30 = *Boevoy Ustav*) was issued.<sup>34</sup>

Now, the ideals of a light navy instead came to dominate – the ‘Young School’, not so different from its French predecessor *Jeune École*. The Young School completely redefined the notion of naval warfare, criticizing traditional Mahanian concepts of command of the sea and preaching the ‘death of the battleship’. In future wars, it was argued, the airplane and the submarine would make sea control impossible. Consequently, the Soviet Navy should be designed for coastal defense, using submarines, torpedo ships, mines, coastal artillery and shore-based aircraft. Also, the importance of joint operations and unity of command was strongly emphasized. To some extent, the Young School could draw on Russia’s own experience in World War I, when the Baltic Fleet had waged a successful defensive struggle against the Germans from the protection of minefields and coastal batteries in the Gulf of Finland.

However, the ideals of an oceanic navy suddenly returned with the gigantic naval rearmament program of June 1936, according to which a fleet of 1.36 million tons was to be created in ten years time. Over 53 percent of this enormous tonnage would consist of battleships, 24 units in all. At the same time, the Royal Navy counted 1.22 million tons, the US Navy 1.1 million tons and the Japanese Navy 0.8 million tons. Thus, the Soviet Union was to become one of the world’s leading naval powers. This naval program was revised repeatedly in 1937–39, and in the final version the tonnage had grown to almost another million tons. Only in October 1940, when war with Germany appeared imminent, was the scheme canceled and production resources redirected to the construction of lighter vessels.<sup>35</sup>

New tactical regulations were also issued. In Soviet literature, the Naval Fighting Regulation of 1937 (BU-37) was generally described as a more mature version of the Naval Fighting Regulation of 1930 (BU-30), signifying a further elaboration of inter-service cooperation, specially designed task forces and of operations against enemy sea lanes of communications. BU-37 also emphasized the navy's role as an offensive weapon, stressing the importance of incessantly attacking the enemy. In June 1939, a special chapter was added to BU-37, dedicated to the problems of 'operations at sea.' The new operational guidelines were further developed in the temporary regulation for the conduct of naval operations (NMO-40 = *Nastavlenie Morskikh Operatsii* [Instruction for Naval Operations]), which was issued in the autumn of 1940.<sup>36</sup>

According to Robert W. Herrick, it is doubtful whether Stalin's naval policy really signified a turn toward genuine navalist thinking. Instead, what happened was that traditional Mahanian concepts of 'command of the sea' were fused with the operational principles of the Young School. Herrick labeled the new creed the 'Soviet School', and according to him, it came to dominate naval thinking in the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War.

The Soviet School maintained that the navy's task was still predominantly defensive, but that this did not exclude offensive operations in a local or regional context, in cooperation with the ground forces. Submarines and aircraft were the main weapon systems, but there was also need for major surface combatants to support them. Command of the sea according to Soviet School thinking did not imply command of the oceans, but control of a limited theater. The aim was not to achieve global domination, but domination over seas adjacent to the Soviet Union's own borders, in areas where the operations of Soviet ground forces could be actively supported. Thus, the Soviet School was more in tune with Corbett than with Mahan or, as Herrick argues, with the views of the French naval theorist Admiral Raoul Castex.<sup>37</sup>

In their recent study, Mikhail Monakov and Jürgen Rohwer come to a different conclusion. The decision in October 1940 merely signified a temporary halt in Stalin's grandiose scheme to challenge the maritime supremacy of the Western powers. After the war the gigantic construction program was again resumed. If there was a continuity between Stalin's and Brezhnev's navy, it was above all in the appreciation of an ocean-going fleet as a potent symbol of Great power status.<sup>38</sup>

### **Military doctrines**

Thus, the evolution of naval doctrine during the twentieth century was characterized by a growing role for information-processing functions (scouting, command and control), while the relative weight of firepower gradually diminished. The ability to attack first appeared to be a greater advantage than superiority in weapon load or ship size. World War II formed a turning point in this development. However, during the period under study here, 1921–41, this outcome had not yet been

decided. Whether the battleship, the airplane or the submarine was the main weapon system at sea was still open to debate.

In the same era, naval doctrine in the Soviet Union underwent dramatic change. The cult of big artillery ships (the Old School) was replaced by the concept of a light, coastal defense fleet, emphasizing the role of submarines, air power and joint operations (the Young School). In the final years of the period, big ships again became fashionable. According to some interpreters, what finally emerged was really an entirely new understanding of naval power (the Soviet School), adapted to Soviet needs, containing elements from both the previous strands of thinking. Others maintain that Stalin did desire an ocean-going fleet that could challenge Western global domination.

How then, should these developments best be explained?

A way of characterizing military doctrines is to see them as either offensive, defensive or deterrent. According to the definitions used by Barry R. Posen, an offensive doctrine aims at disarming an enemy and destroying his military forces. A defensive doctrine aims at denying the enemy the object he seeks, while a deterrent doctrine aims at punishing an aggressor – raising his costs for attacking – without regard for one's own losses. Classical examples of offensive ground warfare doctrines could be found among the European Great powers in 1914, in Nazi Germany as well as in modern Israel. A well-known example of an unsuccessful defensive doctrine is the French Maginot Line of the 1930s. Deterrent doctrines could be illustrated by the strategies of second-class nuclear powers like China and France, as well as by the territorial militia defense concept embraced by small, mountainous, non-aligned countries like Switzerland or Titoist Yugoslavia.<sup>39</sup>

One could argue that the Old School of the Soviet Navy was an offensive doctrine and the Young School was a defensive one. The Soviet School could either be seen as an offensive doctrine or as mixture between offense and defense. As we will see, however, such labels really contain gross simplifications. Seemingly, both the Old School and the Soviet School existed in offensive and defensive versions, while the Young School might very well be described as a deterrent doctrine. In reality, no military doctrine displays purely offensive or defensive elements. As Julian Corbett pointed out, every offensive requires a concentration of force at a decisive point, which implies assuming a defensive posture in other, less important directions. Similarly, the reason for assuming the defensive is to win time to prepare for a counterattack, once the enemy has exhausted himself. With regard to deterrent doctrines, they must contain both offensive and defensive elements.<sup>40</sup>

### **The structure of this book**

What then, determines a country's choice of military doctrine, the choice between offense, defense and deterrence? The existing literature on the subject suggests at least three types of explanations: strategy (or balance of power), organizational