

WHERE THE
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ROBERT FORCZYK

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Foreword

There is a distant and arid peninsula, surrounded by a dark and brooding sea, where armies and fleets traditionally came to die, like wounded animals. Beneath the surface of this soil lies fragments of the legions of Hitler and Stalin, as well as the civilians they murdered. Bits of bone, perhaps part of a jawbone or teeth, a bent German identity disk, or a moldy Soviet belt buckle, and plenty of rusty bullet casings – this is all that remains of their erstwhile martial glory in the Crimea. Here and there, the land above is still scarred with trenches or antitank ditches or a shard of barbed wire, as well as the ubiquitous shattered concrete bunkers – monuments to man’s efforts to deny the inevitable. This was the land where Iron Crosses grew and Red Stars were handed out by the boxful, where reputations were made, or lost, in a matter of hours. These generations had no Tennyson or Tolstoy to note their heroics and sacrifices, just endless lists of awards and casualties, which were then lost.

It is also a place, perhaps unique in modern warfare, where a vicious ethnic and political cleansing was carried out by both opposing sides under the guise of wartime security measures. Warfare in the Crimea was not just about the contest between opposing armies and fleets, but about remaking the human geography with a vengeance. This was a place where opposing views of a better future for their people were

implemented by secret policemen armed with submachine guns and unfettered authority. It is a place where horrible crimes were covered up, so as not to tarnish the official version of history. This work is a step toward exposing the long-suppressed truth that the Nazi and Soviet regimes were not so far apart, in terms of behavior, methods, and objectives. To be sure, there were brave and extraordinary soldiers on both sides, but it is a sad truth of military history that some of the most remarkable warriors have fought for some very shabby causes. It is even more remarkable that the tragic events in the Crimea are not confined to distant memory, but are being repeated in the current era, as Russian troops have once again invaded this region in order to aggrandize the notion of a “New Russia.”

The military history of the Crimean Peninsula, which stretches back to ancient times, has been shaped by its unique geography. A natural fortress surrounded by water, the Crimea has long been regarded as a place where inferior military forces could create an impregnable bastion to hold off larger enemy armies. Attackers have always had limited options for gaining access into the Crimea, and the traditional route through the narrow Perekop Isthmus has been a tough nut to crack, irrespective of weapons technology. Yet the Crimea has also proven to be a cul-de-sac, where trapped armies were forced to fight a last stand or evacuate by sea. The degree that friendly naval forces could operate along the Black Sea littoral has ultimately determined the ability of both attackers and defenders to achieve decisive results in the Crimea.

While the Crimea was regarded as a “Russian Riviera” since the time of Catherine the Great, it was the creation of a naval base at Sevastopol that brought real strategic value to the Crimea. During the 20th century there were no less than five military campaigns in the Crimea, all of which bear striking similarities. Two of these campaigns, the German invasion of the Crimea in 1941–42 and the Soviet invasion of 1943–44, were major operations but are virtually unknown in the English-language historiography of World War II. Fighting in the

Crimea was intense and often desperate, creating heroes on both sides, but their stories are largely forgotten. This book intends to correct that omission, as well as providing historical context for the current Russian military operations in the Crimea. The military history of the Crimea over the past two centuries is exceedingly complex, but presents a rich tapestry of patriots, opportunists, professional soldiers and sailors and not a few villains, all vying for control of this prestigious region, but each in turn facing victory, followed by frustration and defeat.

Prologue

The Russians were drawn to the Crimea by Tatar raiding, which had swept far and wide across southern Russia since the early 16th century. The Tatars were warlike descendents of the Mongol Golden Horde and closely allied with the Ottoman Empire; they were skillful light cavalrymen and for centuries their economy in the Crimea was based upon the sale of pillaged goods and of Russian captives into slavery. The Crimean city of Caffa (later Feodosiya), became the center of a lucrative slave trade with the Ottoman Empire. In 1571, a large army of Crimean Tatars even raided Moscow and burned much of Tsar Ivan the Terrible's capital, then took thousands of prisoners back with them.¹ The Crimean Tatars, who held a position of military advantage, also demanded tribute from Ivan the Terrible and were intent upon seizing more Russian land. Although Ivan the Terrible's army inflicted a severe defeat upon the Crimean Tatars just 40 miles south of Moscow in 1572, this was only a temporary reverse, and Tatar raiders continued to threaten the outskirts of Moscow for another 60 years.

The remote Crimean Peninsula was a natural fortress for Tatar raiding forces, since the only practical invasion route was through the narrow neck of the Perekop Isthmus, just 5½ miles wide. The Crimean Tatars used their plentiful slave labor to build a large fort at Perekop, then supplemented it with a wall across the Perekop Isthmus and dug

a 72ft wide and 39ft deep moat in front of it. It was a very strong defensive position, supported by artillery and several forts. Furthermore, the area around the Perekop Isthmus was treeless and devoid of fresh water, which made it difficult for an attacking force to remain long enough to mount a deliberate attack. There were two other lesser land routes into the Crimea, but each was fraught with difficulty. East of Perekop, the Sivash was a shallow, marshy area that was not really sea or land. It could be crossed at two locations – at the even narrower Chongar Peninsula, just half a mile wide, or the 75-mile long Arabat Spit, which was little more than a sandbar. Both routes were easily blocked by small forces; the Tatars built fieldworks at Chongar and a large stone fort to block the southern end of the Arabat Spit. In military terms, the only practical alternative to an assault on the Perekop Isthmus was to land at Kerch, on the eastern end of the Crimea, but Ottoman naval superiority on the Black Sea made this infeasible for two centuries.

Russia, devastated by famine that eliminated nearly one-third of its population during 1601–03, could not immediately respond to aggression from the Crimean Tatars. It was not until May 1689 that Prince Vasily Golitsyn was able to approach Perekop with an army of 117,000 Russian soldiers and plenty of artillery. However, Russian armies lacked the logistical support to operate in such remote, inhospitable terrain, and Golitsyn was compelled to fall back empty-handed.² Tatar raiding from their Crimean stronghold continued, with 15,000 Russian captives taken in 1693 alone.³ Russian tsars became increasingly incensed about eliminating this persistent threat once and for all, but decades passed with no success. Recognizing the deficiency of Russian military training, the tsars were compelled to import foreign military officers to improve the efficiency of Russian armies. One such officer, the German Count Burkhard Christoph von Münnich, led a 62,000-man Russian army in May 1736 that succeeded in storming the heretofore impregnable Tatar Wall at Perekop by use of deception and a night assault. Münnich conducted a feint against one end of the wall,

which attracted Tatar attention, while his main body assaulted the other end. The first Russian soldier to reach the top of the Tatar Wall was a 13-year-old nobleman named Vasily Dolgorukov, whom Münnich awarded a field commission. Thereafter, Münnich's army spread out across the Crimea, destroying a number of towns, before disease and lack of supplies forced a withdrawal.⁴ The Tatar Khan reoccupied the position at Perekop but another Russian army led by the Irish-born Count Peter Lacy outwitted them again by crossing the Sivash in June 1737 and defeating the outflanked Tatar army. Lacy had discovered an important point about the odd terrain of the Crimea – that under the right conditions of wind and tide, the Sivash was briefly fordable. After these defeats, the military power of the Crimean Khanate fell into sharp decline.

A period of peace followed, but in 1771 conflict was resumed and Prince Vasily Dolgorukov, now a general, returned to Perekop at the head of a powerful army. Tatar resistance was much weaker than before and Dolgorukov easily stormed the Perekop fort on July 10, 1771. Once the defenses at Perekop were breached, the Khan fled to Constantinople and much of his army evaporated. Prince Dolgorukov overran the Crimea in a month, although Tatar survivors retreated into the mountains on the southern coast. He was awarded a title recognizing him as conqueror of the Crimea.⁵

Subsequently, the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji with the Ottoman Empire in 1774 recognized the Russian military successes and allowed the nearly defunct Crimean Khanate to be recast as a Russian puppet state. However, the Russian-appointed Khan was rejected by the Tatar people, many of whom retreated into the southern mountains to conduct a guerrilla war. Up to 30,000 Tatars may have been killed during this period of Russian quasi-occupation, but years of guerrilla warfare also strained the Russian Army. After nine years of this nonsense, Catherine the Great finally decided to annex the Crimean Khanate outright in April 1783. She put her lover Prince Grigoriy Potemkin in charge of the region and he encouraged Tatars to leave the

Crimea for Ottoman lands; 80,000 left in 1784.⁶ Catherine also ordered the deportation of 75,000 Greek Christians from the Crimea and invited colonists from her native Germany to move to the Crimea. Russian rulers since Peter the Great had invited skilled foreigners to come to special economic zones to rapidly build up commerce, and the Crimea was expected to become a rich province.

An expatriate Scot by the name of Thomas F. Mackenzie (1740–86) was in command of the main Russian naval squadron in the Black Sea, and on his own initiative he selected the harbor near the Tatar village of Aqyar as an excellent site for a naval base. In June 1783, crews from Mackenzie's frigates began constructing naval barracks and other shore facilities in the port that would soon be renamed Sevastopol by Prince Potemkin. Another nearby harbor, at Balaklava, was also selected for development. Although the "base" was little more than an undefended roadstead outfitted with a few piers and warehouses, Potemkin announced the formation of the Black Sea Fleet (*Chernomorsky Flot*), from Mackenzie's naval squadron.⁷ Another foreigner serving with the fleet at Sevastopol was the American John Paul Jones, who commanded one of Mackenzie's frigates. Mackenzie himself passed quickly from the scene but left a lasting legacy in Sevastopol. It was not long before annexation of the Crimea brought renewed war with the Ottoman Empire, but the Black Sea Fleet, under the capable leadership of Admiral Fyodor Ushakov, handily won a string of naval victories against the Turks between 1788 and 1791. By the end of the 18th century, possession of a warm-water port in the Crimea enabled Russia to become the dominant naval power in the Black Sea.

Due to the remoteness of the Crimea, it took many decades to actually build an effective naval base at Sevastopol. All materials had to be brought in by vessels, across the Sea of Azov, from Rostov. Most of the labor force was comprised of local serfs, who had few tools for digging or construction, but the number of skilled foreigners imported into the Crimea increased significantly after 1805. A cluster of German

colonies was built around Neusatz-Kronenthal, 12 miles west of Simferopol, which slowly grew to over 11,000 Germans over the course of the 19th century.⁸ It was not until the reign of Tsar Nicholas I (1825–55), that a serious construction effort began to equip Sevastopol as a fully functional naval base. An English engineer, John Upton, was brought to Sevastopol in 1832 to head a five-year project to complete the first dockyard and to design a string of forts around the port.⁹ However, Upton's project took two decades to complete and the first Russian warship could not use Sevastopol's dockyard until 1853. Nevertheless, possession of the Crimea and a nascent naval base at Sevastopol emboldened the tsars to consider further expansion at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, since Ottoman naval superiority was no longer unchallenged.

Yet the build-up of the Black Sea Fleet and the naval base at Sevastopol contributed to tensions with Britain and France, which supported the Ottoman Empire. When another war erupted with the Ottomans, a Russian naval squadron led by Admiral Pavel Nakhimov easily crushed an Ottoman squadron at the battle of Sinope in November 1853, but this served as justification for Britain and France to declare war on Russia four months later. It is revealing that the primary objective of the Anglo-French expeditionary forces in the subsequent Crimean War was to destroy the Russian Black Sea Fleet and its base at Sevastopol, which were regarded as the Russian “center of gravity” for further aggression against the Ottomans. The year-long siege of Sevastopol destroyed Russian naval power in the Black Sea; most of the base was laid waste and 14 of 15 ships of the line and four of six frigates were scuttled in the roadstead. After the fall of Sevastopol to Anglo-French forces in September 1855, the Treaty of Paris, signed in March 1856, limited the Black Sea Fleet to only ten small warships with a maximum combined tonnage of 5,600 tons – less than 10 percent of its pre-war tonnage. The treaty also limited Russia's ability to enlarge existing naval bases in the Black Sea and to construct new coastal fortifications.

Although Russia was angered by this punitive peace settlement, it was not until 1871 that Tsar Aleksandr II dared to abrogate the naval clauses of the treaty, but then left it to his son to begin rebuilding Russian naval power in the Black Sea during the 1880s. The weakness of Russia's industrial base made the resurrection of the Black Sea Fleet a long, drawn-out process and it was not until June 1883 that the dockyard at Sevastopol was capable of beginning construction on the *Ekaterina II*-class pre-dreadnought battleships. Nevertheless, most warships of the Black Sea Fleet were still built at Nikolayev, not Sevastopol. Much of the German population that had supported development of the Crimea began to migrate to the United States after Tsar Aleksandr II decided in 1872 to remove their exemption from conscription into the Russian Army. More Russians were brought in to "Russify" the Crimea, but these also included disgruntled workers from cities that brought unrest with them. In June 1905, the Black Sea Fleet was struck by the mutiny of the crew of the pre-dreadnought battleship *Potemkin*, which then spread to other warships in the fleet. Although the revolt was eventually suppressed, it brought out an important political reality in the Crimea. Whereas agitation in the rest of Russia during the Revolution of 1905 was predominantly in the urban proletariat, the Crimean population was primarily agricultural and not disposed to revolution, but the sailors of the Black Sea Fleet were a nexus of unrest.

When World War I erupted in August 1914, the Black Sea Fleet had a clear superiority over the Ottoman Navy, with nine pre-dreadnought battleships versus only two pre-dreadnoughts Turkey acquired from Germany. However, the German decision to transfer the modern battlecruiser *Goeben* to Turkish service eliminated the Russian naval advantage. Adding insult to injury, the *Goeben* (renamed *Yavuz*) boldly bombarded Sevastopol in October 1914, demonstrating the inability of the Black Sea Fleet to even protect its main naval base. It was not until the two *Imperatritsa Mariya*-class dreadnoughts entered service a year later that the Black Sea Fleet gained some measure of

superiority. However, the lead dreadnought, the *Imperatritsa Mariya*, suffered a magazine explosion and capsized in Sevastopol harbor in October 1916. Given the scale of the Tsarist investment of resources in the Black Sea Fleet and the naval base at Sevastopol, the return for the Russian war effort was minimal. When the Tsar was overthrown by the February Revolution in March 1917, the sailors of the Black Sea Fleet were quickly radicalized and were hostile to the Provisional Government. Sailor committees demonstrated their revolutionary fervor by renaming the two new dreadnoughts in Sevastopol: the *Imperatritsa Ekaterina Velikaya* became the *Svobodnya Rossiya* (*Free Russia*) and the *Imperator Aleksandr III* became the *Volya* (*Freedom*).

Russian authority all but collapsed in the Crimea after the October Revolution, and local Tatars, although reduced to less than 20 percent of the population, saw in this chaos their chance to recover their independence. Noman Çelebicihan, a 33-year-old Tatar lawyer, proclaimed himself president of the Crimean People's Republic on December 13, 1917. Using a few hundred ethnic Tatar troops demobilized from the Russian Army and some pro-White officers, Çelebicihan established a provisional government in Bakhchisaray. However, the Bolshevik leadership in St Petersburg had dispatched Vasily V. Romenets and Aleksei V. Mokrousov, both former sailors, to whip up revolutionary fervor in the Black Sea Fleet, and their mission was a complete success. On December 16, sailors from the destroyers *Fidonosi* and *Gadzhibey* raised the Red Flag and anarchy spread rapidly across the fleet. While Romenets established a Revolutionary Committee (RevKom) in the fleet, Mokrousov organized 2,500 anarchist sailors into the Black Sea Fleet Revolutionary Force and seized the port of Sevastopol in the name of the Bolsheviks. After receiving telegraphed instructions from the Bolshevik Central Committee in St Petersburg to "act with determination against the enemies of the people," Mokrousov's sailors arrested and executed 128 officers on December 28. Naturally, the Black Sea Fleet Revolutionary Committee refused to recognize Çelebicihan's provisional government

and on January 14, 1918 Mokrousov sent a large detachment of his Red Guard sailors northward to Simferopol, where they arrested and executed Çelebicihan. They also murdered about 200 of his supporters, bayoneting and clubbing them to death in the Simferopol train station. Thereafter, the Bolsheviks found it increasingly difficult to control the armed groups of sailors, who favored drunken anarchy over socialist rhetoric. In a three-day orgy of violence, which now extended to families of officers and other members of the bourgeoisie, Mokrousov's gangs of armed sailors murdered between 600 and 700 people in Sevastopol during February 21–23, 1918.¹⁰ Economic activity in the Crimea virtually collapsed as sailors turned to brigandage and hostage taking.

Recognizing that the revolutionary sailors were out of control, Anton I. Slutsky, a professional Bolshevik revolutionary, was sent from St Petersburg to take charge of the Crimea, and his first order of business upon arrival was to institute a Red Terror to crush the rising tide of Tatar nationalism. Slutsky then established a ramshackle government in Simferopol and took charge of the 3rd Soviet Army, which numbered fewer than 5,000 soldiers and sailors. Yet the Bolsheviks had little effective control over the Crimea, and as Professor Peter Kenez described: “The Bolshevik regime [in the Crimea], which lasted for three months, was remarkable only for its senseless cruelty. No one could control the looting and sadism of the sailors.”¹¹

There was one force that could control the anarchy-loving Black Sea Fleet sailors. Most of the Russian Army was demobilized after the Germans agreed to a temporary armistice in December 1917, but when the Bolsheviks withdrew from peace talks at Brest-Litovsk on February 10, 1918, the Germans were quick to take advantage of Russia's helplessness. Dubbed Operation *Faustschlag* (*Fist Punch*), the Germans advanced into Ukraine virtually unopposed on February 18, 1918 and soon reached Kiev. With German encouragement, Ukrainian nationalists formed an independent government and the Army of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR). Although the Bolsheviks quickly

returned to the negotiating table at Brest-Litovsk, the Germans forced them into signing away their rights to Ukraine and the Crimea, as well as the Black Sea Fleet. On March 30, 1918, the German government announced that it did not regard the Crimea as part of Ukraine. Privately, a number of senior German military leaders such as Erich Ludendorff wanted to acquire the Crimea as a permanent German colony in the east. However, Ukraine also wanted to seize control of the Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet.

In April 1918, the UPR dispatched General Peter F. Bolbochan, a former Tsarist officer, with the the 1st Division from the Zaporozhye Corps to seize the Crimea. The UPR had quickly begun to form an army from prisoners returning from Austrian captivity, and Bolbochan's division comprised three small infantry regiments. A small German expeditionary force, initially consisting of General Robert von Kosch's 15. Landwehr-Division and a Bavarian cavalry division, followed Bolbochan's division and tentatively cooperated with the UPR in disarming Russian troops in the area. Slutsky rushed what troops he had to the Perekop, but Bolbochan conducted an end-run at the Chongar crossing, which was seized on April 22, 1918. Once they realized that they were flanked, the Red forces disintegrated in panicked flight, allowing Kosch's German troops to easily pass through the Perekop Isthmus. Local Tatars were eager to join with Bolbochan's division, and when his troops reached Simferopol on April 24 and captured Slutsky, Crimean Tatars avenged the Bolshevik murder of Çelebicihan by executing Slutsky. Two days later, the Germans arrived at Simferopol, but now German-Ukrainian military cooperation came to an abrupt end. Kosch ordered his troops to surround and disarm Bolbochan's division and the UPR was ordered to leave the Crimea, which he pointed out belonged to Germany now. Lenin was furious that the Germans were occupying the Crimea but his protests were ignored.¹²

Control of the Black Sea Fleet now became a primary objective of the Germans, Ukrainians and Bolsheviks. Rear-Admiral Mikhail P.

Sablin had saved himself from mob violence in January by openly joining the Bolsheviks – as other former Tsarist officers did as well – and Slutsky had put him in charge of the fleet. Now with German and Ukrainian forces approaching Sevastopol, Sablin was ordered to take the fleet to Novorossiysk, but he was only able to convince the crews of the dreadnoughts *Svobodnya Rossiya* and *Volya*, plus 11 destroyers, to follow him. The rest of the fleet, including the seven pre-dreadnoughts and another nine destroyers, fell into German hands when Kosch's troops seized the city on May 1, 1918.¹³ German forces overran the rest of the Crimea forthwith, including the Kerch Peninsula. Alarmed that the Germans might continue eastward to seize the remainder of the Black Sea Fleet at Novorossiysk, Lenin personally ordered Sablin to scuttle his fleet on June 18, 1918. The dreadnought *Svobodnya Rossiya* and five destroyers were scuttled, but the crews of the *Volya* and nine other destroyers refused and opted to return to Sevastopol. A large proportion of the crews of the Black Sea Fleet were Ukrainian and they hoped that the Germans would support the creation of an independent Ukrainian navy.¹⁴

The Germans enjoyed the Crimea for six months and installed a puppet government in Simferopol, which allowed a limited amount of Tatar autonomy, thereby gaining some degree of local support. The Germans stabilized the situation in the Crimea and even brought the damaged battlecruiser *Yavuz* to be repaired in Sevastopol's dockyards during the summer of 1918 – one could even say that Kaiser Wilhelm II got better use out of the naval facility than Tsar Nicholas II ever had. Yet when Germany agreed to an armistice with the Western Allies in November 1918, the German occupation of the Crimea came to an abrupt end. Concerned about the Bolsheviks regaining control of Sevastopol and the remnants of the Black Sea Fleet, the British Mediterranean Fleet sent a naval expeditionary force to the Crimea less than two weeks after the armistice. Landing parties from the cruiser HMS *Canterbury* were the first to reach Sevastopol on November 24, where they took control over the remaining Russian warships. The next

day, a larger force with two British battleships arrived, joined by French and Italian warships. Vice-Admiral Albert Hopman, in charge of the 11,000 German troops in Sevastopol, was allowed to assist with maintaining order until more Allied troops arrived.¹⁵ Although welcomed at first, the British were ignorant of local political factions, and their efforts to encourage a new anti-Bolshevik provisional government in Simferopol were ham-fisted. The famous British spy, Sydney Reilly, was sent to Sevastopol to gather information about political conditions in the area, but much of what he reported was inaccurate or overly optimistic. A contingent of 500 Royal Marines landed on December 1, but the British decided to hand responsibility for the Crimea over to the French, who landed the 176^e régiment d'infanterie at Sevastopol on December 26, 1918.¹⁶

The French, particularly Georges Clemenceau, had ambitious plans for the Crimea and military intervention in southern Russia against the Bolsheviks. Clemenceau regarded the Crimea as the perfect bastion from which to cooperate with local White forces, since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire enabled Allied naval forces to operate freely in the Black Sea. However, Clemenceau's vision of rolling back Bolshevism in Ukraine was not matched by the requisite military muscle. A 2,000-man Greek regiment arrived in January 1919 to reinforce the French, and then several French colonial battalions of Senegalese and Algerians, but the Allied force in the Crimea never exceeded 7,000 men. A French fleet, including the dreadnoughts *France* and *Jean Bart*, also arrived at Sevastopol, but French control did not extend beyond the range of their fleet's guns. Morale among the war-weary French forces was poor and their relations with the Crimean people deteriorated rapidly. Nor did White forces, who opposed the Bolsheviks, have more than a token force in the Crimea. By March 1919, the Bolsheviks began moving to eject both the French and the Whites from the Crimea.

Typically for the disorganized Whites, they left the Perekop Isthmus only lightly guarded, and the Red 14th Army easily stormed the Tatar Wall

on April 3. Within five days, Red cavalry reached Simferopol, sending the Provisional Government and Whites scrambling for safety. Red troops reached the outskirts of Sevastopol on 14 April and French naval gunfire repulsed the first tentative assault. However, the French had no stomach for real fighting and a serious mutiny broke out on both French dreadnoughts. A number of rebellious French sailors expressed sympathy with the Bolshevik cause and it was soon apparent that many troops were unreliable as well. The French agreed to a temporary cease-fire with the Bolsheviks, in return for evacuating their forces from the Crimea. Even though the British battleship HMS *Iron Duke* was in Sevastopol, the Royal Navy decided to focus on incapacitating the remaining Russian warships in the port while negotiations dragged on. The British were particularly concerned about the Bolsheviks acquiring intact submarines. British sabotage parties used demolition charges to destroy the engines on a number of warships, including both Evstafi-class pre-dreadnoughts, four destroyers and all nine submarines. Although the French agreed to a cease-fire with the Bolsheviks, the Royal Navy did not, and HMS *Iron Duke* and two light cruisers shelled Red positions along the coast on April 25 and April 27.¹⁷ On April 28, 1919, the French and Greek troops completed their evacuation from Sevastopol and the Red Army marched in the next day.

Although a large number of Russian civilians left with the French, the remaining White forces retreated to the Kerch Peninsula and entrenched themselves near Ak-Monai. The Reds quickly established the Crimean Soviet Socialist Republic in Simferopol, but due to the outbreak of anti-Bolshevik rebellion in large areas of Ukraine, much of the 14th Army was transferred before victory in the Crimea was complete. Commissar Pavel E. Dybenko, a former sailor and political agitator, was left with only 9,600 troops in the Crimea. Dybenko sent his available troops east to attack the Whites at Ak-Monai, but the Royal Navy intervened; between May 2 and June 9, the British positioned two powerful naval task groups on either side of the Kerch Peninsula, one in the Sea of Azov and the other off Feodosiya. Naval gunfire from the

battleships HMS *Marlborough* and HMS *Emperor of India*, supported by two light cruisers and six destroyers, prevented Red troops from breaching the White defenses.¹⁸ Furthermore, the Royal Navy helped the Whites to move additional forces from Novorossiysk back to the Crimea. General Yakov Slashchev landed near Feodosiya with an infantry brigade and soon joined with local White forces. Alarmed by reports of White landings in the Crimea, Dybenko opted to abandon the Crimea without a fight. Slashchev's troops marched back into Sevastopol on June 24, 1919. Thanks to British naval gunfire support, the Whites had recovered the Crimea and Anton Deniken, the leader of the White Volunteer Army, was determined not only to hold onto it as a bastion but to use it as a springboard for one last counteroffensive that ambitiously aimed for Moscow. However, Deniken's counteroffensive failed, and by early December 1919 the defeated Volunteer Army was retreating to the Crimea, where it would make its last stand. On April 4, 1920, Deniken was replaced by Baron Petr Nikolayevich Wrangel, who assumed command over all White forces in the Crimea.¹⁹

Wrangel believed that the Whites might be able to hold the Crimea indefinitely, since even his depleted Volunteer Army could defend the only two practical land routes: the Perekop and Chongar. He stationed General-Lieutenant Aleksandr P. Kutepov's 1st Corps behind the old Tatar Wall at the Perekop Isthmus, which was heavily fortified with barbed wire, machine guns, and artillery during the fall of 1919. The 38-year-old Kutepov, last commander of the elite Preobrazhensky Regiment, was one of the best fighting generals of the Volunteer Army and a stern disciplinarian who kept his troops in good order. Kutepov's troops dug three lines of trenches at Perekop, fronted by three to five rows of barbed wire. He had 8,900 troops holding a 5½-mile-wide front at Perekop, with another 7,500 men holding a reserve position at Ishun, 12 miles south of Perekop.²⁰

General Yakov Slashchev's 2nd Corps deployed 3,000 infantry on a ½-mile-wide front at the Chongar, which was also heavily fortified with barbed wire, six lines of trenches, and even a few concrete bunkers.

Several large coastal guns were taken from Sevastopol to reinforce the Chongar position. Slashchev ordered the Salkovo railroad bridge blown up, leaving a mile-wide gap across the Sivash. Wrangel kept the 12,000 mounted troops of the Don Cavalry Corps back at Dzhankoy as a mobile reserve. Given that the Bolsheviks had absolutely no naval forces on the Black Sea, Wrangel believed that his forces, led by these two skillful and experienced commanders, could hold the only gateways into the Crimea. British military aid continued to arrive in Sevastopol, enabling Wrangel to rebuild the battered Volunteer Army with fresh equipment and uniforms; the British even provided 45 tanks and 42 aircraft to reinforce the White defenses in the Crimea. Meanwhile, those remnants of the Black Sea Fleet that had not yet been scuttled sat rusting in Sevastopol, and although short on both coal and trained sailors, were available to provide Wrangel with naval gunfire support.

With the Russian Civil War in its final spasms by late 1920, the Red Army was finally able to direct sufficient forces to retake the Crimea. Mikhail Frunze's Southern Front dispatched five armies toward the Crimea in October 1920, consisting of 186,000 troops. Yet despite an overall 5-1 superiority in manpower and 4-1 in artillery, Frunze would be able to deploy only a fraction of his forces at either Perekop or Chongar. It was the same kind of situation that faced the Persian army at Thermopylae in 480 BC, where terrain greatly reduced the advantage of superior numbers. With this in mind, Kutepov waited at the Perekop, trusting to barbed wire and machine guns to keep the Reds out.

CHAPTER 1

The Crimea Under the Hammer and Sickle, 1920–41

“We shall now proceed to construct the Socialist order.”

Vladimir Lenin, October 1917

The men marched silently in long columns through the cold, ankle-deep mud, which held the stink of a stagnant sea. It was a cold night on November 7/8, 1920, with temperatures around 50° F (10° C) and very windy, which brought a chill to each man, locked in the solitude of the stealthy march. These men were soldiers of Augustus Kork's 6th Army, who were marching 3 miles across the Sivash to outflank Kutepov's White troops at Perekop. Frunze had wanted to make his main effort at the Chongar Peninsula, but the Azov Flotilla could not move its small craft into the Sivash due to ice

at Henichesk, which was the only place where shipping could enter the confined waters. Without boats, Frunze did not believe that he could move enough assault troops across the water to overwhelm Slashchev's defensive position. Instead, Frunze was forced to shift his main effort to the Perekop, with Kork's army deployed to conduct a frontal assault on the Tatar Wall.¹ Then by chance, high winds and unusual tide conditions lowered the water level in the Sivash and opened a new avenue of approach. Frunze ordered Kork to send nearly one-third of his army – the 15th and 52nd Rifle Divisions and the 153rd mixed brigade, a total of 20,300 troops – to cross the Sivash during the night. Once the Sivash was crossed, Kork would begin the main attack on the Tatar Wall the next day. Frunze believed that if Kutepov's corps was hit from in front and behind simultaneously, it would lead to a rapid collapse. Neither Kutepov nor Wrangel expected a serious attack across the Sivash, but just in case, they deployed 2,000 Cossack cavalymen under Mikhail A. Fostikov to screen the coast along the southern side of the Sivash.

Markian V. Germanovich's 52nd Rifle Division began crossing the Sivash at 2200hrs on November 7, followed by the 15th Rifle Division. After about three hours, they landed undetected on the small, flat Litovsky Peninsula southeast of Perekop and, after assembling, advanced half a mile southward. Kork managed to get some light artillery across the Sivash as well, but his assault force was limited to the ammunition they could carry. Around 0400hrs on November 8, the vanguard of Germanovich's 52nd Rifle Division encountered elements of Fostikov's brigade, which slowly fell back toward the base of the Lithuania Peninsula but gained time for Kutepov to dispatch two regiments of the Drozdovskaya Division from Armyansk to reinforce them. By 0900hrs, the Whites had begun a major counterattack near the village of Karadzhanaya, including armored vehicles, which effectively blocked the Soviet flanking maneuver. For the rest of the day, heavy fighting continued around this village and Kutepov fed in more reinforcements from Perekop. The Soviet assault

group had limited artillery ammunition, which prevented them from breaking through the White positions, and to make matters worse, the water began rising in the Sivash, isolating them. Just before the waters became too deep, Frunze sent the 7th Cavalry Division across the Sivash to reinforce Kork's two divisions.

By the evening, Frunze's plan was unraveling. The flanking maneuver across the Sivash had been brought to a halt and was being pummeled by White forces with superior artillery. A diversionary attack with a regiment down the Arabat Spit had also ended in disaster, with heavy losses. Frunze was not eager to begin the attack at Perekop until Kutepov's corps was disrupted by the flank attack, but now he had no choice – he ordered Vasily K. Blyukher's 51st Rifle Division to begin the assault on the Tatar Wall at Perekop immediately. Despite the size of Frunze's Southern Front – on paper – Blyukher had only 4,800 assault troops in his division and 55 artillery pieces, of which 34 were light 75mm or 76.2mm guns. His arsenal of heavy artillery was limited to 12 120/122mm and six 152mm howitzers, which was clearly insufficient to create a breakthrough in a heavily fortified line. Blyukher was supposed to begin his artillery preparation at Perekop on the morning of November 8, but heavy fog prevented observed fire. Even once the fog lifted around noon, Blyukher's artillery was unable to inflict serious damage upon the enemy defenses. Under pressure from Frunze, Blyukher committed a reinforced infantry brigade around 1325hrs to attack the Tatar Wall, which succeeded in penetrating through part of the barbed-wire obstacles before being shot to pieces by Kutepov's machine gunners. Soviet armored cars supported the attack, but could not counter White artillery. Blyukher ordered in three more assaults during the course of the afternoon, but all ended in failure. Casualties in the assault regiments amounted to 60 percent or higher. Lacking the requisite 3-1 numerical superiority, and plagued by inadequate artillery–infantry coordination, the Red Army's failure to break the Perekop position was typical for a World War I-type positional battle.

Just when it seemed that the Whites were on the verge of winning the battle, Mikhail A. Fostikov's Cossacks pulled out of the fight at Karadzhaniya and retreated all the way back to the port at Yevpatoriya. Once word went around about the retreat, the morale in Kutepov's 1st Corps cracked and other units began retreating to the reserve position at Ishun. As often happens in warfare, the Whites did not realize that the Reds were in far worse shape, and unauthorized retreats become contagious. With his flank giving way, Kutepov was forced to abandon the Perekop position and try to reform at Ishun. Blyukher's 51st Rifle Division was so badly battered that it did not occupy the undefended Tatar Wall until the morning of November 8, and then lacked the strength to pursue. Kork urged the 15th and 52nd Rifle Divisions, which were also in poor shape, to push on to Ishun.

This was another excellent defensive position, surrounded by four large lakes and marshy terrain. Kutepov was able to assemble at least 9,000 troops and three tanks at Ishun, whereas the pursuing Red divisions had no more than 15,000 combat-ready troops in hand. The Whites had moved two 12in battleship guns on carriages to Ishun and three 8in-gun batteries, and the Black Sea Fleet was able to deploy several warships to provide naval gunfire support – in short, the Whites had a clear superiority in firepower. Kutepov's troops fended off the first enemy probing attack on the evening of November 9, but Blyukher's 51st Rifle Division achieved some success on the west side of the Ishun position on November 10 and was only brought to a halt by naval gunfire. With Wrangel's attention focused on Ishun, Frunze ordered the 30th Rifle Division to launch a surprise attack across the Chongar Narrows on the night of November 10/11 – which succeeded. In desperation, Wrangel ordered a major counterattack on the morning of November 11, spearheaded by their remaining Cossack cavalry, which nearly broke Kork's 6th Army. However, the arrival of the vanguard of Philip K. Mironov's 2nd Cavalry Army led to a costly cavalry battle, which the Whites could not afford. Once it was clear that the White forces had shot their bolt and that their impulsive

attack had failed, Wrangel ordered his forces to withdraw from the Ishun position on the evening of November 11.

The Soviet cavalry spread out across the Crimea in hot pursuit, overrunning all of it in less than a week. By the time that Simferopol fell on November 13, Wrangel's forces were already beginning their evacuation of the Crimea. Wrangel had prepared carefully for evacuation and the operation ran smoothly and efficiently; he succeeded in loading a total of 145,693 soldiers and civilians onto an evacuation flotilla of 126 ships within just two days.² There were still enough loyal sailors to enable the rump Black Sea Fleet to join the evacuation, with the dreadnought *General Alekseyev* (the former *Imperator Aleksandr III/Volya*), two elderly cruisers, 11 destroyers, and four submarines – a ragged flotilla that was soon dubbed “Wrangel's Fleet.” Other disabled warships were towed out of Sevastopol, which was abandoned on November 14. During the evacuation, Wrangel ordered his retreating White troops not to destroy any facilities in Sevastopol, which he said, “belonged to the Russian people.” The fleet initially went to Constantinople, depositing the remnants of Wrangel's Volunteer Army at Gallipoli. Three months later, the French granted Wrangel's Fleet asylum and the warships were sent to Bizerte in Tunisia, where they sat rusting at anchor for years until they were finally scrapped.

Frunze claimed that the Red Army lost 10,000 soldiers in assaulting the Crimea in November 1920, but this seems high. Most of the casualties were in Blyukher's 51st Rifle Division, which lost upwards of 3,000 men, but otherwise most Soviet divisions saw only brief combat in the Crimea. The Soviet victory there was based more on luck and determination than skill or planning, as was later acknowledged by the Soviet General Staff's Chief of Operations, Vladimir K. Triandafillov. The forces assigned to storm the Perekop position were grossly inadequate and Frunze based his offensive entirely upon a trick maneuver that succeeded only in part. It was the abrupt collapse of White morale that won the campaign for Frunze,

not the tactical skill of the Red Army. Having the means to escape by sea also influenced the White decision to quit a battle that was still in doubt, since many thought it best to run away in the hope of fighting another day than to conduct a last stand.

*“There are now over 300,000 bourgeoisie [in the Crimea]
who must be dealt with.”*

Lenin, December 6, 1920

On the morning of November 15, 1920, the troops of Blyukher’s 51st Rifle Division and Budyonny’s 1st Cavalry Army moved into Sevastopol, led by an armored car marked with a red star insignia and in large red letters, the word “Antichrist.” Wrangel’s Fleet had not yet steamed over the horizon when the victorious Bolsheviks turned to deal with the remaining “enemies of the Revolution” in the Crimea. While some White commanders had dealt harshly with the local population and Bolshevik sympathizers in the Crimea, allowing their troops license to pillage, rape, and murder on occasion, it had not been officially sanctioned policy. Wrangel had made efforts to clamp down on such excesses, since he realized that such acts turned the population against his side. However, Bolshevik leaders had fewer qualms and were not interested in winning “hearts and minds” in the Crimea. Instead, retribution was the order of the day.

On the day following the Red occupation of Sevastopol, the Revolutionary Military Council of Frunze’s Southern Front formed the Revolutionary Committee of Crimea (*Krymrevkoma*), headed by a troika of committed communists consisting of Béla Kun, Rozalia Zalkind (alias Zemliachka), and Georgy L. Piatakov. Kun, a Hungarian Jew, part-time journalist and long-time revolutionary agitator, had

returned to Russia after his Hungarian Soviet Republic had collapsed in August 1919. He had already gained a reputation as a violent radical in Hungary, where he was responsible for the murder of over 500 opponents of his short-lived regime. However, the real ramrod on the committee was Zemliachka, a pince-nez-wearing 44-year-old Jewish woman from Kiev. Zemliachka had risen through the Bolshevik ranks since the abortive 1905 Revolution and become a close associate of Lenin. She had also had a fanatic's lust for violence, and a homicidal antipathy to all "enemies of the party." Piatakov, although less prominent than either Kun or Zemliachka, was a close associate of Leon Trotsky and was intent upon eliminating residual ethnic nationalism in the new Soviet Union – particularly Ukrainian and Tatar. These three committed and ruthless communists were tasked by Lenin with implementing the elimination of all "class enemies" in the Crimea, later known as the Red Terror. Three special detachments of the newly formed Crimean Cheka (KrymChK) security troops were put at their disposal. The Cheka formed a special Crimean Strike Group (*Krimskoy Oodarnoy Grooppi*), led by Nikolay M. Bistrih, but also made arrangements to use Red Army troops as well.

Prior to conquering the Crimea, Bolshevik leaders had promised amnesty to all White troops who surrendered, and many enlisted soldiers had opted not to join Wrangel's evacuation in hopes of remaining in their home country. About 3,000 White troops remained in Feodosiya when the Red Army entered the city, and they peacefully laid down their arms. After being disarmed, many White soldiers offered to join the Red Army, but instead, soldiers of the Red Army 9th Rifle Division, under the direction of Bistrih's Chekists, executed 420 wounded White soldiers and put the rest in two concentration camps. As it turned out, this was just the opening act in a five-month terror campaign. On November 17, 1920, the *Krymrevkoma* issued an order for everyone in the Crimea to complete a mandatory registration within three days; predictably, the registration was merely a means to identify "class enemies." In Feodosiya, soldiers from the 9th Rifle

Division arrested 1,100 people who registered, of whom 1,006 were shot, 79 imprisoned, and only 15 released.

The Cheka and Red Army execution squads quickly spread the Red Terror across the Crimea. Initially, the victims were primarily former White officers and wealthy landowners, but once these were gone the Terror moved on to eliminating common enlisted soldiers, then potential opponents in the general civilian population. People were condemned for just having displayed “sympathy for the White cause,” which included dockyard workers in Sevastopol who unloaded supplies from ships during White rule in the Crimea. Soon, members of the clergy, teachers, intellectuals, students, and even medical staff were targeted. In Sevastopol, Cheka death squads and soldiers from the 46th Rifle Division used firing squads and massed hangings to murder at least 12,000 people without trial. Bodies were left hanging all over the city to terrorize the rest of the population. In Kerch, prisoners were loaded onto barges that were then sunk in the Sea of Azov. In Simferopol, capital of the Crimea, at least 20,000 were murdered. Apparently, these numbers were not good enough for Kun and Zemliachka, who accused local Bolshevik officials of being “too soft.” In addition to murder, the Chekists employed torture and rape to break those prisoners held in their concentration camps, while the Red Army was allowed to pillage to its heart’s content. Not everyone meekly submitted to the Red Terror; some Crimean Tatars slipped off to the Yalai Mountains in the southern part of the peninsula and attempted to wage guerrilla warfare against the Red Army and Chekists. Known as the Green Forces, these Tatars had no chance against the better-armed and organized Red Army.

However, local Bolshevik leaders reported to Moscow that Kun and Zemliachka were losing control of the situation in the Crimea and that their death squads were behaving more and more like bandits. The Communist Central Committee in Moscow responded by recalling Kun and Zemliachka, but sent Ivan A. Akulov in March 1921 to replace them. Akulov tightened up on discipline a bit, but the terror

and executions continued. It was not until Mirsaid Haydargalievich Sultan-Galiev, a Tatar who joined the Bolshevik movement and became a member of the Communist Central Committee, travelled to the Crimea and witnessed the Terror firsthand that there was any change in policy. Sultan-Galiev reported back in Moscow that:

Such a reckless and brutal terror has left an indelible mark in the mind of the Crimean people. They all feel a strong, pure animal fear of Soviet officials, along with hidden deep distrust and anger.

Communist leaders in Moscow feigned shock that the Crimean people as a whole would take offense at Chekist efforts to suppress “class enemies,” but quietly realized that the Terror could go on for only so long before the region became completely dysfunctional and useless to the party. After April 1921, Akulov began to reduce the number of executions, and these ceased once the Green Forces were defeated by October 1921. At that time, the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was announced, and a number of Bolshevized Crimean Tatars were included in the regime. According to Soviet figures, at least 52,000 people were murdered (the official term was “repressed”) by the Red Terror in the Crimea between November 1920 and April 1921, although the actual number may have been close to 75,000.

When the executions tapered off, the Terror continued in other forms in the Crimea. Imprisonment and deportation were increasingly used to remove potential dissidents; Turkey was sympathetic to the Tatars and agreed to accept some refugees. About 50,000 Tatars were deported either to the Gulag or to Turkey, to reduce their numbers in the Crimea. The Red Army also seized the bulk of the Crimea’s agricultural harvest, leaving the population to face a famine in the winter of 1921/22. However, after the famine some concessions on freedom of religion and language were made to placate the Crimean Tatars. For the next six years, the Crimea was allowed to go its own way

while the communists in Moscow were focused on the leadership struggle following Lenin's death in 1924. By 1928, Stalin was gaining the upper hand and he was in no mood to make concessions to local ethnic interests. His main domestic objective was forced collectivization of agriculture, which proved just as unpopular in the Crimea as it did everywhere else in the USSR. In 1929–30, Stalin ordered the Cheka to crack down on Tatar nationalism in the Crimea, which led to 3,500 Tatars being executed and 35,000 sent to the Gulag in Siberia.

After Chekist death squads raided several Tatar communities, and Stalin decreed the suppression of their Muslim faith and Turkish language, the Crimean Tatars had had enough of Communist rule. In December 1930, a Tatar rebellion erupted at the village of Alakat on the southern coast of the Crimea after the NKVD executed 42 Tatar prisoners. Stalin sent the Red Army to ruthlessly crush the uprising and to inflict more reprisals on the Tatar community in the Crimea. Forced collectivization resulted in another famine in 1931–33, which reduced the population further. Stalin continued to single the Crimean Tatars out for harsh treatment during the rest of the 1930s, which continued right up to the beginning of World War II. By some estimates, between 1921 and 1941, the communists eliminated about half the Crimean Tatar population, or roughly 165,000 people.

The ethnic German population in the Crimea, numbering 43,631 in 1926, was not targeted in the initial Red Terror. After all, the founders of Marxism – Marx and Engels – had been Germans. Yet the Crimean Germans fell foul of the forced collectivization program in the late 1920s, which appropriated their agricultural communes established in Tsarist times and exiled thousands of them to the Urals.

As an adjunct to the Red Terror in the Crimea, the Soviet regime toyed with the idea of creating a Jewish Republic in the Crimea. Two concepts were behind this proposal: that Jews were regarded as more loyal to the Communist regime and would bind the region to the Soviet state, and that Jewish-operated agricultural colonies could provide hard-currency exports to the Near East. Consequently, the

Soviet regime established a committee known as OZET (for “Society for Settling Toiling Jews on the Land”), which encouraged Jewish emigration to the Crimea in 1924–34, doubling the population within a decade. Although the regime provided some funds, OZET was initially quite successful in enticing foreign investments, including over \$20 million from the United States. Land was no problem, since the NKVD simply appropriated land from Tatars and *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans), both of whom were regarded as enemies of the regime. Yet by the mid-1930s, it was apparent that this project had produced only mediocre results – mostly due to recurrent famines and the effects of collectivization – so the idea of a Jewish Republic fell out of favor. When Stalin began his purges in 1937, OZET was one of the early victims, and its leadership was liquidated. However, in the minds of local Tatars and *Volksdeutsche*, the Jews in the Crimea were inextricably linked to the Communist regime that they detested and feared.

Once Wrangel’s Fleet left, the Black Sea Fleet (Chernomorsky Flot) ceased to exist. The new Soviet state had no naval forces worthy of the name in the Black Sea and the naval facility at Sevastopol was damaged. The Whites, Germans, British, French, and Ukrainians had sabotaged the warships left behind, including those under construction at Nikolayev. A handful of older, less useful warships could eventually be salvaged. By 1922, the Soviets had repaired two obsolete 240-ton *Sokol*-class destroyers and one *Morzh*-class submarine, providing the nucleus of a new Black Sea Fleet. Other incomplete ships were available at Nikolayev, but it would take years to get the shipyard fully operational again.

In the interim, the Soviet regime tried to acquire ships for the Black Sea Fleet by any means. Soviet diplomats approached the French with the proposal to buy back part of Wrangel’s Fleet, which was interned in

Bizerte, Tunisia. The Soviet Navy was particularly interested in purchasing the dreadnought *General Alekseyev* and some of the newer destroyers, but the French dragged out the negotiations and then decided not to return any of the vessels to the USSR. By 1924, the Nikolayev shipyard was able to repair four incomplete destroyers of the *Fidonisy* class; these four ships became the backbone of the Black Sea Fleet from 1925–30. The elderly light cruiser *Komintern* was also made operational again, as well as four small AG-class submarines. By 1926, the Black Sea Fleet had one light cruiser, six destroyers, and four submarines operational – but just barely.

In 1927, a special underwater salvage unit, known as EPRON (*Ekspyeditiya podvodnih rabot osobogo naznacheniya*), was set up to begin raising some of the scuttled warships from the waters around Sevastopol, Nikolayev, and Novorossiysk. EPRON was able to refloat the destroyer *Bystry*, but its engines were wrecked. Subsequently, EPRON divers refloated the destroyer *Gadzhibey* and salvaged its engines, which were then fitted in the *Bystry* – enabling it to become operational again. EPRON made special efforts to salvage material from the two sunken *Imperatritsa Mariya*-class dreadnoughts in the area. The Whites had taken the capsized *Imperatritsa Mariya* into the Sevastopol dockyards in May 1919 in order to begin salvage work, and there it was found when the Red Army entered the city. Although the hull was beyond repair, the armament was worth salvaging and EPRON recovered her 12in gun turrets as well as some of her 130mm secondary batteries. Less successful was the effort to salvage 12in gun ammunition from the sunken *Svobodnaya Rossiya* in Novorossiysk, which resulted in a magazine explosion. Two Tsarist-era light cruisers were also under reconstruction, but it took more than a decade to get them both into service. The Nikolayev shipyard was finally able to begin construction of a few submarines in 1929, but it would not be able to begin building major warships for another six years.

Stalin was not initially concerned about the feeble nature of the Black Sea Fleet, but he changed his mind when the Turkish

Government announced that it was going to modernize the battle cruiser *Yavuz* and purchase new destroyers and submarines from Italy. It was unacceptable to Stalin that Turkey should appear to have a superior naval force in the Black Sea, so he directed the Baltic Sea Fleet to transfer the battleship *Parizhskaya Kommuna* and the light cruiser *Profintern* there. When the *Parizhskaya Kommuna* arrived at Sevastopol in January 1930, it became the flagship of the Black Sea Fleet. However, Stalin was unwilling to devote any significant resources toward new naval construction while he was engaged in building up Soviet industry, and first priority went to the Red Army and then the Air Force (VVS). It was not until 1935 that Stalin authorized a naval expansion program, with two *Kirov*-class heavy cruisers, two *Leningrad*-class destroyer leaders, six *Gnevny*-class destroyers, and a large number of submarines intended to reinforce the Black Sea Fleet. Due to disappointing technical performance from Soviet-built destroyers, funds were even appropriated to purchase a destroyer leader from Italy, which entered the Black Sea Fleet in 1939 as the *Tashkent*. The *Parizhskaya Kommuna* was extensively modernized in 1939–40, but all of the *Gangut*-class dreadnoughts still lacked the firepower and protection of modern battleships. Consequently, Stalin approved construction of a new class of 59,000-ton battleships, armed with 16in guns; the one intended for the Black Sea Fleet was designated as the *Sovetskaya Ukraina* and was laid down at Nikolayev in October 1938. The heavy cruiser Molotov, completed in early 1941, was the first and only warship in the Black Sea Fleet equipped with air-warning radar; its Redut-K system could detect enemy aircraft at a range of 75 miles.

Vice-Admiral Filip S. Oktyabrsky took command of the Black Sea Fleet in March 1939. The 41-year-old was a product of the Stalinist purges, which had eliminated many of the more experienced Tsarist-era naval officers. Oktyabrsky came from the merchant marine and had no naval experience from either World War I or the Russian Civil War. He was given a smattering of technical and doctrinal training at the

new Naval Academy in Leningrad in 1925–28, but thereafter his command experience was limited to minesweepers and motor torpedo boats. By June 1941 the Black Sea Fleet had blossomed into a considerable general-purpose force, and Oktyabrsky was responsible for a cruiser brigade, three destroyer divisions, and eight submarine divisions, which were equipped with one battleship, two heavy and four light cruisers, 17 destroyers, and 44 submarines. Nevertheless, putting a man without prior command experience of even a destroyer in charge of a fleet of this size and complexity would have a noticeable effect upon the Black Sea Fleet's ability to perform its missions around the Crimea.

Oktyabrsky also had no prior experience with naval aviation, but he had a very powerful force in the Black Sea Fleet Navy Air Force (VVS-ChF), which had 626 aircraft.³ The two primary missions of the VVS-ChF were to conduct maritime reconnaissance over the Black Sea and to provide fighter cover over the fleet and its bases. The VVS-ChF had 139 Beriev MBR-2 flying boats for the reconnaissance mission within the 119th Reconnaissance Regiment and six separate squadrons. Air cover for the fleet was provided by three fighter regiments equipped with a total of 140 biplane fighters (I-15bis, I-153) and 91 monoplane I-16s. A single modern MiG-1 fighter had arrived at Yevpatoriya by June 1941, but the VVS-ChF lagged behind the VVS in modernization efforts. The fighters could provide a reasonable degree of zone protection over Soviet naval bases, but their limited range and endurance inhibited their ability to cover fleet operations far from the coast. On the other hand, the VVS-ChF had a decent medium-range strike capability in its two bomber regiments, equipped with a total of 117 Ilyushin DB-3F and Tupolev SB-2 bombers, which had the range to strike targets on the Romanian coast. However, barely 20 percent of the aircrews were trained in June 1941, which greatly restricted operational capabilities at the outset of the war.

In March 1910, the Tsarist regime had recognized that the defenses around the main naval base at Sevastopol were outdated. The existing coastal-defense batteries were concentrated around the harbor entrance and consisted of artillery from the 1870s and 1880s. Most batteries had limited arcs of fire and were unsuited for ground defense. The vulnerability of Port Arthur to surprise naval attack and then ground assault during the recent Russo-Japanese War influenced the Russian Navy's decision toward a major modernization of its coastal defenses at its key bases. In particular, the Russian Admiralty became interested in replacing outdated coastal artillery with a powerful new 12in/52cal. naval gun (305mm) developed by the Obukhovskii Works in St Petersburg in 1907. The 305mm Obukhovskii could fire a 446kg shell out to a maximum range of 28 miles, and if mounted in a fully traversing turret, would be ideal for the dual coastal and ground defense role. Funds to update the coastal defenses around Sevastopol were authorized in 1911, and several smaller batteries armed with 120mm guns were completed in 1912–13. However, the main element of the coastal-defense upgrade was to construct two new batteries, each equipped with two twin Obukhovskii 305mm guns mounted in armored turrets. The Russian fortification expert, General César A. Cui (of French-Lithuanian heritage) was sent to head the project, and he selected sites for the two batteries north and south of Sevastopol. General-Major Nestor A. Buynitsky, one of the foremost Russian engineers, took over the actual construction of the two 305mm turret batteries. Cui's design was quite sophisticated, and in addition to building the batteries, Buynitsky was also tasked with building a railroad spur for each construction site and creating a large-scale concrete manufacturing capability in situ. Despite the untimely death of Buynitsky in late 1914, work progressed fairly quickly on the southernmost 305mm battery, later designated Coastal Battery No. 35, but only the initial site preparations had been completed on the northernmost battery site, later designated Coastal Battery No. 30, before the Russian Revolution brought construction to an abrupt halt.

The four massive twin-305mm turrets, each weighing over 1,000 tons, had been built by the St Petersburg Metal Works Plant during the war, but some of the guns had been removed for use in coastal defenses on the Baltic and none of the turrets had arrived in the Crimea.

Once Wrangel's forces were driven from the Crimea, the Revolutionary Military Council was mindful of the role played by Anglo-French naval forces in intervening in the Crimea both in 1854–55 and 1918–20 and was eager to deter future reoccurrences. The council decided to resume work on the Tsarist-era coastal-defense program but initially lacked the resources to accomplish much. Virtually all of the 27 coastal batteries around Sevastopol had been rendered inoperative by the Anglo-French before they evacuated the port, and Red Army engineers were able to repair only two 152mm batteries in 1921. Construction of the two 305mm batteries languished for seven years until the council was finally able to provide sufficient resources and labor to resume work on Coastal Battery No. 35 in 1924. Four 305mm guns from the Baltic Fleet battleship *Poltava*, which had been damaged by fire in 1919, were recovered and mounted in the turrets manufactured in St Petersburg during the war.⁴ By mid-1926, both turrets were installed in Coastal Battery No. 35 and the installation was declared operational late in 1927, even though the rangefinder and fire-control mechanisms were not installed until the mid-1930s. The battery's command bunker and a magazine holding 800 305mm rounds were protected by 13ft of reinforced concrete, designed to withstand 16in naval gunfire. Coastal Battery No. 35 had a peacetime garrison of 234 naval personnel, but in wartime would be augmented with antiaircraft gunners and more security troops. In July 1929, Stalin visited Coastal Battery No. 35 on an inspection trip, and among his entourage was Generalmajor Werner von Blomberg, head of the Truppenamt. This was during the period of Soviet–German covert military cooperation, and Stalin wanted to impress his German visitors with Soviet defensive capabilities in the Black Sea. Stalin suggested that the battery should demonstrate its

firepower by firing a 305mm round, but when informed that each projectile “cost more than a tractor,” he demurred.

Construction on the northern Coastal Battery No. 30, located near the Bel’bek River, proceeded much more slowly, and it was not until March 1928 that the Revolutionary Military Council allocated 3.8 million rubles to restart work, which did not actually begin for two more years. The project was badly organized, falling far behind schedule. Coastal Battery No. 30 was declared operational in mid-1934, but its complicated rangefinder system was not ready until 1940. However, the Achilles Heel of both 305mm batteries was that they drew their electrical power from Sevastopol’s power grid through a transformer station; if civilian power was lost the massive turrets would become inoperable. Auxiliary diesel generators were emplaced near the command-post bunkers, but only sufficed to provide power for communications and lighting. In fact, both 305mm batteries only became fully operational about six months before the German invasion. Lieutenant Georgy A. Aleksandr had arrived to take command of Coastal Battery No. 30 in November 1937 and Lieutenant Aleksei Y. Leshenko took command of Battery No. 35 in November 1940.

Once Stalin’s program of forced industrialization became established by the mid-1930s, the Black Sea Fleet was provided with greater resources, which enabled it to continue to improve its coastal defenses right up to the start of the German invasion. In addition to protecting Sevastopol, the Soviet Navy built three large coastal batteries to protect Kerch. The Black Sea Fleet also was provided with 300 anti-aircraft guns to provide additional protection against enemy air attacks on its bases.

The Black Sea Fleet was responsible for the defense of its main naval base at Sevastopol, including coastal artillery and anti-aircraft guns, while the Red Army was responsible for the land defense of the Crimea. There were no large naval infantry (*morskaya pekhota*) units formed in the Crimea at the start of the war. The only major Red Army formation in the Crimea in June 1941 was General-Lieutenant Pavel I. Batov’s

9th Rifle Corps, comprised of the 106th and 156th Rifle Divisions and 32nd Cavalry Division. This corps had been organized in the North Caucasus Military District and moved to the Crimea in mid-May 1941. Batov arrived at the corps headquarters in Simferopol just two days prior to the beginning of the German invasion. Falling under the authority of the Odessa Military District (to become the Southern Front on mobilization) Batov was instructed that his mission was to defend the Crimea against possible amphibious or airborne attacks, but he received no guidance on coordinating with the Black Sea Fleet. Altogether, Batov's 9th Rifle Corps had about 35,000 troops and could be supplemented by local militia. The Soviet Air Force (VVS) units assigned to the Odessa Military District were grouped around Odessa and had no significant presence in the Crimea in June 1941.

The Soviet General Staff expected to fight future wars primarily on foreign soil, but acknowledged that enemy bombers and warships might be able to attack facilities in exposed areas such as the Crimea. Although Turkey was regarded as an unlikely threat, it had amassed more than 500 combat aircraft by 1940, making it the largest air force in the Balkans and the Middle East. Turkey's acquisition of five foreign-built submarines also aroused Soviet concern. However, the ratification of the Montreux Convention in 1936 eased Soviet concerns by inhibiting foreign fleets from transiting through the Turkish Straits into the Black Sea.

The Kingdom of Romania had not been regarded as a potential enemy during the interwar period, but this changed when Germany and the Soviet Union signed their infamous Non-Aggression Pact in August 1939, which secretly condoned the Soviet acquisition of the Romanian border province of Bessarabia. In June 1940, the Red Army invaded Bessarabia and humiliated the Romanian Army, providing a motive for revenge. Five months later, a coup in Bucharest installed a fascist dictatorship, which quickly signed an alliance with Germany. The new German-Romanian alliance threatened the Soviet position in the Black Sea and for the first time since the Russian Civil War exposed

the Crimea to possible enemy air or amphibious attacks. The Royal Romanian Air Force was rapidly developing its offensive capabilities in 1937–40 by taking delivery of Italian-made S79 medium bombers in 1938 and German-made He-111H medium bombers in 1940. By June 1941 the Romanians had formed four bomber groups with 96 bombers. In addition, they had three long-range reconnaissance squadrons equipped with 37 Bristol Blenheims – which posed a credible threat to the Black Sea Fleet.

Although the Soviet High Command was very concerned about the possibility of enemy amphibious landings in the Crimea, there was actually little possibility of that occurring. The Royal Romanian Navy was little more than a coast guard, with only four destroyers, one submarine, a single minelayer, and a few assorted auxiliaries. Romanian vessels were mostly obsolete and too outclassed to risk a head-on action against even part of the Black Sea Fleet. Furthermore, Romania's merchant marine was tiny, with only 35 vessels of 111,678 GRT (gross register tonnage). Five of these merchantmen were modern vessels that would be useful for convoy operations, but the fact is that Romania lacked the ability to move more than limited quantities of troops and supplies across the Black Sea and had no ability to conduct an opposed landing.