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Commentary Series on Putin's War: "The Black Sea: No Longer a Russian Lake?"

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On the night of April 13, 2022, Ukrainian forces announced that two of their missiles had hit the *Moskva,* Russia's flagship in the Black Sea. On the next day, Russian officials acknowledged that their heavily armed ship had sunk.

To this day, information on the attack, the rescue operation, and exact number of casualties is scarce and contested.[1] It is beyond doubt, however, that the use of NATO-gathered intelligence by Ukrainian defenders has shaken Russia's strategic position vis-à-vis Western powers both on land and in water. Russian warships began to operate further away from the coast immediately following the sinking of the *Moskva*.

What this incident tells us about the future of the Black Sea's maritime regime is still too soon to fathom. But it does say a lot about how long-term transformations of that regime might inform general tendencies in the redistribution of naval power in the wider Mediterranean region.

"A Russian Lake"

Besides the *Moskva* incident, naval forces seem to have been relatively minor players in the Russian-Ukrainian. Cities, tanks, and military ambushes have occupied most media attention. Most key developments so far have occurred inland. The sinking of the *Moskva* would appear to have more symbolic significance than strategic one.

Nevertheless, a look at *Moskva's* activities before its sinking shows that this view can be deceptive.[2] On February 24th, the day the Russian invasion of Ukraine was launched, the ship led an assault to take Zmiinyi Island, also known as Serpent Island. Famously, when one of the island's Ukrainian guards was asked to surrender, he responded in a recorded audio: "Russian warship, go f**k yourself."

The strategic importance of this small garrison in Western Ukraine lies in its position off the coast of Romania (and Moldavia, which only has access to the Black Sea through the international port of Giurgiulesti).[3] The island dominates the

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[1] Navy Lookout, "Russian Cruiser Moskva Sunk in the Black Sea – Assessing the Implications," *Navy Lookout*, 15 April 2022, https://www.navylookout.com/russian-cruiser-moskva-sunk-in-the-black-sea-assessing-the-implications/.

[2] Navy Lookout, "Situation Report: The Naval Aspects of the war in Ukraine," *Navy Lookout*, 25 February 2022, https://www.navylookout.com/situation-report-the-naval-aspects-of-the-war-in-ukraine/.

[3] For a political map of the region: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Relief_map_of_the_Black_Sea.svg.

shipping routes from Odessa to the Bosporus and Istanbul and, from there through the Sea of Marmara and the Dardanelles Straits, to the Mediterranean Sea.

After taking over the island, the *Moskva* kept a regular pattern (which could help explain its vulnerability to enemy fire), patrolling in the triangle from Serpent Island to Sebastopol (its port base in Crimea, to the East) and closer to the coast near Odessa (the ship was likely hit about 80 miles off Odesa).[4] The ship's role was the coordination and aerial defense of the Russian Black Sea fleet, whose mission was in turn to harass Ukraine from its southern flank.

For Russia, controlling this space from the early days of the war has been key in blocking Ukrainian exports, and thus halting a major source of revenue for the Ukrainian economy and defense effort. This blockade was completed with the virtual closure of the Sea of Azov, home of the important exporting port of Mariupol.

The blockade and the Azov closure had already started in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea. Russian military ships retained any non-Russian commercial vessel trying to cross from Azov to the Black Sea. Moreover, in 2015 Russia started building a bridge connecting the Crimean Peninsula to Russia through the Kerch Strait.[5] This enabled land transport to the peninsula, which was isolated to the north. But it was also built at the relatively low height of 30 meters in order to restrict the passage of tankers and container ships, thus incapacitating much of Mariupol's commerce.

Ukrainian maritime exports ceased from the war's onset. The appearance of several floating mines in different parts of the Black Sea, for which Russia and Ukraine blame each other, has contributed to the halt.[6] This blockade is widely recognized as one of the factors behind the current high prices of steel and energy, but also of wheat, corn, and fertilizers. The effects that this might have in those countries which depend on Ukraine's and Russia's grains to a staggering degree is still to be seen. For instance, Ukraine supplies 85 % Egypt's imported wheat, and 80% of Tunisia's.[7]

The commercial blockade has of course its military counterpart. Led by the *Moskva,* the Russian squadron patrolling the Black Sea successfully kept the meager Ukrainian fleet anchored in port. Moreover, while Russia has kept amphibious warfare (including landings) to a minimum, the threat that its ships near the coast will engage in an assault has forced the Ukrainian army to deploy forces in areas where no actual fighting is taking place.

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[4] H. I. Sutton, "Russia's Most Powerful Warship In The Black Sea is Operating in a Pattern," *Naval News* (07 Apr. 2022): https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/04/russias-most-powerful-warship-in-the-black-sea-is-operating-in-a-pattern/.

[5] Andrew Wilson, "Strait to war? Russia and Ukraine Clash in the Sea of Azov," *European Council of Foreign Relations*, 2 October 2018.

[6] Tayfun Ozberk, "Opinion: Is there a Serious Sea Mine Threat in the Black Sea?" *Naval News* (27 March, 2022): https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/03/opinion-is-there-a-serious-sea-mine-threat-in-the-black-sea/.

[7] Amr Hamzawy, Karim Sadjadpour, Aaron David Miller, Frederic Wehrey, Zaha Hassan, Yasmine Farouk, Kheder Khaddour, Sarah Yerkes, Alper Coşkun, Maha Yahya, and Marwan Muasher, "What the Russian War in Ukraine Means for the Middle East," *Carneige Endowment for International Peace,* 24 March 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/24/what-russian-war-in-ukraine-means-for-middle-east-pub-86711.

The Russian fleet has effectively denied access to any other serious naval contender in the region. During January and February 2022, Russia positioned up to 16 vessels in the Black Sea, including four or five submarines.[8] By contrast, Turkey is currently the only country within the NATO alliance with warships in the region.

Russian dominance of the Black Sea has for centuries been a central part of the Russian naval doctrine. And Sebastopol and the Crimea peninsula at large have been the key to fulfilling this doctrine.[9] In 2014, Russia justified taking over the peninsula on the grounds of it being a historically vital Russian maritime base–other reasons of course include Russian irredentism and the discovery of offshore gas fields in Crimean territorial waters.

After 2014, Russia's Navy became ever more present. In 2015 Chinese warships joined Russian vessels in a week of naval drills in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. In a 2016 plea to NATO allies to intervene, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan complained that the Black Sea had "nearly become a Russian lake."[10] While his relationship with Putin has improved considerably since then, Turkish naval exercises and offshore gas prospections show an effort to regain importance in the region. Paradoxically, the historical Russo-Turkish conflicts on the Bosporus and Dardanelles Straits played a crucial role in ensuring Russian dominance.

War, Law, and Turkish Control over the Straits

Commerce between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea a used to be a Turkish prerogative. From about 1453 to about 1774, the Ottoman Empire vetoed the transit of foreign vessels. The victories of Tsar Peter I and Empress Catherine II (both dubbed 'the Great') forced Ottoman rulers to permit Russian and other foreign vessels to pass freely as well as to access Ottoman ports. But whenever British, French, or German rulers wished to restrict Russian expansionism, they invoked "the ancient rule of the Ottoman empire" to promote the closure of the Straits to Russian ships.[11]

This could easily backfire. In World War I, the German-Ottoman alliance led to the closure of the Straits to foreign vessels. To break the ban, a combined British and French fleet attempted to take Istanbul in 1915. After failing to do so, they launched an amphibious attack on the Gallipoli peninsula in the aim of seizing the Dardanelles. After eight months of costly warfare, in early 1916 Ottomans declared victory–which famously cost Winston Churchill his position as First Lord of the Admiralty. The Straits remained locked.[12] The economic effects this had in Russian trade were among the factors behind the 1917 revolution.

Gallipoli is arguably the first campaign in which submarines played a major role. The allies used a total of twenty-two of them to harass Turkish cargo and combat ships in the Sea of Marmara, sinking between 180 and 211 Ottoman vessels. German U-boots were active in the Western Mediterranean, but Allied anti-submarine forces prevented them from approaching the Dardanelles. Allied dominance of the underwater space relied on the topography of the sea bottom, with

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[8] H. I. Sutton, "Massive Russian Navy Armada Moves into Place off Ukraine," *Naval News* (21 Feb. 2022): https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/02/massive-russian-navy-armada-moves-into-place-off-ukraine/.

[9] Mungo Melvin, *Sevastopol's Wars: Crimea from Potemkin to Putin* (Oxford: Osprey, 2017); Rasmus Nilsson, "Russian Policy Concerning the Black Sea Fleet and its Being Based in Ukraine, 2008-2010," *Europe-Asia Studies* 65:4 (2013): 1154-1170.

[10] Andrew Wilks, "Turkey steps up Black Sea naval activity as war rages in Ukraine," *Al-Monitor* (21 April 2022): https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/turkey-steps-black-sea-naval-activity-war-rages-ukraine.

[11] Nilufer Oral, "The 1936 Montreux Convention," in Heather A. Conley (ed.), *History Lessons for the Arctic* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield/CSIS, 2016): 24-37.

[12] Christopher M. Bell. *Churchill and Sea Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

steep slopes allowing submarine capitaines to dive deep quickly and resurface to attack. While the Allies failed to taking Gallipoli, their submarines forced the Ottomans to rely on slower and more expensive land transport. This additional effort diverted troops from the Russian front, which in turn enabled the Russian army to take hold of much of the Eastern Black Sea coast.[13] The deep third dimension of naval warfare was thus inaugurated.

After the war, the Ottoman empire crumbled. But the threat of underwater warfare and the disputes around the Dardanelles remained. In 1923 the newly established Turkish Republic negotiated new terms for the Dardanelles in the Lausanne Peace Treaty, which were then revised in the 1936 "Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits" that was signed at Montreux.

The Montreux Convention balanced the principle of freedom of the seas with Turkish security, regulating passage in a way that ensured that commerce would not be interrupted in times of peace or war, while recognizing Turkish defense concerns. For instance, special provisions for submarines prohibited passage to any submerged vessel from a non-Black Sea state and forced submarines to always cross individually, "by day and on the surface," reflected anxieties about the vulnerability of Istanbul to an underwater assault.[14]

The Convention also regulated passage of military vessels both in times of peace and in times of war. All warships were required to notify Turkey their intention of crossing the straits well in advance, and warships from non-riparian states could cross into the Black Sea for a maximum of 21 days and in limited numbers. In times of war, moreover, Turkey could deny access to warships from belligerent countries, except in case of vessels based in Black Sea ports. In the case of a war in which Turkey was directly involved as a combatant, the decision was left to Turkish leaders.

Human access and knowledge of the underwater world greatly expanded in the years around the Montreux Convention. The interwar period saw a proliferation of acoustic technologies for submarine navigation and detection, profiles of currents and ocean bottom charts, and a re-evaluation of the potentialities of warfare and economic exploitation below the surface.[15] Submarines dominated some of the key developments of World War II. And, once the war was over, offshore oil exploration led to the territorialization the sea: an expansion of territorial waters initiated by the United States through the Truman Declaration in 1945 and soon followed by unilateral sovereignty claims as well as bilateral and international treatises.[16]

The most ambitious of these agreements is the UN Conference of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which was signed in 1983 and is still in force. While it took a decade of strong-headed negotiations to reach an agreement regarding the straits' regime, UNCLOS preserved the Dardanelles and Bosporus Straits as an exception.[17] They are still regulated by the Montreux Convention. This gives Black Sea coastal states, including particularly Russia, privileges of access that no other strait regulation grants.

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[13] Evren Mercan, "The Impact of Allied Submarine Operations on Ottoman Decision-Making during the Gallipoli Campaign," *Journal of Maritime Research* 19:1 (2017): 63-75.

[14] 1936 Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits. Adopted in Montreux, Switzerland, on 20 July 1936: art. 12.

[15] Lino Camprubí and Alexandra Hui, "Testing the Underwater Ear: Hearing, Standardizing, and Classifying Marine Sounds from World War I to the Cold War," in Viktoria Tkaczyk, Mara Mills, and Alexandra Hui, *Testing Hearing. The Making of Modern Aurality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 301-325.

[16] Sam Robinson, "Scientific Imaginaries and Science Diplomacy: The Case of Ocean Exploitation," *Centaurus* 63 (2021): 150-170.

[17] James K Sebenius, *Negotiating the Law of the Sea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

The urgency of restricting some of these privileges explains why it was so crucial that Turkey recognized the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a "war," something that Ukrainian ambassador to Ankara requested from day one of the Russian invasion.[18] While Turkey waited until February 27th to take the step, it enabled its officials to announce that the strait was closed to Ukrainian and Russian vessels (excepting those already based in the Black Sea).

"No Longer an American Lake": The Russian Presence in the Eastern Mediterranean

Moskva's sister ships, RFS Marshal Ustinov of the Northern Fleet and RFS Varyag of the Pacific Fleet, are as of April 2022 in the Eastern Mediterranean. They won't be able to take the role of Russian Black Sea flagships until the war is over or Turkey grants them special permits. They are not alone. Coinciding with the January and February 2022 pile-up of ships in the Black Sea, large numbers of Russian vessels were allocated to the Eastern Mediterranean and ordered to stay there. With the launching of the invasion, 16 Russian warships, including two submarines, simultaneously sailed in formation towards the Syrian port of Tartus, home to Russia's only overseas military base.[19] They were clearly making a point about their ability to deter any kind of direct NATO naval involvement in the Black Sea.

The base of Tartus is crucial in sustaining Russian naval power in the Mediterranean. It also played an important role in Russian involvement in the war of Syria. One of the most significant operations initiated from that base was the launching of Kalibr cruise missile against ISIS from two submarines in 2017. There is evidence that the four Kilo Class submarines that are present in the Black Sea are armed with Kalibr missiles and have likely been using them against targets in Ukraine.[20]

The origins of the Tartus base go back to 1971. At the time, the Soviet Union welcomed bases in the region in order to counter the limitations on its Mediterranean presence as imposed by Montreux restrictions (particularly limitations on submarine transit and the need to announce any military crossing 8 days in advance). In 1958 a Soviet-Albanian agreement included a submarine base in Valona, which was closed in 1961 on Albania's initiative. In 1968 a Soviet-Egyptian agreement meant in practice the establishment of a Soviet naval base in Alexandria, but the Egyptians started restricting access in 1972 and terminated the agreement in 1976. Other agreements permitted limited Soviet use of naval facilities in Libya and Algeria. However small its size, Tartus is the closest the Russians came to having to a permanent presence in the Mediterranean.[21]

Russian interest in securing maritime bases in the Mediterranean Sea was based on the need to support the 5th Squadron, which had created in 1967 in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli Six Day War to counter the US 6th Fleet, which until then had ensured American naval hegemony in the region. From July 1967 to December 1968, about seventy-five Soviet

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[18] Justin Katz, "Why Turkey calling it "war" in Ukraine matters for the Black Sea," *Breaking Defense*, 27 February 2022, https://breakingdefense.com/2022/02/why-turkey-calling-it-war-in-ukraine-matters-for-the-black-sea/.

[19] H. I. Sutton, "Unusual Russian Navy Concentration seen in Eastern Mediterranean," *Naval News* (24 February 2022): https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/02/unusual-russian-navy-concentration-seen-in-eastern-mediterranean/.

[20] H. I. Sutton, "Russian Submarines Launching Kalibr Cruise Missiles at Ukraine," *Cover Shores* (21 April 2022): http://www.hisutton.com/Russian-Submarines-Launching-Missiles-Ukraine.html.

[21] Gordon H. McCormick, "The Soviet Presence in the Mediterranean," *The Rand Corporation,* paper-7388 (October 1987).

submarines entered the Mediterranean.[22] As US Admiral Horacio Rivero put it, the Mediterranean was "no longer an American lake."[23]

The following years saw constant competition between both navies for dominance in the region. Warships coming in and out the Strait of Gibraltar linked Eastern Mediterranean developments to the larger North Atlantic theatre, where submarines patrolling with nuclear weapons enforced mutual deterrence. As my team and I are currently exploring, the unprecedented concentration of submarines in the Cold War Mediterranean did much to the scientific and strategic configuration of the Sea, leading to entanglements that still shape our geopolitical and environmental understandings of the region.[24]

The Depth of History

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation abandoned any grand scheme regarding the Atlantic. The Russian Navy was slowly retooled with regional interests in mind.[25] In the Mediterranean region, these included operations in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Black Sea.

On April 22, 2022, the Russian ship *Kommuna* appeared to be headed towards what is believed to be the site of the *Moskva* wreck.[26] While it has not been confirmed that its mission is to search for the remains of the sunken ship, this ignited rumors that the wreck may hide nuclear weapons. Since they would lie at only about 50 m of depth, the Russian Navy would be eager to retrieve them.

Regardless of whether this news is finally confirmed, the *Kommuna* serves as an example of the significance of history to the current war in Ukraine. The ship entered service in 1913. It served under the Romanovs, saw the rise of the Bolsheviks, survived two world wars and the Cold War, and witnessed the decay and rise of the navy of the Russian Federation. A floating hangar with an open belly, it was designed to retrieve sunken submarines. While current submarines are too big for it to sallow, the *Kommuna* today carries and deploys mini submarines which can then look for sunken ships or broken cables. History resurfaces from marine depths.

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[22] Aleksandr B. Shirokorad, *Chernomorskii Flot V trekh Woinakh i trekh Revolutsiakh* (Moscow, 2007).

[23] Lino Camprubí, "No longer an American Lake': Depth and Geopolitics in the Mediterranean," *Diplomatic History* 44:3 (2020): 428-446.

[24] The work is generously funded by an ERC-Consolidator Grant. Lino Camprubí, DEEPMED (Discovering the Deep Mediterranean Environment: A History of Science and Strategy, 1860-2020): https://www.academia.edu/49122878/B1_ERC_CoG_DEEPMED_Discovering_the_Deep_Mediterranean_Environment_A_History_of_Science_and_Strategy_1860_2020_

[25] Anna Davis, *The 2015 Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (US Naval War College, RMSI Research 3, 2015); Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia's Naval Capabilities in the Mediterranean," *Marshall Center Security Insight* 35, July 2019.

[26] H. I. Sutton, "Russia Deploys Unusual 110-Year-Old Ship to Investigate Moskva Wreck," *Cover Shores* (22 April 2022): http://www.hisutton.com/Russian-Navy-Moskva-Cruiser-Wreck.html.

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