

The Revival of the Soviet Red Fleet Before the Second World War

Hadrien T. Saperstein

Abstract

Between the First and Second World Wars, the Soviet Red Fleet is traditionally analysed through the use of a linear historiographical framework in the form of three phases: the Reconstruction phase (1919–1925), the Consolidation phase (1925–1932), and the Big High-Sea Fleet or Ocean-Going Fleet phase (1935–1940). Each phase is distinguished by their own respective strategic thoughts and objectives. This essay challenges this linear historiographical framework by analysing five tensions located at various command levels inside the stratum of the Soviet naval and political leaderships. These five tensions centred on profound philosophical differences that rarely arrived at finite, conclusive ends with the result that the traditional linear historiographical framework for the Soviet Red Fleet must be rewritten to reflect a non-linear narrative.

Keywords: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Soviet Red Fleet, Soviet Naval History, Interwar Period, Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Michael Frunze, Joseph Stalin, Soviet School.

Introduction

Under the military failures of the First World War and the weight of the October Revolution, the newly christened The Workers and Peasants Red Fleet of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was desperately in need of a fresh start.¹ Over the subsequent decades, the Soviet Red Fleet would be rebuilt, eventually becoming worthy of its superpower status; however, its size, structure, and doctrine spasmodically reformulated during the interwar period. The traditional narrative is that during the interwar period the Soviet Red Fleet went

¹ Jurgen Rohwer, "Russian and Soviet Naval Strategy," in *Soviet Sea Power in Northern Waters*, by John Skogan and Arne Brundtland, eds. (London: Pinter Publishers Limited, 1990), 6.

through three phases: The Reconstruction phase (1919–1925), the Consolidation phase (1925–1932), and the Big High-Sea Fleet or Ocean-Going Fleet phase (1935–1940). Each phase is distinguished by their own respective domestic situations, strategic objectives, doctrinal debates, and force sizes. This essay challenges this linear historiographical framework by analysing five tensions located at various command levels inside the stratum of the Soviet naval and political leaderships. These five tensions centred on profound philosophical, ideological, doctrinal and strategic differences that rarely arrived at finite, conclusive ends. These tensions demand that the traditional linear historiographical framework for the Soviet Red Fleet must be rewritten to reflect a non-linear narrative.

First Tension: Lenin versus Trotsky

In a description of the Soviet Red Fleet following the First World War, the People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs, Michael Frunze, advanced a profoundly bleak review: "In sum ... we had no fleet."² Without any protection against external, belligerent forces, and amidst a civil war, it was a time of great trepidation and apprehension across the newly formed Soviet state. The famed historian Teddy Uldricks remarked that what "the Soviet leadership had feared most of all [was] the formation of a mighty coalition of imperialist powers linking London, Paris, Berlin, Washington, and perhaps also Tokyo, in a great crusade to crush the communist experiment in Russia."³ This fear proved prophetic as the Western powers, still recovering from the devastation of Great War themselves, invaded contested territorial lands during the Russian Civil War with the hopes of assisting the White Russians against the 'Red Devils'. In time, the Capitalist invaders were to retreat, all but guaranteeing the military success of the Soviet Communists and an end to the calamitous war.

As the war progressed, and the Soviet position became more secure, the leadership moved from military conqueror to political administrator. In an effort to rebuke secondary attempts by the Western

² Christopher Lovett, "The Russian/Soviet Navy, 1900–1945," in *The Military History of the Soviet Union*, by Robert Higham and Frederick Kagan, eds. (New York: Macmillan, 2010), 186.

³ Teddy Uldricks, "Soviet Security Policy in the 1930's," in *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917–1991: A Retrospective*, by Gabriel Gorodetsky, eds. (London: Frank Cass, 1994), 71.

powers to intervene onto the still unconsolidated territory, a security strategy began to be formed. It is at this juncture where the first tension emerged. This first tension arises from the debate between the two most prominent figures in the revolutionary state: Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. Coming from vastly different premises regarding the future of the Soviet state, their conclusions diverged widely concerning two distinctions: the internal enemy, and maritime strategy and doctrine.

Lenin possessed two enemies, one external and one internal. The external enemy was the largest empire the world had yet ever seen, the British Empire. He considered it the “linchpin of the Capitalist system and centre of all efforts to renew military intervention against the USSR.” At the grand strategic level, Lenin promulgated a ‘divide and survive attitude’ against this external enemy. Only by skilfully “keeping the imperialist states divided against themselves could [he] prevent a renewed anti-Soviet onslaught.”⁴ The internal enemy was the Soviet naval forces. Lenin saw these forces as a cancerous cell that extended from this internationalised Capitalist system. The danger to the USSR was perceived so elevated that a proposal to scuttle the warships and disband the Service was ardently contemplated. This determination stood in stark contrast with Lenin’s own efforts in previous years to establish a separate, autonomous ‘Naval Commissariat’ within a unified Defence Ministry.⁵

Much of the distain towards the Navy had been the result of the Kronshtadt Mutiny, the apogee of a political discontentment with the Petrograd Soviet associated with war communism. The mutineers from the port city of Kronshtadt had rejected multiple sets of economic and political policies pursued by the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War in response to the ideological demands of the new administrators. In a brave, albeit, ill-timed mutiny, the sailors, soldiers, and civilians of Kronshtadt repulsed two assault waves from Soviet forces under the orders of Mikhail Tukhachevsky (dubbed the ‘Red Napoleon’), Soviet Commander of the Seventh Army. By the end of the third assault wave though, the Red Army secured the bridgehead and captured those mutineers who had not fled to Finland.⁶ In response to the mutiny, Lenin enacted what would come to be known as the Purge of

⁴ *Ibid.*, 71

⁵ Robert Herrick, *Soviet Naval Strategy, Fifty Years of Theory and Practice* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 1968), 3.

⁶ Lovett, “The Russian/Soviet Navy,” 186.

1921. Fifteen thousand personnel would be cleansed from the Navy, adversely affecting naval developments for many years.⁷ The Soviet Navy Commissar V. I. Zof commented the following year that the “[Soviet] fleet is like ... a cow that is milked, milked but never fed,” while the later American Sovietologist, Robert Herrick, suggested more bleakly that the “Russian fleet was at the lowest level in [its] history”⁸ after these events.

In this period, Lenin furthermore extended his anti-capitalist strategic narrative into the realm of maritime strategy. The narrative was directed towards repudiating Admiral Alfred P. Mahan’s ‘Command of the Sea’ concept. More than anything else, Lenin “denounced [Mahan’s thesis] as inherently capitalist and entirely unacceptable to the new communist states” considering that the concept focused on the protection of trade and imperialism.⁹ These two events combined left Lenin utterly convinced there did not remain any “great strategic” tasks left for the Soviet Red Fleet.¹⁰

While Trotsky and Lenin shared similar views as to the external enemies of the USSR, Trotsky espoused a drastically different viewpoint as to the internal enemy. During his tenure as the People’s Commissar of Military and Naval Affairs between 1918 and 1925, Trotsky intervened assiduously against Lenin’s intentions to scuttle or reform the Navy *en masse*. This achievement is commonly overlooked by his cantankerous detractors. In a first successful intervention, prior to the implementation of the Purge of 1921, Trotsky was able to safeguard influential maritime and naval strategists of the former Imperial Russian Navy.¹¹ Some of these were to become prominent maritime and naval thinkers in the debates that ensued in the late-1920s and mid-1930s. In a less successful second attempt, Trotsky permitted only a limited number of “ordinary seamen,” many recruited from the Komsomol (Youth Organization), into the upper naval leadership echelon after the enactment of the Navy High Command Reforms at the behest of Lenin.¹²

⁷ Herrick, *Soviet Naval Strategy*, 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ Bryan Ranft and Geoffrey Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 85–86.

¹⁰ Jurgen Rohwer and Mikhail Monakov, “The Soviet Union’s Ocean-Going Fleet, 1935–1956,” *The International History Review* 18, no. 4 (1996), 838.

¹¹ Lovett, “The Russian/Soviet Navy,” 187.

¹² Rohwer and Monakov, “The Soviet Union’s Ocean-Going Fleet,” 838.

The desire to fight over the leadership of the Soviet naval forces is usually attributed to Trotsky's frustration with the dealings of the ordinary seamen after their ascension into power. This argument, however, obfuscates something much larger and much more significant, Trotsky's imagined Communist Navy possessed capitalist characteristics and retained a strategic role within his preferred grand strategic scheme. While not yet viewed in this light by the academic literature, in saving maritime and naval strategists trained in the supposed Capitalist school of thought, Trotsky recognized the need to adopt a temporarily capitalistic model of naval development. This conviction was problematic due to its oxymoronic standing. If his purpose of war was founded in the thesis of "permanent revolution" that supported a continuous revolution against Capitalism across Europe, then the adoption of a temporarily capitalistic model of naval development soured Trotsky's fervent rejection of "stageism" or "two-stage" theory, explained as states having to pass through a stage of capitalism before moving to a socialist stage.¹³

Along with the use of a temporarily capitalistic model of naval development, Trotsky believed, in contrast to Lenin, that the Soviet naval forces possessed a strategic role. This is most emblematic in the *Proposal of 1919* advanced by Trotsky. In this document, he recommended that, in the Baltic and Black Seas, the Soviet Fleet adopt a defensive posture to fight against foreign interventionism, while, in the Caspian Sea, it was to adopt an offensive posture in order to export the Bolshevik revolution through the Red Army, or "Worker's Militia," into Central Asia.¹⁴ The proposal was later materialized through the Navy Reorganization Committee of 1921, designating four strategic environments, each with their own particular roles. In the Baltic Sea, the Fleet was to assist the Red Army in quashing one of the last remnants of the Civil War, the Karelskii Front operations, and simultaneously educate its naval personnel. The Black Sea Fleet was to maintain "strong coastal defence," whereas, in the Caspian Sea, it was to maintain "mastery of the sea" and strengthen the flotilla to transport the "Bolshevik message" to the Orient. Finally, the forces in the Arctic Ocean were to defend fishery zones and secure two main areas in the mouth of the North Dvina and Kola peninsula.¹⁵

¹³ Gordon Skilling, "Permanent or Uninterrupted Revolution: Lenin, Trotsky, and their Successors on the Transition to Socialism," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 5 (1961), 7-11.

¹⁴ Rohwer, "Russian and Soviet Naval Strategy," 6.

¹⁵ Rohwer and Monakov, "The Soviet Union's Ocean-Going Fleet," 838.

In the end, in each of the two distinctions—internal enemy and maritime strategy—Trotsky’s ideas prevailed. Even though the naval leadership was filled with a limited number of fresh faces loyal to Lenin, Trotsky ultimately prevented the purging of maritime and naval strategists, each of whom possessed principally differing ideological and strategic views with that of Lenin. Moreover, the Soviet Navy still remained an adherent to the temporarily capitalistic model of naval development and held a strategic role within the grand strategic scheme even after the Purge of 1921.

Second Tension: Trotsky versus Frunze

Even prior to the removal of Lenin from the Chairmanship of the Council of People’s Commissars due to a terminal illness caused by an assassination attempt, Trotsky faced a secondary challenger—Michael Frunze.¹⁶ Although initially a staunch follower of Leninism, Frunze shared marked distinctions with Lenin. It was Trotsky, nevertheless, who remained continuously his most ardent opponent. One of those critical diverging points between Trotsky and Frunze was on the virtue of the *Unified Military* doctrine.

Extending from Lenin’s determination to rid the Soviet Communist Party of opposition groups and intra-party strife as advanced in his *Point Seven* thesis, Frunze and Sergei I. Gusev, head of the Red Army’s Political Administration, formulated the ‘unity of views’ concept for the Soviet Armed Forces. Originally presented at the Tenth Party Congress, number seventeen of the *Twenty-Two Point Program* (later called *Frunze-Gusev Program* by historians) stressed the desirability for a “unity of views about the character of military problems facing the Republic, the means of solving them, and methods for the combat preparation training of troops.”¹⁷ This Program fell onto mostly deaf ears at the Congress, however. The ears that had devoted any attention, like notably Trotsky, were heavily critical of its use of conceptual ambiguity and loose terminology. In part due to this severe criticism, Gusev never wrote again on the unity of views concept. The criticism, on the other

¹⁶ John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military Political History, 1918–1941* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 59.

¹⁷ Matthew M. Hurley, *A Worker’s Way of War: The Red Army’s Doctrinal Debate, 1918–1924*, Thesis, University of Washington, June 1991, 37.

hand, had revitalized Frunze, who now understood that “the polemics over military doctrine [could be] intended, in part, to hasten Trotsky’s inglorious fall from the mantle of party leadership.”¹⁸

Frunze shortly thereafter published a follow-up article entitled, *A Unified Military Doctrine and the Red Army*, that advocated for a “single military” doctrine. This revisionist doctrine held two aims: technical and political. The technical aim sought to create balanced organisational unity between land and naval strategies, overturning the earlier independence granted to the Navy. All submarines, surface ships, coastal defence forces, and aircrafts of the Soviet Red Fleet were now required to coordinate their operations according to a single planning process with the Soviet Army. The reality, however, was the total “domination of strategic planning and resources allocation by the Army.”¹⁹ The second aim, political in character, obligated the Red Fleet to realign its political goals with that of the burgeoning Soviet way of warfare concept through the use of the Marxist lexicon. The Soviet way of warfare was uniquely proletarian, they argued, especially when contrasted with the Capitalist states, seeing that the politico-military leadership dutifully adhered to the Marxist science of war framework. This framework put the primary focus on workers rather than bourgeois elites, and emphasised the principles of the offensive and manoeuvre warfare.

At the doctrinal level, though acquiescent to Frunze’s first aim of technical dominance of the Army over the Navy, Trotsky vehemently opposed the revision of military and maritime strategy and doctrine in terms of the Marxist lexicon to satisfy the proletarian way of warfare concept. Trotsky’s ardent opposition may be specifically linked to four antitheses. First, he feared that the transference of Marxist terminologies into military and naval doctrines would create a “methodism” more concerned with the “tyranny of the offensive” than the Marxist tendencies distinguished by “flexibility and mobility, or, to speak in military language, capacity for manoeuvre.”²⁰ This concern was later shared by the historian Walter Jacobs, who described Frunze’s use of the offensive as a “pre-emptive war with vengeance.”²¹ Second, as a prolific

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁹ Herrick, *Soviet Naval Strategy*, 22.

²⁰ Leon Trotsky, “Military Doctrine or Pseudo-Military Doctrinairism,” *The Trotsky Internet Archive*, December 5, 1921.

²¹ Walter D. Jacobs, *Frunze: The Soviet Clausewitz, 1885–1925* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 43.

reader of military history and war theory during and after the Russian Civil War, Trotsky could not discern anything new about the proletarian way of warfare that was “unique to the working class and superior to [the] then current bourgeois military concepts.”²² Its focus on the offensive and manoeuvrability for example clearly resembled the French’s conceptualization of the offensive prior to the First World War. The reiteration of bourgeois military concepts was due to the simple reality, he argued, that “it was not yet possible to develop a mature, theoretically sound proletarian military doctrine.”²³ Third, Trotsky was gravely concerned that utilizing the Marxist science of war framework in such a way would censor military discussions on future existential concerns. Most importantly, Trotsky did not comprehend why the wheel should be reinvented again as Marxism already provided a framework by which to guide all politico-military leaderships. From this wholesale retort it is easy to come to agree with Dmitry Fedotoff-White, an officer of the Imperial Russian Navy turned historian, who concluded that Trotsky dismissed the school of proletarian warfare as “utopian, impractical, and ill-formulated.”²⁴ On the whole, the rejection of the lexicon was not a repudiation of Marxism, but rather an attempt to shield it against an “artificial Communism” that worked against the “real revolution.”²⁵

By applying the Marxist lexicon into its naval doctrines, some observers may claim that Frunze’s aim of seeking congruency between the Soviet Army and Navy through the use of the Marxist lexicon was grounded on purely ideological motives, guaranteeing uniqueness to the Soviet Armed Forces as they would have nothing in common with the national armies of the capitalist countries. Others may propose that it held pragmatic ends, showing the Western imperialist states that the young Soviet state operated with a single, unified voice. These two positions, however, grossly underestimate the power of terminology in governmental documents and the purpose of language more generally. If language is a mechanism by which to describe reality, it therefore follows that in being restricted to a specific set of words the Navy was in fact

²² Hurley, *A Worker’s Way of War*, 39.

²³ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁴ Dmitry Fedotoff-White, *The Growth of the Red Army* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 161.

²⁵ Hurley, *A Worker’s Way of War*, 39.

mandated to adopt an already prescribed reality or vision of the world. In mandating as such, Frunze was effectively rendering the Navy impotent to enact any of the strategic thought Trotsky had saved from the Purge of 1921.

By the mid-1920s, Trotsky was defeated by the anti-navalists inside the Soviet Red Army and the proponents of the *Unified Military* doctrine across the Soviet Armed Forces; both of these movements more or less led by Frunze. Their victory, however, would be marred by the sudden death of Frunze a few months after replacing Trotsky as the People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs in 1925. Added to that, young mid-level officers were finally coming into their own maturity, bringing a new vision and purpose of war and warfare for the Soviet Navy with them.

Third Tension: Soviet Old School versus Soviet Young School

As a result of the Soviet leadership's failure to resolve divergent and conflicting opinions inside the Armed Forces by effectively applying the *Unified Military* doctrine, a third tension erupted between the Soviet Old School and Soviet Young School between 1928 and 1931.

As remarked by Jurgen Rohwer and Mikhail Skogan, application of the Soviet Old School naval strategy continued almost uninterrupted between 1911–12 until 1925–26. Initially led by Major General of the Admiralty Nikolai Klado (the 'Russian Mahan'), the Soviet Old School was subsequently promulgated by two of his pupils, Captain M.A. Petrov and Captain Boris Zherve; both Professors teaching at the former Imperial Russian Nikolayev Naval Academy, now renamed the Soviet Naval Academy.²⁶ The two men shared similar viewpoints on the role of battleships and cruisers, in that these particular ships were part of a traditional high-seas fleet that were essential to exercise command of the sea in the maritime approaches to Soviet territory. In contrast to Mahan and Klado however, they were writing after the submarine had demonstrated relative successes in battle during the First World War. As the submarine and the airplane made it more difficult to maintain command of the sea, Petrov and Zherve wrestled with the question: How would the traditional battleship and cruiser fleet exercise command of the

²⁶ Rohwer, "Russian and Soviet Naval Strategy," 6.

sea in the face of novel dimensions of naval warfare? Their common rebuke: with every new weapon, counter-weapons soon followed.²⁷

For the proponents of the Soviet Young School, like Commander K.I. Dushenov, Admiral I.K. Kozhanov, Commander I.M. Ludri, Professor A.P. Aleksandrov, this 'old' naval strategy is counterproductive undertaking for the new Soviet state. A phrase utilized at that time to explicate the position is best articulated by Professor Aleksandrov: "down with the idea of naval supremacy!"²⁸ Rather, the Soviet Young School envisioned the various Soviet Fleets engaging in "active coastal defence" with massive employment of mines, small submarines, torpedo boats, and aircraft to defend the coastal areas of Soviet territory. Much of this was grounded on the premise that the battleship had lost its *primary* function and naval supremacy based on the battleship no longer made sense. Commanders Dushenov and Ludri in particular used various naval operations from the First World War as case-studies to justify their conclusions, showing that the former Imperial Russian Navy had waged a successful defensive struggle against the Germans using minefields and coastal batteries in the Gulf of Finland.²⁹

In certain ways, as some commentators already observed, the dispute rehearsed the arguments found in the French naval strategy *désaccord* between the 'French Old School' (*Vielle École*) and 'French Young School' (*Jeune École*) in the late eighteenth century. The acceptance of this view wholesale is erroneous, however. In a revisionist reading of history, Bryan Ranft and Geoffrey Till suggested rather that the French *Jeune École* posited a "strategic offensive" while the Soviet Young School argued for a "strategic defensive" attitude. With the publicist Gabriel Charmes and Maréchal Theophile Aube as the most visible figures of the movement, the French *Jeune École* pursued unrestricted attacks on merchant ships wherever they could be found as a means of economic warfare to compel the enemy—Britain—to surrender because of its dependence on sea-borne supplies.³⁰

Yet, the ideas promoted by both the Soviet Old and Young schools possessed some serious shortcomings. Whereas the Old School was

²⁷ Herrick, *Soviet Naval Strategy*, 9.

²⁸ Rohwer, "Russian and Soviet Naval Strategy," 6.

²⁹ Gunnar Aselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union in the Baltic, 1921–1941* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), 12.

³⁰ Ranft and Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 82.

limited by the small, underdeveloped Soviet economy that could not produce the ships necessary, the Young School was incapable of promoting socialism abroad due to the inherent limitations found in a defensive strategic doctrine. The Hungarian writer, Arthur Koestler, wrote as much on the latter when he said:

The [Communist] Party is in favor of small submarines with a short range. You can build three times as many submarines for your money as big ones But the actual problem lay in a quite different sphere. Big submarines mean a policy of aggression, to further world revolution. Small submarines mean coastal defence—that is, self-defence, and postponement of world revolution.³¹

In an attempt to overcome these limitations both schools arrived at a tenuous middle ground: the Soviet School.

Summarized in different ways by different people, much of what constitutes the Soviet School engenders a moving target, with some scholars emphasizing elements over others and vice versa. Be that as it may, some general notions can be drawn out. In terms of strategy, the Soviet School posited a “defensive” stroke that nevertheless did not exclude offensive operations in a local or regional context, albeit in cooperation with the ground forces. In addition, the command of the sea concept was relegated to a “limited command of the sea.” Certain scholars have viewed this transition as essentially a move to fuse Mahanian command of the sea with operational principles of the Young School.³² Others, notably Seleznev and Herrick, have gone another way by positing that this school represented a shift from Mahanian to a Corbettian-Castexian reading of maritime strategy.³³ This last group essentially understood Corbettian-Castexian strategic thought as a focus on what Admiral Stansfield Turner later re-designated as “sea control,” meaning, focus on sea lanes of communication, rather than command of the sea, which implied Mahanian naval battles at the international level, demoting naval battles to locally controlled, near-shore theatres of operations. Regardless of its placement in strategic camps, the Soviet

³¹ Milan Hauner, “Stalin’s Big-Fleet Program,” *Naval War College Review* 57, no. 2 (2004), 87.

³² Lovett, “The Russian/Soviet Navy,” 187.

³³ Aselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union in the Baltic*, 13.

School ultimately rejected the need for a strictly high seas fleet and concentrated on advocating an inshore defensive role based on light surface craft, submarines, mines, and shore-based aircraft. In turn, they reinterpreted command of the sea as excluding the “command of the oceans” element. The aim became focused on the seas adjacent to the Soviet Union’s territorial boundaries in areas where the operations of ground forces could be actively supported. All the Soviet Red Fleet now sought after was “control of a limited theater.” The main weapon systems utilized to achieve this end were submarines and aircraft with major surface combatants in *secondary* support.³⁴

Fourth Tension: Fascist Secret Suitors versus Collective Security Strategy

Beyond the internal division in the Soviet Red Fleet during the mid-1920’s to early-1930’s, a fourth tension persisted simultaneously and thereafter in the Soviet foreign policy sector. It pitted Vice-Commissar for Foreign Affairs Karl Radek, Soviet Trade Representative to Berlin David Kandelaki, and the former Counselor of the Soviet Embassy in Berlin, Sergei Bessonov, dubbed as the “Fascist Secret Suitors,” against Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov’s *Collective Security* strategy. The tension is already colloquially chronicled as the Soviet dual foreign policy in the academic literature. The three Fascist Secret Suitors impressed upon the Soviet leadership a need for rapprochement with foreign fascist leaders. The rapprochement was anamorphic, taking many shapes and forms, “from the oil shipments to Italy after failed boycotts, to the refusal to sign [a] ‘mutual assistance pact’ with China, to selling the Chinese eastern railway to the Japanese.”³⁵ In opposition, Litvinov argued for a Soviet Union that champions an anti-fascist moral crusade by:

reinvigorate[ing] the collective anti-aggression mechanism of the League of Nations to construct a regional security pact in Eastern Europe; negotiate[ing] anti-German bilateral defence pacts with the non-fascist powers[; and] encourage[ing], through the Comintern, the election of

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁵ Teddy Uldricks, “Soviet Security Policy in the 1930’s,” 67.

governments in the Western democracies committed to opposing Nazi expansionism.³⁶

Similar to the Soviet Old and Young Schools, neither of the parties to the fourth tension were seemingly victorious. Uldricks described how the tension was resolved:

Stalin was motivated neither by a comprehensive anti-fascist impulse, nor by a pacifistic aversion to war; either by admiration or loathing of Hitler nor by any really operative desire to foment foreign revolutions. While he was not averse to territorial acquisitions, gaining additional lands was not his central objective, either. Rather, perceiving that the Soviet Union existed in an extremely hostile environment, Stalin's principal objective was to preserve the country's national security.³⁷

At the close of the period, it seemed the real winner was Stalin; for indeed, in the post-Lenin-Trotsky period, the Soviet foreign policy adopted a "siege mentality" reflective of both the Man of Steel's personal and organizational paranoia.³⁸

Fifth Tension: Stalin's Big Navy versus Stalin's Political Control

The success of the Soviet School was swiftly checked by the events of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and the Greek Communist persecutions (1936). In both cases, the Communist insurgents were defeated, and in both cases, the Soviet state attempted to use naval forces to influence their internal politics. From this twice failed attempt, the importance in transcending the possession of a weak Soviet Navy crystallized. Best captured by Stalin's perception on Soviet sea power, the General Secretary now wanted a "big ship navy" mobilized for both deterrence and prestige. This became the fifth tension, between Stalin's desire for a 'big navy' and Stalin's simultaneous desire for total "political control."³⁹

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 70–71.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 71

³⁹ Herrick, *Soviet Naval Strategy*, 28.

The shift towards a big ship navy can be measured through budgetary expenses codified into law with the *Second Five-Year Plan* of 1933–1937. The plan called for a 300 percent increase in small surface ships, 510 percent increase in naval aviation, 75 percent increase in coastal guns, and 100 percent increase in naval base fortifications. Additionally, it targeted the modernization of battleships, the construction of large submarines and heavy cruisers in the Baltic and Black seas shipyards, and acquired large calibre naval guns, battleship turrets, armour plate, and main battery fire control equipment.⁴⁰ By the end of the programme in 1937, the Navy's four fleets were substantially more hardy than in previous years.⁴¹ Below is a rough estimation of the equipment in each of the fleets:

Baltic fleet – Leningrad

- 2 battleships
- 1 training cruiser
- 1 destroyer leader
- 7 destroyers
- 5 patrol ships
- 2 minesweepers

Black Sea fleet – Sebastopol

- 1 battleship
- 3 cruisers
- 1 training cruiser
- 5 destroyers
- 2 patrol ships
- 4 minesweepers

Pacific Fleet – Vladivostok

- 2 destroyers

Northern Fleet –
Murmansk/Polyarny

- 3 destroyers

Despite the gains in ship numbers during this period, in pursuit of political control, Stalin reversed gains in the human element through the 'Great Purge' of 1937–1938. As a consequence, the Red Fleet suffered "greater proportional losses than Red Army."⁴² Moreover, a major share of the former Tsarist officers were replaced with younger officers of the Soviet generation, culminating with the removal of both Petrov and

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 24; 29.

⁴¹ Rohwer and Monakov, "The Soviet Union's Ocean-Going Fleet," 848.

⁴² Peter Tsouras, "Soviet Naval Tradition," in *The Soviet Navy, Strengths and Liabilities*, by Bruce W. Watson and Susan M. Watson, eds. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), 15.

Zherve.⁴³ In contrast to Lenin who still lacked anything looking like total political control over the Navy after the Purge of 1921, Stalin's control over Soviet political institutions arrived in some measure after the Great Purge reached its peak in 1938. Though its success would give Stalin increasing political control, it nevertheless reduced in a dramatic fashion the average level of the seamanship and leadership of the Soviet Red Fleet.⁴⁴

Amid the Great Purge, the tension continued unabated when Stalin promoted the Third Five-Year Plan of 1938–41. The primary aim was to build a sizable Soviet Navy akin to the previous desires of the Soviet Old School from fifteen years earlier.⁴⁵ This included the construction of additional battleships, even with the three already underway. Furthermore, aircraft carriers were discussed intently, though later postponed until the end of the latest Plan in an effort to solve certain naval design problems.⁴⁶ The British naval historian, Andrew Lambert, however recounts that the design flaws with the Soviet aircraft carrier merely revealed something deeper at play. Stalin's desire for total political control over all aspects of the Soviet state ineluctably prevented the successful development of a fully matured, diverse navy designed to operate "out-there" beyond the territorial boundaries and, therefore, outside the limits of Stalin's siege mentality.⁴⁷ This also explains why the Soviet Fleet developed without integrated airpower requiring it to operate within the range of shore-based aircraft.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The traditional narrative is that during the interwar years the Soviet Red Fleet went through three phases: the Reconstruction phase (1919–1925), the Consolidation phase (1925–1932), and the Big High-Sea Fleet or Ocean-Going Fleet phase (1935–1940). The history of the Soviet Red Fleet during this period however was one of great flux, replete with multiple ideological, organizational, and doctrinal tensions, purges, and

⁴³ Herrick, *Soviet Naval Strategy*, 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁶ Ranft and Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 87.

⁴⁷ Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Made the Modern World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

⁴⁸ Ranft and Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, 85.

a changing international environment. As this paper demonstrated, there was an undercurrent to the period in the form of five tensions. These tensions manifested a lack of linear coherency in the development of the Soviet Navy going against the linear narrative described above. The Soviet Red Fleet went through a continuously volatile process of construction-deconstruction-reconstruction in order to accommodate the imagination of the Soviet naval and political leaderships across various command levels.

While Trotsky's fall from power and Frunze's simultaneous rise might be interpreted as a transition from the Reconstruction phase to the Consolidation phase, the virulent debate that rapidly eventuated between the Young and Old Soviet Schools interfered with any enhancing consolidation of the Soviet Navy. If anything, the debate induced a deconstruction phase. The subsequent brief showing of the Soviet School, as a result of the tenuous compromise reached between the Young and Old Soviet Schools, prompted another reconstruction phase that was itself rather quickly inverted by Stalin's desire for a big ship navy. The rise in total naval assets and material capabilities often used to showcase an enhancing "consolidation" during the Big High-Sea Fleet or Ocean-Going Fleet phase, obfuscates the dire impact of Stalin's pursuit of total political control over the Soviet state. In seeking such power, Stalin inhibited any consolidation of a big ship navy originally sought after the inversion of the Soviet School.

The Soviet Navy that concludes the interwar years may be characterised as one shackled by its own unique sets of tensions. With this newfound history of the Soviet Red Fleet, it might be enlightening, *per contra*, for contemporary researchers to ponder the impact of a counterfactual history, one where the Soviet Navy was unhindered by its five tensions and instead developed along a coherent, linear naval development plan, and what the effect that coherent plan might have had on world history.