Stalin’s Ocean-Going Fleet: Soviet Naval Strategy and Shipbuilding Programmes, 1935–1953,

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Vietnam. Ellsberg served as the action officer for Vietnam, reporting personally to John McNaughton, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara’s principal assistant for Vietnam. Ellsberg became convinced that every president knew that his commitments would prove insufficient to accomplish the goal of preserving South Vietnam’s independence. However, none of them could withdraw American support—because a communist victory in South Vietnam would create an unbearable political liability in the Cold War climate of “wars of national liberation” backed by the Soviets and China.

Ellsberg went to work as McNaughton’s aide for Vietnam on 4 August 1964. On that day his office was receiving live reports of North Vietnamese patrol-boat attacks on the U.S. destroyer Maddox, the presence of which off North Vietnam was one of several provocations staged by the Johnson administration to elicit a military reaction from Hanoi. The administration publicly claimed that two distinct sets of attacks were made, first on the Maddox and a short time later on the Maddox and a sister ship, USS Turner Joy. Drawing on his direct experience in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Ellsberg demonstrates that Maddox’s skipper raised doubts about the second set of attacks within a few hours of announcing them. The Johnson administration nonetheless went to Congress describing both attacks as bona fide, because together they appeared to justify a long-planned escalation of the air war. Once armed by Congress with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Johnson made a few direct retaliatory air strikes and then posed as the presidential peace candidate. He was running against Republican Barry Goldwater, who was advocating precisely the kind of sustained air campaign that Johnson had already planned and would begin once safely reelected president.

One can applaud or condemn Daniel Ellsberg for what he did in 1971. What one cannot do is ignore the power his memoir has to inform Americans about how the executive branch conducted its foreign policy and military strategy from the 1940s until 1974. As the United States apparently heads (at this writing) toward another major war, the skeptic is entitled to wonder if things at the top have really changed.

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The collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of major Russian archives have provided an opportunity to add greatly to our understanding of the character of the Soviet navy. Eminent researchers Jürgen Rohwer and Mikhail S. Monakov have contributed much to this understanding with their study of Soviet naval shipbuilding and strategy when Josef Stalin controlled the development of the Soviet Navy, from 1935 until his death in 1953. They have uncovered extensive details of the massive shipbuilding program, most of which never came to fruition. Strategy, however, remains as murky as ever. This study complements but does not replace Monakov’s series of articles on

At the end of 1935 Stalin personally yanked the Soviet navy from littoral defense through air, submarine, and light surface forces into a grandiose shipbuilding program centered on large battleships and battle cruisers, while retaining “Young School” craving for submarines. Stalin took naval strategy into his own hands but never divulged any strategic precepts or plans to his naval leaders, who in fear of Stalin’s wrath dutifully adapted themselves to the imposed scheme, several falling to the purges anyway. The result was a massive shipbuilding program and a naval officer corps stranded in a strategic wilderness, with silent misgivings about the apparent dissonance between the projected force structure and operational commitments arising from the Soviet Union’s particular geostrategic position.

By 1939 an immense program had evolved to build twenty-four powerful battleships by 1947, with fifteen for the Pacific Fleet and the rest divided among the Baltic, Black Sea, and Northern Fleets. Concurrent plans called for a submarine force intended to reach 438 units, of which 219 were earmarked for the Pacific. These fleet goals, along with a modicum of light surface forces, were impossible for Soviet shipbuilding capacity, even by halting merchant ship construction. With the onset of the Great Patriotic War, all long-term projects were suspended; only submarine and light surface projects continued, as circumstances allowed. The defeat of the Axis saw the prewar schemes reduced to three battleships and three battle cruisers, all of which were canceled when Stalin died. The *Sverdlov*-class cruisers and a new submarine force of 284 boats became the shrunken legacy of Stalin’s naval dreams.

The navy of Admiral Nikolai Kuznetsov, under army operational control but without strategic direction from the General Staff or the top, continued to orient itself before, during, and after World War II toward traditional defensive roles—defeating attacking enemy fleets and amphibious expeditions in the near seas—with only a limited submarine offensive on adjacent enemy sea lines of communications.

Stalin’s motive for building a battleship fleet, according to the authors, was the vision of the Soviet Union gaining supremacy in the four near seas and then becoming an oceanic power, with the battleship or battle cruiser “a symbol of the highest grade of power, a most powerful and mobile instrument of power politics, that the world had ever known,” the direct predecessor of the atomic bomb in attaining superpower status.

Stalin, however, left no direct evidence of his reasons, whereas several indicators point toward a dominant mental construct of positional strategic defense still guiding Stalin and his admirals. He and his naval leaders agreed on a defense strategy but diverged on preferred force structure. Stalin rejected the aircraft carrier, despite all the evidence from the Second World War of the importance of airpower at sea for a blue-water navy. Kuznetsov often pleaded in vain with Stalin for stronger shipboard antiaircraft defenses on ships, for aircraft carriers to cover surface forces from enemy air
attack out to three hundred miles from naval bases, and to limit Soviet land-based air support. In 1946, Kuznetsov’s close associate Admiral Vladimir Alafuzov developed a positional scheme of supremacy under land-based air cover up to one hundred miles from naval bases, and conditional sea control by large surface vessels with limited air support in a “far zone” out to three hundred miles. This fell short of command of the expanses of the Barents, Baltic, and Black Seas or of most of the Sea of Japan. Only submarines with long endurance could operate in the open ocean, but Stalin preferred medium submarines, conceived for operations in near seas against an amphibious threat. The projected battleships would have had an operational radius only half that of their contemporaries in oceanic navies. Only current Italian battleships, also designed for near seas, had such limited autonomy. To operate across the open ocean was a ludicrous concept to Stalin in 1945, arguing for a defensive posture for at least ten to fifteen years to come. Stalin’s projected “large sea and oceanic navy,” to use the Soviet term, was likely created for a hoped-for more robust traditional strategic defensive in contiguous seas. The evidence in this book, if not its title, lends support to Herrick’s judgment of a Stalinist strategy of limited command of the near seas. To suggest that it was “the first step on the road to global naval power,” as does series editor Holger Herwig in the preface, would require Stalin and his navy to demonstrate a conceptual leap for which neither had shown a proclivity. Mind-sets resist change. Even in the navy of Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, who inherited Stalin’s schemes and built up Kuznetsov’s fleet, extensive deployments did not replace deeply held positional and defensive assumptions. Had Stalin’s “oceanic” fleet actually been built, whether a shift of orientation by him or his admirals toward “global naval power” would have occurred remains undemonstrated and problematic.

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In the various history books on the American Revolution, the Penobscot expedition is rarely mentioned in any detail, being overshadowed by the more widely known and successful battles and campaigns. Perhaps this is due to the dismal outcome of this early joint amphibious operation and to the desire by some, especially Massachusetts politicians of the time, to forget what had happened. This hastily conceived expedition was launched from Boston in July 1779. The expedition was given the task of expelling the mounting British military presence on coastal Maine, centered around Penobscot Bay, but specifically at Castine. The expedition set off with full expectation of success on the part of the Massachusetts political leadership. But from the beginning, the force assembled was hampered by inadequate leadership, divided command authority, poor training and support, and a