CHAPTER 9

THE IMPERIAL RUSSIAN NAVY, 1696–1900

The Ambiguous Legacy of Peter’s “Second Arm”

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Introduction

HISTORIANS HAVE GENERALLY IGNORED THE MARITIME SIDE of Russian history. The modest scale of this chapter when judged against the overwhelming proportion of this volume devoted to the Imperial Russian Army says much that is appropriate regarding the history of the Imperial Russian Navy (IRN). It reflects the dominant geostrategic reality of Imperial Russia, a land power that came to rule over much of Eurasia.

The Russian Navy was founded by Peter the Great (1682–1725) in the Baltic to protect Russia from then powerful Sweden and on the Sea of Azov to counter the Ottoman Empire. Catherine the Great extended Russia’s control to the Black Sea by adding a fleet based at Sevastopol. Russia maintained small flotillas on the Caspian and White Seas. By the end of the eighteenth century there was also a Pacific Squadron that supported the Russian-American Company colony in Alaska. From Catherine II’s reign until the late 1820s, periods of friendly relations with Britain allowed the Baltic Fleet to deploy to the Mediterranean in a series of campaigns against the Ottomans. A Russian squadron joined an Anglo-French fleet in the victory over Mehmet Ali at Navarino in 1827. Thereafter until the 1854–56 Crimean
War, the Baltic Fleet declined into the autocrat’s naval parading force. At the same time the professionalization of the Black Sea developed apace as a result of superior leadership, notably Admiral M. P. Lazarev, and continuous operations in support of Russia’s protracted war with Caucasian mountaineers. Nakhimov’s overwhelming victory against a Turkish Squadron at Sinope in late 1853, which brought Anglo-French intervention in the Crimean War, was, in fact, a continuation of the Black Sea Fleet’s mission to isolate the Caucasian theater of operations from maritime supply.

The 1856 defeat that saw the Black Sea Fleet abolished and made very clear the need for rail connections to link south Russia with the Moscow-St. Petersburg core and to avoid a Baltic blockade, also came at the crucial time when the great steam-and-steel revolution was taking place. This coincided with the scrapping of the IRN’s sailing ships and their replacement both by modern warships, such as those which visited the United States in 1863-64, and in a revival of concern with naval strategy and tactics. Though reduced in size to one thirty-sixth of the million-man army, the 28,000 men in the navy were much more technically proficient and efficient.

Between the beginning (1696) and the end (1917) of its history, the Imperial Navy had far more influence than its modest size and marginal role would suggest. Three key themes emerge. The first concerns the role of the navy in national strategy; the second the relationship between the navy and the process of technological modernization and Westernization; and the third the issue of the professionalization of the officer corps. By the mid-nineteenth century the latter involved the development of a system of advanced schooling for officers, the cultivation of a shared vision of the service through publications for the officer corps (the official and unofficial sections of Morskoi sbornik), and the unsuccessful resolution of the especially difficult question of officer advancement (chinoproizvodstvo) which turned on the conflict between promotion based on bureaucratic seniority or talent and achievement.

The navies that Peter built on the Sea of Azov and in the Baltic were fleets in being that, as in the later Soviet case until the 1950s, had deterrent value, but also served as a “second arm” supporting amphibious operations against hostile shores, a mission that the Black Sea Fleet also developed. Given the demands of maintaining a continental army, the navy had few levers to use to extract bigger budgets. After the early combined operations under Peter, the navy languished until the reign of Catherine II, when it once again dominated the Baltic and won command of the Black Sea. In this period the IRN did venture out of the Baltic and enjoyed some success in battle. Because of the nature of the final struggle with Napoleon, a conti-
nential war fought in alliance with Britain and as a result of the debt incurred in prosecuting that war, the navy once again went into decline. The exception to this being the mounting of scientific expeditions and round-the-world cruises. Russian naval officers came to see such deployments as necessary for the training of professional naval officers.

The history of the navy from Petrine days to the end of its second century reflected the patterns and tensions between repressive, militaristic autocracy and thoughtful, visionary *obshchestvo* (educated society). The Crimean War dealt a heavy blow to that structure, challenged its institutions and stimulated the Great Reforms, which included the emancipation of the serfs as a basic move toward a more productive economy and the needs of the armed forces.

In this the admiral, General-Admiral Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolae-vich, played an important role from 1854 in protecting and training five future ministers in bureaucratic politics and administration and instilling in them the hope that virtue and talent would triumph. He also cultivated an alliance with the naval officers who had been proteges of Admiral Lazarev and brought them into the senior leadership of the navy. With no Black Sea Fleet because of the demilitarization of the Black Sea, this leadership focused its attention on the modernization of the Baltic Fleet and the development of a Pacific Squadron. The visits to the United States in 1863 of Baltic and Pacific squadrons were part of a new naval strategy that embraced such deployments as a deterrent threat to British trade.

By the time of the Great Reforms (1856–70) following the Crimean defeat, the navy was allowed to play a wider role through modernization so as to help the Russian Army preserve the country’s great-power status. From 1856, then, the Russian Navy developed in parallel with Western naval forces and created its own industrial base in alliance with private enterprise. This development rested upon the cultivation of a professional officer corps, where initiative and experience took precedence over seniority. In 1877–78 the Black Sea Fleet, which was almost non-existent—remilitarization had only become possible in 1870 and there were no yards or mills in the South to build modern ironclads—managed to neutralize a much larger Turkish Navy through the aggressive use of mines and torpedoes.

Believing that he should, unlike most Russians, consult affected parties, the grand duke turned *Morskoi sbornik* (Naval Digest) from a dull official bulletin into a lively journal of discussions, which helped clarify the confusions and the liberations of the Great Reforms.

These abolished the ancien regime and introduced a new world in which local organizations governed what was within their ken. This very much affected the army deprived of its privileged aristocratic officers and its
Serf soldiers. It also touched an increasingly technological steam and steel navy after 1860. At the same time the implications of the reform process frightened many conservatives in the Imperial family (notably the heir to the throne, the future Alexander III, the bureaucracy, and society). Konstantin Nikolaevich was for them a “red,” a dangerous figure whose ideas could lead to the undermining of the autocracy itself. After the death of Alexander II, the new tsar moved to remove the grand duke from his post as general-admiral and other state offices.

With the grand duke’s departure from leadership of the navy, leadership of the Naval Ministry passed into the hands of men who once again cultivated appearances at the expense of accomplishments and saw initiative and experience as grave dangers to institutional stability. The naval counterreforms, especially the tsenz (promotion based on positions held and time in service) created a bureaucratized force. The Naval Ministry reverted to the purchase of major combatants abroad and failed to develop a staff system to guide the navy in preparation for war. The full implications of this decline were only revealed by the destruction of the Russian squadron at Port Arthur and the defeat of Rozhestvensky’s squadron at Tsushima (1905).

In the great intellectual debate of the nineteenth century between Westernizers and Slavophiles, the navy proved to be one of the most controversial institutions because it had no roots in Muscovite Russia but was closely tied to the Petrine transformation. It was the ultimate product of Westernization. Slavophiles regarded it as an artificial imposition of an alien state.

Today, the heirs of the Slavophiles have embraced geopolitics and Eurasianism and condemn Russia’s contemporary experiment with democracy and an open society. They speak of a profound cultural and political struggle between Russia as a continental power and the West as an alien maritime world. Eurasian ideologues, such as Alexander Dugin and Alexander Panarin, speak in terms of a decisive contest between a hegemonic thalsocracy, led by the United States with the “pirate” values of “Atlanticism, globalism [mondialism], and liberalism” and a Russian tellurocracy that is Eurasian, anti-Western, and anti-liberal. For these ideologues of the “conservative revolution,” the Petrine transformation and the Great Reforms were nothing more than the seduction of Russia.

Peter the Great

Peter the Great, charismatic leader, artisan-tsar, warrior, and promoter of Russia’s Westernization/transformation and expansion, occupies pride of
place as the founder of the Imperial Navy. While there were seafaring antecedents in Kievan Rus' and Novgorod, Peter the Great and the importation of foreign naval specialists during the reign of his father, Tsar Aleksei I, Peter I gave naval affairs a prominence and status unprecedented in the history of the Russian state. His early interest in navigation and sailing against the wind makes his botik (ketch) the grandfather of the Russian Navy. His unprecedented visit to the northern port of Archangel in 1693 with its ties to European trade established his personal interest in maritime affairs. Denied victory in his first campaign against the Turkish fortress at Azov in 1695, Peter responded by building a galley fleet at Voronezh on the Don to support his second Azov campaign of 1696, which ended in victory. Peter's Great Embassy to the West with its recruitment of foreign specialists and his own time as a shipwright in Saardam, Holland, underscore the linkage of naval affairs and Westernization. Newton’s *Principia* was first taught in Russia at the School of Mathematics and Navigation, Russia’s first naval school (1720). During the Northern War Peter established the Naval Academy, which undertook the training of Russian noblemen to become naval officers, and served as the basis for the Naval Cadet Corps in St. Petersburg.

While William Fuller has recently questioned whether Peter’s improvisations ever amounted to the establishment of a standing [regular’naia] Russian Army, there can be no such question with regard to the fact that Peter established the Imperial Navy. One need look no further than the spire of St. Petersburg’s Admiralty and remember that the first yard founded there in 1704 and the fortress complex and yards at Kronstadt became the foundations of a permanent Russian naval power in the Gulf of Finland. The symbol of the town/fortress at Kronstadt makes this point evident with representation of a lighthouse and fortress wall. With the conquest of the Baltic provinces, Revel became the maneuver base for the fleet’s operations in the Baltic. Without this infrastructure there could be no navy.

Of course, Peter built his navy rapidly to meet the immediate challenge of the war with Sweden. By 1725 Russia controlled the Baltic with 27,000 men, 34 ships-of-the line, 9 frigates, 34 smaller sailing ships, and several hundred galleys supported by an annual expenditure of 1.5 million rubles. The ships and galleys, built of green timber, had a short service life—Russia built more than 1,000 short-lived vessels of all classes during the Northern War—but the infrastructure (the Admiralty College, Naval Academy, Peter’s Naval Regulations and the yards and works, and supporting fortress complexes) remained.

During his long struggle with Sweden for access to the Baltic during the Northern War, Peter formulated a military strategy that used naval forces,
i.e., sailing and galley fleets and General-Admiral Count F. M. Apraksin’s “landing corps” [desantnyi korpus], to support the advance of the Russian Army. Peter took a leading role in the navy’s actions, including its first major victory at Gangut/Hankö. The raids that Russian naval and military forces launched against the Swedish coasts in 1719, 1720, and 1721 brought the war home to the government in Stockholm. Peter’s naval regulations [Kniga morskogo ustava] defined this strategy. “A potentate who has an army has only one arm, but a potentate who has an army and navy has two”—in other words, the potentate determines the actions of his arms toward specific strategic objectives. As the prominent historian Evgenii Tarle pointed out, the navy had a major role in Petrine foreign policy, especially in forging and sustaining the alliances that supported Russian influence in the Baltic, finally secured by the Treaty of Nystadt in 1721.

Such, however, was not the case with the naval infrastructure in the south. After the end of the Northern War (1700–21) Peter I moved to counter the advance of Ottomans in the Caucasus and Caspian, where a number of Persian provinces had risen in rebellion against their Shah. Peter I’s intervention here in 1722 brought a significant expansion of Russian naval presence on the Caspian and enjoyed initial success until the Ottoman Empire intervened. The war with the Turks, for which Russia was not prepared, began and ended with a military disaster on the River Pruth and a negotiated peace in 1724. Following Peter I’s death in 1725 the naval infrastructure in the south languished until the reign of Catherine the Great with the incorporation of the Crimea into the empire and the establishment of the Black Sea Fleet with its main base at Sevastopol and its shipbuilding yards at Nikolaev on the Dnieper.

The Navy after 1725

The Imperial Army, whose size dwarfed that of the navy, obtained strategic and material dominance, which had two consequences. First, the navy remained a marginal institution, whose well-being depended upon the extent to which successive rulers appreciated the importance of it to the nation’s power and security. Territorial extent and a large, growing population were coupled with relatively undeveloped urban centers and commercial classes. Until well into the nineteenth century there was no commercial elite who saw the navy as a necessary instrument to protect Russian trade and foreign commerce. Only after the Crimean War, the Baltic blockade, and the emergence of private yards and works in St.
Petersburg did a business community appear that saw its interests linked to naval construction and maritime commerce. N. I. Putilov, who began his business career managing the construction of screw-propelled gunboats for the Baltic Fleet during the Crimean War, went on to become one of the leaders of Russian's iron and steel industry and the founder of the famous Putilov Works in St. Petersburg.

Russian naval expenditures hit a high of 59 million rubles in 1812–15 as a result of the Napoleonic War, but inflation made the figures less significant and they dropped to a devalued 24 million in the 1820s, then rose to 48 million in spite of drastic cutbacks owing to the 1828–29 war with the Turks and the Bosphorus expedition. By 1840 the ruble was stabilized and budgeting in silver. However, with the arrival of steam, naval costs crept up though the number of rubles remained at 24 million after a Crimean War high of 98 and another peak of 109 million with the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78.

The Nineteenth Century

Russia's autocrats remained the chief benefactors of the navy. In 1762, on coming to power through a coup by the Guards regiments, Catherine the Great (1762–96) honored the navy by making her young son and heir, Paul Petrovich, general-admiral and nominal head of the Admiralty College (administrative bureau). Nicholas I (1825–53) showed similar patronage to the navy by appointing his second son, the Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich, general admiral and chief of the Guards Crew [ekipazh] in 1831. Under Alexander II (1855–81) Konstantin Nikolaevich took over the active direction of the Naval Ministry in 1855 and continued to do so until he was removed by Alexander III in 1881 shortly after the assassination of Alexander II. Alexander III (1881–94) appointed his own younger brother, Grand Duke Aleksei Aleksandrovich, naval minister in 1881 and promoted him to general-admiral in 1883. Like Konstantin, Grand Duke Aleksei Aleksandrovich had been at birth tied to the navy by his enrollment in the Guards Crew. He held the post of naval minister until the disastrous performance of the navy during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05). Unlike Konstantin, the grand duke proved a naval dilettante, more concerned about external appearances than pressing professional issues associated with the revolution in naval technology, tactics, and strategy. Rumors of corruption and the disaster at Tsu Shima led to his removal in June 1905. Thus, the tie to the dynasty left an ambiguous legacy for the navy.
The Legacy

Thus, it is no wonder that advocates of Russian naval power have repeatedly felt the need to begin any work of naval advocacy with an existential question that would seem alien to a traditional maritime nation: “Does Russia Need a Navy?” [Nuzhen li Rossii flot?]. Periods of intense naval development followed by periods of disregard and decline made this question seem the compelling starting point for generations of Russian naval reformers. These repeatedly pointed to the indisputable fact that a navy could not be created overnight nor on the eve of war. Warships take time to build, require capital refits, and in the industrial age become quickly obsolete unless modernized. Naval forces have to be trained, share a common notion of how they will be employed in case of war, and exercised. Navies require extensive and costly shore establishments to maintain the fleet. Naval forces need to engage in long-range cruises. In short, peacetime neglect translates into wartime inaction and/or disaster.

Certain popular myths about Russian sea power still dominate. The first of these is the absence of maritime tradition, which made naval affairs an alien matter for the Russian nation. A subset of this view, which can be found in Western studies of the Imperial Navy, is the importance of foreign influences on Russian naval development, that presence explaining any positive changes and in its absence the reasons for naval decline. The numerous foreign officers in Russian service from Admiral Cornelius Cruys, a Dane recruited by Peter I, to John Paul Jones, the American naval hero hired by Catherine II, confirm the cosmopolitan nature of the service. Some of these foreigners were, however, russianized and succeeding generations went into naval service. For instance, the Greig family provided distinguished naval officers from the reign of Catherine II. From admiralteistvo (the seat of the Russian naval college and ministry in St. Petersburg) through the “est” shouted by Russian seamen (a corruption of the English “yes”) in response to an order, to the rank of michman (a Russian rendering of midshipman) there is no shortage of foreign words (English, Dutch, and German) in the Russian naval vocabulary. But there was also no shortage of outstanding Russian naval officers and no absence of strictly Russian traditions of naval service. Making serfs and state peasants into sailors and the gentry into professional naval officers proved a difficult but not insurmountable task.

Naval Administration

The evolution of naval administration in Imperial Russia can be divided into five distinct periods. The first, which covers the founding of the navy down
to the creation of the collegial system of state administration in 1718, was a period of improvisation and of ad hoc institutions to supervise the construction of warships and the administration of the fleet, such as the Ship Chancery [korabel’nyi prikaz] in Moscow to oversee the mobilization of resources for ship construction and the Admiralty [admiralteistvo] at Voronezh on the Don, which directed the creation of the flotilla used to support the Second Azov Campaign in 1696. Following that success Peter I turned his attention to the institutionalization of the fleet’s infrastructure and created the Vladimir Judicial Chancery [Vladimirskii sudnyi prikaz] to coordinate the activities of various Muscovite offices in support of the Azov Flotilla. With the start of the Northern War the center of gravity of naval administration shifted to the Baltic. To coordinate activities there Peter I originated the Admiralty Chancery [admiraliteiskii prikaz] under the direction of Fedor Apraksin in 1700. Already in 1698 Peter I had created the Naval Chancery [voenno-morskoi prikaz] to oversee the operations of the navy and appointed Fedor Golovin as its director. This office later took over responsibilities for both naval and foreign policy and was renamed in 1712 the Chancellery of the Navy [kantseliariia voenno-morskogo flota].

The second period began in 1718 when Peter introduced collegial governance on the Swedish model into the Russian state. This reform brought all the various offices dealing with naval matters under the direction of the Admiralty College [admiraliteistv-kollegia], which was headed by a president and vice president and included 11 offices. Like other collegial institutions of the state, the Admiralty College provided for council leadership of the naval administration under the president of the College. It was a system adapted to a state that had a persistent shortage of trained and competent officials. During the reign of Empress Anna Ivanovna (1730–40) the Commission for the Navy undertook a study of naval administration. As a result the college was organized into four “expeditions” (bureau)—commissary, intendant, crew, and ordnance—with the eleven existing offices subordinated to the four expeditions according to function.

The third period began with the reign of Catherine I (1725–27) and continued down to the end of the reign of Paul I (1796–01). Under Catherine the Great (1762–96) a number of important changes in naval administration transpired. In 1763 the Admiralty College was reorganized into five expeditions with the addition of its own treasury. As a result of military operations against the Crimean Tartars and the Ottoman Turks, the Azov Flotilla was reborn in 1775 and with the conquest of Crimea became the basis for the Black Sea Fleet, which was created in 1782. Prince G. A. Potemkin as military commander, commander of the Black Sea Fleet and governor-general of New Russia, played a major role in creating the naval
infrastructure for the new Black Sea Fleet at Nikolaev, Kherson, and Sevastopol. Distant from St. Petersburg, required to run its own ports, yards, works, and bases, and the unique requirements of the theater led to a significant degree of autonomy until its disbanding as a result of the demilitarization in 1856 of the Black Sea after the Crimean War.

The fourth period came with the reign of Alexander I (1801–25) and continued through that of Nicholas I (1825–53). Under the influence of the Unofficial Committee, in 1802 Alexander I undertook the transformation of the central Russian government from a collegial system with eight ministries—war, navy, foreign affairs, internal affairs, justice, finance, education, and commerce. The tsar also created the Council of Ministers to provide administrative coordination. In 1802 the Ministry of Naval Forces was created. The expeditions were renamed and their functions rationalized. On the basis of recommendations of the Committee for Bringing the Fleet into a Better Condition, the Naval Ministry gained several new offices: the Admiralty Department, which was to supervise construction activities; offices of the Military Chancellery for the Fleet; General Staff Doctor, who became head of the Directorate of Naval Medicine; and the Council of the Minister to coordinate the activities of the various departments. In 1821 the post of chief of staff to His Imperial Majesty for the Navy was created and took on the functions of assistant to the minister. Rear Admiral Anton (Otto) Moller was the first and only person to hold this office, from 1821 to 1828, when he became naval minister until 1836.

Reacting to the threat posed by the Decembrist Insurrection in 1825, Nicholas I turned his immediate attention to the reform of both the army and the navy. On 31 December 1825 he created the Committee for the Formation of the Navy, and over the course of the next few years that committee’s work led to a further rationalization of the Naval Ministry. The expeditions were renamed departments and reorganized. Several new departments were created: the Hydrographic Department, the Scientific Committee, and the Administration of the General du jour. So by 1828 the Naval Ministry was organized along the following lines: Chancellery of the Minister; the Admiralty Council; the Scientific Committee; the Department of the General du jour, to which the Inspector and Auditor Departments were subordinated; and the Administration of the General Intendant, to which the Ordnance, Shipbuilding and Commissary Departments were subordinated. A few months later the Naval Ministry took over the administration of those state forests that were to provide timber for naval construction under the Department of Ships’ Timber. In the same year the Naval Staff was created to oversee the training of the Fleet, the planning of operations,
and the publication of naval regulations. Nicholas I appointed Prince A. S. Menshikov as chief of the Naval Staff. In 1831 the Naval Staff became the Main Naval Staff. From 1836 to 1855 Menshikov led both the Main Naval Staff and the Ministry and oversaw further rationalizations of the naval administration, which strengthened the tendency toward bureaucratic centralization and control. Reform-minded officers characterized the era as one in which the navy existed for the ministry and not the ministry for the fleet. In 1852 the Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich was named Menshikov’s deputy and after 1853 de facto naval minister. Menshikov thereafter had little time to oversee the Naval Ministry since he would serve as special envoy to the Porte on the eve of the Crimean War and as commander in chief of Russian Army and naval forces in the Crimean War (1853–56).

The fifth period of naval administration began with the appointment of the Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich as commander of the navy and chief of the Naval Department, a post he held from 1855 to 1881. The basic direction of the reform of naval administration was toward a system that would enhance the quality of personnel at sea through long-range cruises, bring about the technical modernization of the navy to European standard, and create a modern industrial infrastructure to support the fleet, based upon state and private facilities. With the demilitarization of the Black Sea this naval infrastructure was concentrated in the Baltic, especially around St. Petersburg. To assist the grand duke, the post of Administrator of the Naval Ministry was created, though down to 1863 the actual direction was closely supervised by the grand duke. One of the major administrative developments was the creation of the Shipbuilding Committee to oversee innovation in naval design and construction as the navy moved from sail to steam. In 1867 the Scientific and Shipbuilding Committees were merged into the Naval Technical Committee to oversee all aspects of technical innovation. It was under Konstantin’s direction that a major naval reform, which decentralized naval administration and granted great autonomy to commanders of ports of the First Rank, was decreed in 1860. This delegation was to serve as a pilot project for the reform of the Ministry of War undertaken by General D. A. Miliutin, and followed by that of other ministries. After 1863 and the grand duke’s appointment as viceroy of the Polish Kingdom active direction of the Naval Ministry went into the hands of Admiral N. K. Krabbe, administrator of the Naval Ministry from 1860 to 1876. This system survived down to the removal of the Grand Duke Aleksei Aleksandrovich in 1905. Effective naval administration depended upon the professional and political skills of the various administrators of the Naval Ministry. But the last truly effective naval officer to hold this post was Admiral Ivan A. Shestakov, from
1882 to 1888, who led the construction of a powerful modern Black Sea Fleet and the development of the yards, works, and factories to support it. Shestakov also won the bureaucratic battle to bring the Volunteer Navy under the control of the Naval Ministry.

This “patriotic” manifestation for the creation of merchant ships that could in wartime serve as auxiliary cruisers had been organized by conservative nationalists like Konstantin Pobedonostsev and Mikhail Katkov to embarrass the Naval Ministry and the Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich, who were seen as supporters of liberal and radical ideas in the Russian government and at the court. The actual charge in 1905 against the grand duke was that after 1871 he had neglected the rearmament of the Black Sea and so had left Russia with a navy that could not support the conservative nationalists’ radical ambitions in the Balkans. Admiral Shestakov convinced Alexander III that the Naval Ministry, purged of Konstantin Nikolaevich, was the appropriate agency to supervise the Volunteer Fleet.

After Shestakov, the officers who held the post of administrator proved remarkably ineffective in promoting naval innovation and professionalization. For 20 years the navy had lacked both “a head and heart” to direct its development and to plan its operations.

The Naval Frontiers of an Eurasian Empire

An understanding of the Imperial Russian Navy has to include assessment of the geo-strategic reality of Russia’s emerging maritime frontiers and the relationship of those regions to Russia’s continental expanse. Although extensive, these frontiers had only limited commercial value until Peter’s advance into the Baltic, contesting Swedish naval hegemony there and in the Gulf of Finland, winning Russia’s first major victory against a European naval power at Gangut/Hankö in 1714. In the aftermath of a series of contests with Sweden, Russia gained effective naval hegemony among the Baltic littoral states. In 1809 Finland and its great fortress complex at Sveaborg came under Russian control. But later during the wars with Napoleonic France the Russian Navy went into substantial decline precisely because the center of gravity of that contest was not on the sea or even in the maritime littorals. For that reason the navy simply did not receive significant funding because of the great demands of the land struggle. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, Russian state finances and the associated debt brought further belt-tightening. Ship construction declined, and funding for squadron cruises became hard to obtain.
This trend was only reversed when Nicholas I became emperor in 1825 and embarked on a restoration of naval power to enhance his influence in Europe. Under the new tsar Russia built and maintained for over a quarter of a century the third most powerful navy in Europe. The problem was that the definition of naval power began to change with the advent of steam propulsion in the 1840s.

By the early 1850s the sailing ships were, however, obsolete. England and France were in a naval race to create screw-propelled battleships. Nicholas I had entrusted the navy to Prince A. S. Menshikov, a veteran soldier and imperial confidant. For over 20 years Menshikov ran the navy in a manner in keeping with the tsar’s views. A cumbersome bureaucratic machine, the Naval Ministry did not provide effective leadership for naval modernization. Russia acquired a few paddle-wheel frigates from abroad, primarily from England, and was slow to adapt screw technology. Not until 1848 did Russia launch its first screw frigate, Archimed. However, in 1850 she hit the rocks off Bornholm and sank. No other screw warships were built before the Crimean War. Admiral Nakhimov’s victory over the Turks at Sinope in October 1853 was the swan song of the Russian sailing fleet. When England and France sent squadrons of screw battleships into the Black Sea to blockade Sevastopol and into the Baltic, the Russian Navy found itself effectively disarmed at sea. Moreover, dependence on foreign sources for ships and technology made it difficult for Russia to overcome its technological disadvantage.

Russia did not have the indigenous yards and engine works to support domestic construction and was late in adopting new technologies, especially screw propulsion for its capital ships. In this manner Nicholas I’s reign began with a broad range of naval successes in the Mediterranean (1827) and Black Sea (1853) but ended with a scuttled fleet at Sevastopol (1856) because sailing ships could not risk uneven combat with Allied screw ships-of-the-line. The Crimean War also taught the Russian Navy the bitter lesson that dependence on foreign and potentially hostile states for naval technology was a shortsighted policy. The Crimean War is a misnomer. While Sevastopol became the chief theater of land operations, Anglo-French strategy sought decision in the Baltic where naval expeditions deployed in 1854 and 1855. Those strikes were in fact the primary mover in the Russian attempt to achieve naval self-sufficiency and led to experiments with galvanic mines, screw-gunboats, and primitive ironclads. But the Anglo-French naval presence did not achieve its primary goals. Peripheral attacks and the bombardment of Sweaborg were no substitute for the destruction of Kronstadt. Moreover, geography, hydrographic conditions, and climate made the Allies’ naval presence less than effective. Their blockade did not cut
the cabotage trade that moved in the skerries of the Gulf of Finland and the onset of winter and risk of ice forced the squadrons to withdraw each year. In spite of repeated enticements from England and France, Sweden refused to join the Allied coalition.

Only with the emergence of Admiral Tirpitz's German High Seas Fleet in the late 1890s did Russia again face a formidable naval challenge on its immediate Baltic Sea frontier.

During its long history, the Baltic Fleet was quite inadequate to command the sea against the intervention of the Royal Navy or a coalition of naval powers led by England. Situational alliances with England or a coalition of other powers did, however, emerge as a shift in the European balance of power and allowed the Baltic Fleet to deploy squadrons for distant operations, especially in the Mediterranean during the reigns of Catherine II, Paul I, Alexander I, and Nicholas I. The victory of the Russian Mediterranean Squadron under Aleksei Orlov over a Turkish squadron at Chesma in 1770, Admiral Fedor Ushakov's successful campaign in the Adriatic in 1798–1800, and Admiral Dmitrii Seniavin's Aegean expedition of 1805–07 were achieved thanks to favorable relations with England, which allowed for the deployment of Russian squadrons from the Baltic. Moreover, alliance with England created opportunities for promising young Russian naval officers to do extended service with the Royal Navy. Many of these went on to prominent roles in the Russian Navy.

Close to the Imperial court and therefore dominated by the emperor's/empress's oversight, the Baltic Fleet was noteworthy for its seasonal deployments and imperial reviews, which cultivated a certain formalism in seamanship and tactics and a propensity for Imperial intervention and bureaucratic politics.

The relative decline of the navy from the first years of Alexander I's reign to 1825 can be explained by several factors. First, the end of the alliance with England compromised the navy's ability to deploy beyond the Baltic. After the Treaty of Tilsit (1807) took Russia out of the war with France and into the Continental System, Admiral Seniavin's Mediterranean Squadron found itself blockaded by a powerful English Fleet at Lisbon in 1808. The admiral agreed to the parole of the ships and crews to England until the end of hostilities. In 1809 he returned from there under a cloud of disfavor and resigned from active service in 1813. War with Napoleon in 1812–15 then required the Russian government to concentrate its efforts on the army. Following the victorious conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, the Russian government faced a massive debt and had to tighten its budget. This meant reduced appropriations for the military and the decay of the navy.
At the same time it should be noted that the Baltic Fleet had provided the stimulus for the growth of naval professionalism. From its ranks came the vast majority of Russia's noteworthy maritime explorers of the North Pacific and of the Arctic. These commanders who took single vessels or small squadrons around the world on voyages of exploration earned a reputation for individualism and initiative. Far removed from the autocratic power, they were the masters of their ships and their fates. Associations forged on long-range cruises often led to senior mentors fostering the careers of promising junior officers by arranging for assignments with the mentor. Moreover, such long-range “campaigns” carried added weight in terms of seniority and rapid promotions.

While such voyages had begun during the reign of Peter the Great, notably the Dutchman Vitus Bering’s expedition, the full flowering of the initiative came in the wake of the Englishman Captain James Cook’s final voyage, which took him to the Aleutians and Kamchatka in 1778–79. His appearance in Russian waters stimulated the government to reinforce its naval presence and to take measures to prevent commercial inroads into the lucrative fur trade by other powers or their agents. Ironically, the service of I. F. Kruzenshtern and Iu. F. Lisianskii with the Royal Navy in the mid-1790s stimulated their interest in involving the navy more actively in the protection and administration of Russia’s North Pacific colonies. While they had little success in selling their ideas initially under Paul I, they had better luck with the new monarch, Alexander I. Kruzenshtern and Lisianskii led a two-ship detachment on the first Russian circumnavigation of the globe in 1803–06. More voyages followed in the first quarter of the nineteenth century with the tasks of protecting and promoting trade, discovery, and science. In the 1840s Nicholas I, at the urging of Governor-General of Eastern Siberia, N. N. Murav’ev, authorized a naval expedition under the command of G. I. Nevel’skoi with the task of establishing the border between China and the Russian Empire. From 1849 to 1855, Russian sailors carried out an active exploration of the Tartar Straits, Sakhalin, the lower Amur and Usurri Rivers, thereby establishing Russia’s claim to the Amur as the border between Russia and China, which was negotiated by Admiral Putiatin in 1858 at Aigun. Russia and China also agreed to joint administration of the territories east of the Usurri River. In 1860 Russia forced China to concede to Russian sovereignty in the Treaty of Beijing, thus bringing the maritime provinces into the Russian Empire. Through such long-range voyages naval officers became involved with the Imperial Academy of Sciences and were among the founders of the Imperial Geographic Society in the 1840s.
In the years after 1862 the Russian Navy in the Orient faced the new threat of Japan. Cruiser detachments from the Baltic were inadequate. Then in the wake of the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78) it was decided to build a Baltic and Black Seas fleet combined with coastal forces and minefields. There followed the Triple Alliance and in 1881 a program to add 16 battleships, 13 cruisers, 11 gunboats, and 100 of the new torpedo-boats. But in spring 1885, this 20-year plan was modified in the light of friction with England and Germany. Yet it was 1890 before Libau was settled upon as an outpost to support the army against German amphibious flanking moves. By 1888 the Baltic Fleet had 24 battleships to Germany’s 27, and these were now each of 13,000 tons. In the Far East no danger was seen until the Anglo-Japanese alliance was signed in 1902.

Some foreign authors have also propagated one of the most persistent myths of Russian sea power—the overarching and predominant impulse of imperial expansion to seek and control warm-water ports. Like most myths, this one has an element of truth, but treated ahistorically, it often obscured more than it revealed about the history of the Russian Imperial Navy. In the Baltic Russia did develop forward naval bases, especially Libau, which were ice-free. But the basic wartime mission of the Baltic Fleet remained the defense of the Gulf of Finland and St. Petersburg.

In the south there certainly was no shortage of naval ties to various schemes to seize “Tsargrad”/Constantinople as part of any final resolution of the Eastern Question. As a boy, the Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich wrote one such project after a visit there in the 1840s. But his tutor, Admiral F. P. Litke, counseled him against embracing such romantic projects. In the aftermath of the Crimean War Konstantin Nikolaevich was one of the first Russian statesmen to propose the sale of Alaska to the United States in order to meet a crisis of state finances and to pull back the Empire’s Far Eastern naval frontiers to a defensive perimeter based on the newly acquired maritime provinces and Kamchatka. The successful defense of Petropavlovsk against the attack of an Anglo-French squadron in 1854 and the withdrawal of its defenders in 1855 marked the beginning of a search for a defensible naval frontier, which led to an unsuccessful effort to seize a base in the Straits of Tsu Shima and the founding of the naval base and city at Vladivostok in the early 1860s.

In the nineteenth century the navy was the primary source of radical ambitions in the Balkans and the Black Sea. From the navy’s perspective, control of the Turkish Straits by a weak Ottoman Empire was to be preferred to any shift that would put the Straits under the control of a major maritime power. The Black Sea Fleet had deployed to the Straits in 1833 when Ot-
toman power was challenged by the Egyptian vassal. In case the “Sick Man of Europe” should prove to be on his death bed, Russian statesmen from Nicholas I to Foreign Minister Izvolskii would seek a settlement of the issue that would give Russia command of the Bosphorus with the ability to establish undisputed Russian command of the Black Sea. A miscalculation of the attitude of England toward the Eastern Question and a heavy-handed response to French ambitions in the Near East under Napoleon III drew Nicholas I’s Russia into a war with a coalition of European powers, led by England and France. Following the Crimean War and the demilitarization of the Black Sea, the Naval Ministry did support efforts to undermine the demilitarization regime and welcomed the opportunity to annul it unilaterally during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–74). But with the change in the foundations of sea power, the Naval Ministry was well aware of the long process of infrastructure development that would have to take place before a modern Black Sea Fleet could be created. In 1876 Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich sided with those opposing a radical solution to the Eastern Question, in part not only because of the navy’s weakness in that theater, but also because of the risk that war posed to the national economy. The leadership of the War Ministry had much greater, if ill-founded, confidence in a short victorious Balkan campaign to end Ottoman hegemony there once and for all.

At the end of the Crimean War naval vessels had a total of 15,000 guns. By 1861 the Baltic Fleet had only 2,070. Then came rifled guns. Those imported failed the tests, but Russian rifled guns could fire 4,000 shots, so the Obukhov ordnance factory was erected in St. Petersburg and by 1901 it was also supplying the army with guns. As it was laid down that battleships needed a four-hour supply of shells, the Obukhov factory delivered more than 350,000 shells between 1881 and 1900. Problems with fusing these shells limited the effectiveness of Russian long-range gunnery during the Russo-Japanese War. In the expansion of the IRN from 96 warships in 1856 to 212 in 1860, French rather than English yards played a part.

Developing from their own experiments with mines during the Crimean War and with spar and towed torpedoes during the Russo-Turkish War, the Russians embraced the English Whitehead self-propelled torpedo, which was mounted on destroyers and later submarines. By 1900 the torpedo was a formidable weapon with a speed of 29 knots and a 654-pound warhead. By 1881 minesweeping was also in use, and in 1897 the 1849 signaling code was replaced by a new wireless (W/T) code. The Russian Navy also developed the ability to use contact mines offensively—by laying them off enemy ports or in well-traveled maritime routes—and defensively as part
of mine-artillery positions, which included minefields, supporting surface combatants, and shore batteries.

From Sail to Steam

Even before the abolition of serfdom the Naval Ministry under Konstantin Nikolaevich championed the abolition of obligated service for kantonisty (sailors’ children who were obliged to attend naval schools and were supposed to provide the navy with petty officers) and of serf-laborers in its yards and works. It proposed to replace such obligated labor with hired workers. When the abolition of serfdom in 1861 called into question the existing recruiting system, the Naval Ministry proposed making naval recruitment voluntary on the basis of the technical skills and literacy required of sailors on modern steam warships. This was opposed by the Ministry of War and rejected by Alexander II. As a result the navy did, however, shrink in size from 100,000 in the 1850s to just over 28,000 in the late 1870s, in spite of the addition of 95 steam warships to the fleet between 1856 and 1863. At the same time lack of funds caused closing of shore facilities and the scrapping of obsolete sailing vessels.

Quantity had given way to quality. Innovation replaced stagnation. Active deployments on distant cruises became the order of the day. The Naval Ministry also sought to build up a naval infrastructure to support a modern steam-and-steel navy. Like France’s jeune école, Russian naval strategists stressed the deterrent utility of powerful screw-propelled frigates, corvettes, and clippers on distant stations as a potential threat to the maritime powers’ commerce. The first ship of this type was the powerful frigate General-Admiral built in the Webb Yards in Brooklyn, New York, in 1857. Russian yards were soon producing analogous vessels. In 1863 during the international crisis brought on by the January Insurrection in Russian Poland and the escalating threat of war with England and France, the Naval Ministry put into practice this strategy of deterrence. Admiral S. S. Lesovskii took a Russian squadron to the Atlantic Coast of the United States and Rear Admiral A. A. Popov deployed Russia’s Pacific Squadron to San Francisco. During the same crisis the navy also invested in new classes of warship, including ironclads, for defense of the Gulf of Finland.

The Crimean War also benefited the navy at a crucial time. The Black Sea Fleet of 71 was scuttled to protect Sevastopol and the sea itself was neutralized by the Treaty of Paris (1856). Most of the 53 Baltic Fleet were sailing vessels and they were scrapped as useless against the modern Anglo-French
navies. But the Russian Navy moved quickly after 1856 to build a new steam­

crew fleet in a program that lasted 20 years, even though after the French La

Gloire appeared in 1859, Admiral N. K. Krabbe called all wooden sailing

steamers useless. He had the new large steamers converted to ironclads. The

IRN had by January 1863 5 ironclads to the French 16 and the British 12

battleships. With intelligence from Admiral Lesovskii in New York on the

U.S.S. Monitor, Krabbe ordered monitors instead of the battery ironclads

under order from England or under construction by contract in Russia for

shallow inshore work to protect St. Petersburg and the Kronstadt naval base.

These monitors were not only ideal for the confined waters of the Gulf

of Finland but the simplicity of their armor (ten one-inch curved plates on

the turret) made it possible for Russia's yards and engine works to build

them with dispatch. Admiral G. I. Butakov, who, as Captain of the paddle­

wheel frigate Vladimir had won the first battle between two steam warships

in 1854, became the commander of the Baltic “practice squadron,” directed

a tactical revolution based on steam propulsion, and wrote the first Russian

work on steam tactics. Admiral A. A. Popov, the former commander of the

Pacific Squadron in 1863, became the dominant figure in Russian warship

design, providing the fleet with powerful armored cruisers for commerce

raiding and its first modern battleship, the Petr Velikii in the 1870s. Admi­

ral Popov was also the author of one of the most controversial Russian in­

novations in naval architecture, the circular floating batteries Admiral Popov

and Novgorod and the imperial yacht Livadiia. Designed as powerful gun

platforms to defend the Dnieper Estuary at a time when Russia had no yards

or works in the south to build modern ironclads, the batteries were slow, dif­

ficult to maneuver, and became a source of public criticism of the Naval

Ministry during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78. At the same time the

Russian Navy also developed the mine—stationary, spar, towed, and self­

propelled (torpedoes)—as a naval weapon and made vigorous use of it. Lieu­

tenant S. O. Makarov, commanding the steamer Konstantin, became the

most outstanding Russian practitioner of mine warfare as a special type of

naval action. Using the steam launches carried by the Konstantin, Makarov

took the war into Turkish harbors and helped to paralyze a more powerful

Turkish ironclad fleet. The concept, the mine-artillery position, also entered

the Russian tactical vocabulary during this war.

By 1870 designers were very conscious of rapid technological change,

which led to the Peter the Great, 9,300-ton heavily armed and armored battle­

ship capable of 12.3 knots and with a range of 3,000 miles. Launched in 1872

and commissioned in 1877, she was criticized by the Naval Committee as being

less suitable than fast cruisers for the same cost armed with torpedo tubes.
Russian navalists advocated the development of a powerful presence in the Far East in the 1890s, which culminated in the occupation of Kwantung Peninsula and the transformation of Port Arthur into the navy’s chief base in the theater. Yet, others, most notably Finance Minister Sergei Witte, had promoted Russian expansion through the building of the trans-Siberian railroad and the Russo-French Chinese Eastern Railroad across Manchuria with a line that linked Mukden with Port Arthur. A weak and unstable China became a cockpit of imperial rivalries with Russia and Japan on a collision course from Japan’s victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95.

In the mid-nineteenth century St. Petersburg suffered from a lack of command, control, and communications (or C3). To avoid telegraphic surprise in 1863, the Russian Baltic and Far Eastern fleets had sailed to the United States so as not to be blockaded as in the Baltic and Black Seas in the Crimean War.

At the same time screw warships were accepted and these forced the change by 1870 from linear tactics to maneuver ones. However, as the Industrial Revolution began to arrive in the St. Petersburg area, the shipyards did hardly any work as they were not yet equipped to handle the new iron-and-steel technology. But by 1900 there were 13,835 workers at the government’s Baltic yards, and these could construct modern warships.

The new programs were slow to come to fruition due to the arguments between Slavophiles who wanted a defensive navy and the Westernizers who designed an ocean-going fleet. Nevertheless the 1864 monitor classes were completed by 1868. By then the 23 ships in the Baltic Fleet were armed with up to 14-inch guns.

**Officers and Men**

In 1854 the Baltic and Black Seas fleets had 90,585 officers and men including 2,255 admirals and generals. The emphasis to 1863 was upon training and discipline, but not on gunnery nor seamanship. The navy was there to look impressive to the Autocrat of All the Russias.

In 1856 the fleets had stood at 130,000, but they were reduced to 43,000 in 1863. By 1874 the total was only 28,000, but then rose, especially in the 1880s, to 52,000 in 1900.

In 1874 the length of service was reduced from 25 to 5–7 years, as the navy needed technically adept crews. In 1865 sailors were 27 percent literate, whereas in 1900 they were 75 percent.

The Imperial Navy was a special microcosm of Russian society, a social order based upon estates with ascription defining each member’s position in
a social hierarchy of ascending privilege and status. The top of Russian society, its hereditary gentry, had a strong tradition of state service and no notion of aristocratic autonomy in the face of autocratic power. That power had created a bureaucratic hierarchy of state service in the Table of Ranks, which bestowed upon those with the skills and connections to manage their careers the possibility of advancement from lower estates to conditions of personal and even hereditary nobility. The Russian military drew its officer corps from the service gentry that Peter and later rulers strove to Westernize. Peter recruited foreign officers and dragooned and cajoled his reluctant nobles to man his ships. While the pressure disappeared, the navy did not become a particularly popular choice for gentry families intent upon the advancement of their sons. The Baltic German nobility were an exception here and did develop a tradition of joining the Guards Crew by which they stressed their loyalty to the throne and to the navy as an institution. For most Russian noblemen army service carried prestige, greater opportunities for advancement, and better chances to maintain and even manage an estate.

A naval career meant long separations from family and estates, difficult conditions of service, significantly less prestige, and the risk of an impoverished old age, when an officer found himself with a “wolf’s ticket” and no prospect of service afloat. If an officer failed to secure 18 “campaigns” at sea he had no prospect of getting the imperial favor of a modest pension. This situation did not change until the 1860s when the future minister of finance, M. Kh. Reitern organized the Naval Ministry’s self-financed pension fund for officers. Some families did, of course, become naval dynasties. These included the Golovins, Butakovs, Greigs, Istomins, Kruzenshterns, Lazarevs, Mordvinovs, and Rimskii-Korsakovs to name only a few. The best Russian naval officers saw the navy as more than a career. It was a calling to the sea, the dynasty, and the nation.

The system of officer education and recruitment that existed down to the 1860s relied upon families selecting the appropriate primary school for their young sons, still less than ten years of age. This meant that many boys found themselves in naval schools or the naval company of a cadet school before they had developed any calling for the sea. When they graduated, many such young officers were a disgruntled lot, seeking the most expeditious manner to end their service commitment. Admiral E. V. Putiatin, one of Admiral Lazarev’s “band of brothers” (see p. 257) and a successful sailor-diplomat, whose voyage to the Far East had been immortalized in I. A. Goncharov’s *The Frigate “Pallada,”* wrote a series of articles on the need for the reform of naval education. His views won praise within the government and led to his appointment as minister of education in 1860. Although Putiatin’s
tenure was short, the reform of Russian public education remained in the hands of those associated with the Naval Ministry, when the Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich’s personal secretary, A. V. Golovin, replaced Putiatin and held the post until 1866. With the introduction of a system of public high schools (gymnasia and real schools), the naval system of officer education shifted to one of recruitment of young men and not boys. The Naval Corps (naval academy) became a four-year course open to all estates with admission by examination. The cadets took courses in three broad areas: humanities (Russian, English, history, and law), the sciences (advanced mathematics, physics, and mechanics), and naval science (naval architecture, engineering, navigation, astronomy, fortifications, naval gunnery, history and tactics, hydrography, and meteorology). In 1877 the Naval Ministry established the Nikolaevskii Naval Academy, a two-year school for advanced studies in shipbuilding, hydrography, and mechanics. In 1896 the Academy reorganized its curriculum so that the first year of instruction was devoted to the three previous areas and the second year to the study of strategy, tactics, naval statistics, geography, history, and international law. The academy also became the chief setting for naval war gaming.

With the impulse for reform of the naval service came the professionalization of the officer corps. And this resulted directly in the very different worlds of the Old Baltic Fleet and the younger Black Sea Fleet. The Baltic Fleet was a “court” and bureaucratic institution dominated by external appearances and internal decay. The Black Sea, however, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century emerged as the incubator of Russian naval professionalism. Far from St. Petersburg’s heavy hand, the Sevastopol admiralty had broad discretionary powers in managing day-to-day affairs. Moreover, climate made it possible for vessels to stay at sea longer and the missions associated with the protracted war against the Shamil in the Caucasus created opportunities for junior officers to exercise independent command of small warships and detachments in the course of blockading the coast and supporting the army. Moreover, the Black Sea Fleet enjoyed 20 years of inspired and charismatic leadership, dedicated to enhancing the officer corps’ sense of professional duty and the honor of the service.

From 1833 to 1850 Admiral M. P. Lazarev served as Commander in Chief of the Black Sea Fleet and created a powerful impulse toward naval professionalism. A veteran of the 1805 Battle of Trafalgar—he had been one of the Russian naval cadets assigned to the Royal Navy in 1804–08—Lazarev took part in Anglo-Russian naval operations in the Baltic in 1812, and in 1813–16 he commanded the Russian-American Company vessel Suvorov on the circumnavigation of the globe to Sitka. In 1819–21 he and F. F.
Bellinshausen commanded the sloops *Mirnyi* and *Vostok* on a voyage of exploration that led to the discovery of Antarctica. In 1823–25 Lazarev made another circumnavigation to Russian America in command of the frigate *Kreiser*. Promoted to captain first rank and given command the ship-of-the-line *Azov*, Lazarev sailed with Admiral Geiden's squadron from Kronstadt to Portsmouth and then to the Mediterranean, where an Anglo-French-Russian squadron defeated an Egyptian squadron at Navarino in 1827. During the ensuing Russo-Turkish War Lazarev served as chief of staff to the Russian squadron operating in the Aegean and blockading the Dardanelles. Promoted to rear admiral for his role at Navarino, Lazarev returned to the Baltic Fleet in 1830. But in 1832 he was named chief of staff of the Black Sea Fleet and in 1833 its Commander in Chief. Taking with him officers who had served on his long-range cruises and aboard the *Azov*, Lazarev cultivated the Nelsonian notion of officers as a “band of brothers” and imparted to his subordinates a respect for the professionalism of the Royal Navy and the notion that officers had an obligation to assure the welfare of their crews. Sailors were not interchangeable cogs in a machine, but specialists with unique skills necessary to the proper operation of the vessel and to its effective employment in combat. Two of his most prominent subordinates, Vice Admirals V. A. Kornilov and Admiral P. S. Nakhimov, carried that tradition forward until their deaths during the siege of Sevastopol. Kornilov commanded the Black Sea Fleet and Nakhimov annihilated a Turkish squadron at Sinope in November 1853. In the aftermath of the Crimean War and the disbanding of the Black Sea Fleet their subordinates brought those values to the Baltic Fleet and the Admiralty in St. Petersburg. These men became the leaders of a navy struggling to overcome the consequences of defeat and to meet the challenges of steam and iron. They provided much of the navy’s leadership over the next quarter century and became one of the most important impulses for naval reform and technological modernization. The Naval Ministry borrowed foreign technology, sought to build and sustain an industrial infrastructure at St. Petersburg for a modern fleet, and used long-range cruises to the Mediterranean and the Pacific to foster seamanship and leadership in officers and men. During the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, the British had beaten the French at sea because the French, said the Russians, had “dilettantes for naval ministers and jackasses for admirals.”

In spite of the efforts of reformers, careerism, arbitrary discipline, and appalling conditions of service did not, however, disappear. This was especially true during the era of counterreforms under Alexander III and Nicholas II (1894–1917), when conservatives sought to limit social mobility, protect estate privileges, and defend unlimited autocracy. In a highly technical service
that depended upon meeting the challenge of change, rigidity amounted to
tying down the safety valve on a pressure cooker. Under the tsenz (system of
qualifications) introduced in 1885, naval officer promotion reverted to a
strict system of advancement according to positions held at sea, thus empha­
sizing seniority and career management over talent and initiative. Bureau­
cratic routine and successful inspections replaced the cultivation of initiative
among junior officers. Such reform-minded officers as S. O. Makarov and
I. F. Likhachev spoke out against this system, but with little effect.

During 1905–14 Captain Nikolai Klado ran the war games and vigor­
ously propagated the Mahanian view of sea power and its influence on his­
tory. In this fashion the Naval Academy became one of the most important
sources of navalism and imperial expansion in the years preceding the Russo­
Japanese War. Russian navalists promoted a policy of forward presence in the
Far East, recommended the occupation of Port Arthur and the deployment
of the First Pacific Squadron to support Russian claims in Manchuria and to
check Japanese ambitions. Although Admiral Likhachev had actively pro­
moted the creation of a naval general staff in the 1890s, no such institution
existed until 1906 to serve as an “integral commander” and brain of the navy
prior to the Russo-Japanese War. Grand Duke Aleksei Aleksandrovich took
little interest in the running of the Naval Ministry and the succession of
naval officers who held the post of administrator were unable to resist or
overcome this combination of bureaucratic inertia and imperial overreach.
The navy lacked effective professional direction.

Life aboard a warship reinforced the social distance between officers in
the wardroom, an institution introduced in the eighteenth century on the
model of the Royal Navy, and the enlisted men of the gun deck, as was, of
course, true for all navies in the age of sail. But in the Russian case the gap
was, indeed, even sharper. The navy’s enlisted men came from the vast en­
serfed peasant population, which viewed their protracted service as onerous.
Few of the tsar’s subjects had any connection with the sea or the maritime
trades. In comparison with the terms of service in the army, common sea­
men had by far the worst of it. This was not so much in the matter of re­
cruitment, for Russian conscription was no more arbitrary than the
notorious press gangs that provided the men for Nelson’s gun decks. Rather,
the source of greatest suffering was the long term of service—25 years—and
the conditions. The problem was the fact that climate and short, seasonal de­
ployments meant that sailors not only endured the rigors of life at sea but
also faced the rigid, martinet discipline of the barracks and drillfield in win­
ter. Baltic sailors, after they had laid up their ships, often moonlighted to
supplement their meager incomes. They sold their services and government
caulking materials to households in St. Petersburg to winterize their windows. Poor diet, wretched barracks conditions, and epidemic diseases led to extremely high mortality rates among the lower ranks and their families even in peacetime. A study of naval mortality during the reign of Nicholas I placed annual deaths at about 3,000 per year out of a force of 100,000. Because of poor rations ashore, scurvy was not unknown in the barracks. Corruption in the supply services often meant that rations intended for the enlisted men were sold.

Corporal punishment, as in other navies, remained the chief form of discipline into the mid-nineteenth century. Its defenders, who included officers who had served in the Royal Navy, opposed any attempt to limit sentences or to require the approval of the sentence by a doctor as an attempt to undermine the authority of the captain, who, like the autocrat he served, was to be limited only by his conscience before God. The “red shirt,” as seamen called the striped back of their punished comrades, was a dreaded and ubiquitous part of naval service. However, the idea of beating “serfs” into seamen seemed to most officers necessary and went unchallenged until the 1850s.

Attitudes toward corporal punishment began to change during the Crimean War. The soldiers and sailors who defended Sevastopol became national heroes and induced a new respect in Russian society and among officers of both the army and navy. Lev (Leo) Tolstoy’s “Tales of Sevastopol” as the account of an eyewitness of the heroic defense contributed to this shift by making society aware of the moral dilemma inherent in an officer corps that treated its enlisted men as serfs.

Following the Crimean War, younger, reform-minded naval officers rejected such arbitrary abuse of enlisted men. Under the leadership of the Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich officers and officials actively championed the abolition of corporal punishment and the introduction of trial by jury not only in the fleet but also in Russia. Morskoi sbornik became one of the most popular “think” journals in Russian society because it carried articles on the reform of education, justice, and other social issues. The Naval Ministry cultivated a policy of “artificial openness” (iskustvennaia glasnost) in order to promote reform. (Its success led to the founding of the War Ministry’s Voennyi sbornik, which, however, proved only a pale imitation.) Reform-minded naval officers also organized “Sunday schools” to promote literacy among seamen. In their view “Ivanov” had to be treated as a citizen. The independent émigré press, founded by Alexander Herzen and Nikolai Ogarev, also pushed reform by highlighting cases of arbitrary application of corporal punishment and other abuses. Moreover, the explosion and sinking of the screw clipper Plastun’ in 1860 demonstrated that corporal punishment
was incompatible with naval service on a modern warship and posed a threat to the ship's own safety. One seaman, Savel’ev, while awaiting corporal punishment, had been ordered to police up the shell magazine before a blast there blew the ship apart with great loss of life. Konstantin Nikolaevich viewed corporal punishment as a legacy of serfdom and warned that its application undermined the very authority it was supposed to uphold. In April 1863 Alexander II issued a decree abolishing corporal punishment in Russia.

Given the new steam-and-steel navy, officers also had to be retrained and in 1885 superannuated officers unable to command, do gunnery, and navigate were forced out by stopped promotions and compulsory retirement by ages. Officers were sent for a few years to the secondary reserves. But in 1895 the shortage of officers to fill the establishments of the newer, larger, more complex ships was such that gunnery and navigation were abandoned.

Conclusion

The story of the Russian Imperial Navy from Peter the Great to Nicholas II is that of an auxiliary to the dominant military system of a major land power. And if that were not enough to cut its budgets, it was socially inferior to the army except in German Baltic families. Moreover, it was spread across five bodies of water, all blockadable and three not ice-free. The critical turning point after more than two centuries was the Crimean War and the contemporaneous steam and then the steel revolutions of the mid-nineteenth century.

Over and above, like other navies, the Russian Navy suffered and benefited from autocratic power. Cycles of initiative and development followed by neglect and decline depended upon the will and interest of monarchs and their agents in the navy. Militaristic autocracy too often demanded a clockwork perfection and the appearance of order without an appreciation of the naval art. And that often undermined initiative and led to the failure to plan and to defeat in battle.

Yet the officers were educated and the emancipation of the serfs greatly helped get proficient crews when in the 1860s steam and steel demanded it, and domestic yards and ancillary industries were capable of producing modern warships equal to those of the other major naval powers in 1900. How well the navy was prepared became obvious after 1900.

The legacy of the Imperial Russian Navy is still alive in the twenty-first century. It was invoked often during the recent celebration of the three-hundredth anniversary of the navy's founding as a call for reform and revival. Once again the navy is in a period of radical decline with low morale, inade-
equate funding, lost infrastructure, and truncated naval frontiers. Between 1990 and 1995, naval personnel was cut by 50 percent (fleet aviation personnel by 60 percent), ships by 50 percent, and fleet aircraft by 66 percent. It has been estimated that in 2000 the navy lost 13 to 15 ships each month to all causes. Analysts warn that the reduction in Russia's shipbuilding capacity could be irreversible. Those who have sought to bring a rebirth to the Russian Navy today have invoked the Petrine tradition and even the Imperial Navy's flag, the blue cross of St. Andrew on a white field.

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