



# THE BLACK SEA RUSSIAN NAVY IS NOT AN OVERNIGHT CREATION – A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLACK SEA RUSSIAN NAVY –

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*The maritime power of a state is not built overnight. That is the result of a long process based on articulated strategies, the needs of a state to defend and promote its maritime interests, and it depends on the economic power as well as the maritime ambition. In this regard, it must be said that the Russian Federation Black Sea Fleet has not appeared from nowhere. It has had a step-by-step strategy with relevant presence and military actions having significant strategic influences in the region.*

*As part of this endeavour, a presentation will be made on the emergence, evolution, and modernisation of the Black Sea Fleet, in relation to the geopolitical realities and regional interests of the Russian Federation. Thus, the purpose of this approach is to identify the principles that underpin the promotion of a maritime strategy in the Black Sea region, in relation to the peculiarities of a semi-enclosed sea, and how they influence the development of the fleet.*

*The novelty is determined by some important lessons learned. One of the main tasks of naval strategy in peacetime is to obtain sufficient space for the operations of one's naval forces and aircraft in times of war, so the size, configuration, and strategic position of the coast in a Narrow Sea do matter. Having this relevant example, we can highlight some characteristics of the centuries-old strategy for the development of Russian maritime power (especially that of the Black Sea) and its projection capacity in the World Ocean. From these conclusions, the Black Sea littoral states, members of NATO, can extract some lessons to be capitalised on. As a result of this analysis, we can underline the fact that, throughout history, the states involved could learn to win more through war than through peace.*

*Keywords: The Black Sea Russian Navy; maritime security; the Sea of Azov; maritime strategy; Russian Empire;*

## INTRODUCTION

It is certain that the maritime power of a state is not built overnight. That is the result of a long process based on articulated strategies, the needs of a state to defend and promote its maritime interests, and it depends on the economic power as well as the maritime ambition. Starting from this consideration, this paper aims to analyse the unique way of the Russian Black Sea Fleet establishment and development.

In this regard, it must be said that the Russian Federation Black Sea Fleet has not appeared from nowhere, it has had a step-by-step strategy, with relevant presence and military actions having significant strategic influences in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and beyond. This strategy represents the core of this paper.

Firstly, history mentions that, after the Russian-Turkish War of 1768-1774, the Tsarist Empire took control of the Yedisian region between the Dnieper and Bug rivers. This was the moment when the creation of a strong fleet was needed, and Empress Catherine II was the one who issued a decree establishing the main directions for the construction of a fleet in the Black Sea.

A series of steps followed, which led to the unification of the Sea of Azov and the Dnieper fleets in 1884, which formed the core of the newly created fleet, called the *Black Sea Fleet*, a name under which it is known nowadays. In memory of this moment, 13 May is the day of the Black Sea Fleet. ([www.kchf.ru/history](http://www.kchf.ru/history)).

The consolidation of the fleet was carried out during the Russian-Turkish War of 1787-1792, in the battles against the French forces, and in the period 1798-1800, during the Russian-Turkish War of 1828-1829. The Crimean War follows, beginning in May 1853, between the Tsarist and Ottoman Empires, which consolidated the presence of the Black Sea Fleet that achieved important victories. Thus, the geopolitical context of the time changed in favour of the Russian Empire.

As it can be seen, the development of the Black Sea Fleet and the pursuit of strategic interests to have unhindered access to the World

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Ocean was achieved step by step, war after war, in an impetuous and aggressive manner, being delayed only because of internal financial and economic difficulties or of external intervention meant to curb Russian expansion and influence.

What the Tsarist Empire failed through force, somehow Russia succeeded through diplomacy, through the 1936 Montreux Convention, an epochal achievement based on an impressive naval power, which obtained a decisive legal umbrella to keep the Great Powers away from the security of the Black Sea.

Following an analysis of the participation of the Black Sea Fleet in the actions of the First and Second World Wars, the paper will present the development of the fleet during the Cold War to the current period. This will highlight the role of the Black Sea Fleet as a means of expressing interests in the Black Sea and the adjacent area, now known as the *Wider Black Sea Area*.

As a result of the analysis, we will develop and bring arguments for the main characteristics of the multi-secular strategy for the development of Russian maritime power in the Black Sea:

- it is done step by step regardless of the regime, taking advantage of the favourable geostrategic situation in a timely and rapid manner;
- it has periods of hibernation and modest development depending on geopolitically imposed barriers or internal problems, but it does not vanish;
- it is resilient, explosive, impetuous, and surprising.

The article will end with highlighting the most important conclusions that underline the identification of the most relevant lessons that history can provide, that being the novelty of this article. The lessons learned have the role of preventing the repetition of mistakes and will be a model of approach to the development of allied capabilities in the Black Sea area.

## THE BLACK SEA FLEET – A STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

Peter I, also called the Great, laid the foundations of the modern Russian Empire and was the first leader that realised the importance of a fleet, making it a foreign policy goal. On the official website of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, we find the reason for the establishment and development of a fleet, which was declared

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*“the need of medieval Russia to get out of isolationism, to economically develop and modernise”.* (structure.mil.ru). We can say that the need to impose the will to manifest the interests of the Tsarist Empire was the basis for the establishment of a fleet, considering the strategic importance of the Black Sea for the evolution of the empire.

From the mists of history, the Black Sea has been an area of imperial dispute. The Black Sea basin was, for most part of its ancient and medieval history, the meeting place of flourishing civilisations, imperial ambitions, confrontations for domination and control, as well as of economic and cultural synergies. Greek city-states founded trading colonies along the shores of the Black Sea as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. Byzantium dominated it for centuries through a complicated network of alliances and selective military interventions, the Tartars and the Golden Horde controlled a vital segment of the Silk Road from China to Europe, Venice and Genoa established prosperous shopping centres that survived until the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when they were overwhelmed by the growing power of the Ottoman Empire, which, in turn, faced the expansion of Imperial Russia, which reached the shores of the Black Sea in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The rivalry between the two empires, the Ottoman Empire and the Tsarist Empire, often resulted in wars, wiping out each other’s dominations as Russia struggled to gain control of the entire maritime space, especially the Black Sea straits, assuming the role of liberator of the Christian peoples (D’Encausse, 2008, p. 9).

The Little Ice Age that hit Europe in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was the chance to develop Russia – an obscure, barbaric, and unimportant country from the early Middle Ages. The need for Siberian furs as well as other goods for trade represented a special development opportunity for medieval Russia, so the conquest of Siberia and Vladivostok was an economic necessity and the development of trade with Western countries was a compelling market requirement.

It is known that in those times this goal was achieved by force, i.e., by wars for the conquest of territories, which would ensure access to the sea. The first attempt to get the leader Peter I out to the sea was in the Sea of Azov where he built a fleet in the war with the Turks (1665), succeeding in conquering the city of Azov. With greater aspirations, the Great Northern War (1700-1721) was aimed, for Peter I, at conquering a window to the sea, which he succeeded in taking from Sweden,



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the Baltic provinces, from Riga to Vyborg, and thus Russia could freely enter into trade with the West on its own terms.

Russia soon realised that the control of the Baltic Sea was difficult, if not impossible, given the interest of the riparian powers in the area, so it turned its attention to south-eastern Europe, namely the Black Sea, known at the time as the Turkish Lake, where the Ottoman Empire showed obvious signs of weakness. This strategy has been followed step by step over the centuries for unhindered access to the World Ocean. Thus, the Black Sea Fleet becomes a strategic objective, its origin being a legacy left by the visionary Peter I for the next generations, the origin of the fleet representing the foundation of regional strategic interests.

### **THE EXPANSION OF THE TSARIST EMPIRE IN THE BLACK SEA. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BLACK SEA FLEET AND THE RUSSIAN-TURKISH WARS FOR THE HEGEMONY OF THE BLACK SEA**

At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Black Sea basin was under the influence of the Ottoman Empire. This was contrary to the strategic interests of the Russian Empire, which developed the rivalry between the two empires. After the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774 and the conclusion of the peace at Kuciuk-Kainargi (21 July 1774)<sup>1</sup>, the Tsarist Empire took control of the Yedisian region between the Dnieper and Bug rivers (Drujinina, 1955, pp. 349-360; Sturdza, Colescu-Vartic, 1900, p. 125-1). Thus, the geopolitical context of the time changed in favour of the Russian Empire, which acquired the freedom of navigation of military ships in the Black Sea, the freedom of navigation of merchant ships in the Black Sea, straits, and the Eastern Mediterranean. From that moment a new pole of power appeared in the Black Sea basin, the first step of Russia's maritime interest being fulfilled.

The next step was to create a strong Black Sea fleet, a process that began after the end of the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774. In this regard, on 11/22 December 1775, Empress Catherine II issued a decree establishing the main directions for the construction of a fleet on the Black Sea. It provided for the construction of twenty large and small warships needed for them. (encyclopedia.mil.ru).

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<sup>1</sup> Kúçúk Kaynarca.



The programme was carried out to some extent and, on 11 January 1783, Catherine II signed an edict on the creation of the post of commander of the Black Sea Fleet and appointed Vice-Admiral Fedot A. Klokachev to the position. The document stated: *“To command our fleet in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, we immediately send our Vice-Admiral Klokachev, who will appear before Prince Potemkin, Governor-General of Novorossiysk and Azov, to receive the necessary instructions”*.<sup>2</sup> (studbooks.net).

A series of steps followed, which in 1884 led to the unification of the Sea of Azov and the Dnieper fleets, which formed the core of the newly created fleet, called the Black Sea Fleet, a name under which it is known today.

In this region, on the south-eastern shore of the Crimean Peninsula, it was founded the city of Sevastopol, which would become the main base of the fleet, and from 1804 the main military port. Sevastopol entered a rapid process of construction and expansion so that in the spring of 1784, the number of its inhabitants reached 4,000 and 28 ships were in position in the South Bay.

The baptism of fire of the Black Sea Fleet took place in the Russo-Turkish War of 1787-1792, which ended with the victory of the Austro-Russian alliance through the peace of Iași. In this war, the Russian ships under the command of Rear Admiral Jon Paul Jones, Prince Karl Heinrich, and the future commander of the fleet Fyodor F. Ushakov achieved important victories.

Between 1798 and 1800, the ships of the Black Sea Fleet achieved important victories in the Mediterranean against the French forces. (dlib.rsl.ru). By conquering the French fortifications on the island of Corfu, the Black Sea Fleet established its first base in the Mediterranean Sea, increasing the influence of the Tsarist Empire in the area.

In conclusion, that was the moment when the expansion of the Tsarist Empire in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea area was established. Thus, the hegemony of the Tsarist Empire in the region was carried out through the Black Sea Fleet, the most visible instrument for maritime power projection.

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<sup>2</sup> *“Для командования заводимым флотом Нашим на Черном и Азовском морях повелеваем тотчас отправить нашего вице-адмирала Клокачева, которому для принятия потребных наставлений явиться у Нашего новороссийского и азовского генерал-губернатора князя Потемкина”*.



## THE EARLY BLACK SEA FLEET DEVELOPMENT

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Black Sea Fleet experienced an important development, having in its composition: 14 liners, 6 frigates, 4 corvettes, 12 brigs, 6 steam frigates, and other ships. One of the most important ships was the 3-masted line ship “Azov”, which was noticed during the battle in the Gulf of Navara. (runivers.ru/doc). After the battle, the Ottoman Empire closed the straits for Russian ships, declaring war on the Russian Empire.

A new Russian-Turkish war ensued between 1828 and 1829, during which we noticed that in the operations there was a coordination between the ships within the Black Sea Fleet and the river ones belonging to the Danube Fleet. During the war the Russian ships participated in extensive naval battles and we can highlight their participation in small-scale amphibious operations.

After the peace of Adrianople on 2 September 1829, Russia returned to the mouth of the Danube (the first gateway to the Western world) and part of the Caucasus coast between Batumi and Poti. Thus, the influence of the Russian Empire was growing and the main direction became the takeover of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits.

Since 1842, shipbuilding for the Black Sea Fleet was in decline because of the redistribution of funds for the construction of docks and the Admiralty in Sevastopol. The development of the Black Sea Fleet and the pursuit of strategic interests to have unhindered access to the World Ocean was achieved step by step, war after war. The main characteristic of the naval strategy was the impetuous and aggressive posture. However, the financial and economic difficulties or the intervention of the Great Powers to curb Russian expansion and influence in the region determined a lag behind the developments in the naval field.

The first major intervention of the Great Powers against Russia was the Crimean War, which initially began in May 1853 between the Tsarist and Ottoman Empires. The danger of Russia taking control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits was imminent especially after the crushing victory of Admiral Nakhimov destroying the Turkish fleet at Sinope on 18/30 November 1853. The battle was considered by the Ottoman Empire a “*casus belli*” for the entry of France and the British Empire into the war. On 23 December 1853/4 January 1854, the Anglo-French fleet entered the Black Sea, and on 9/21 February 1853,

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Russia declared war on Britain and France. In June-July 1854 the Franco-Anglo-Turkish fleet consisting of 34 liners, 55 frigates, and other ships, blocked the Russian fleet in Sevastopol, providing the necessary conditions for the landing of allied forces at Yevpatoria on 2/14 September 1854. During that period the ships of the Russian fleet participated in the defence of Sevastopol, which was abandoned by Russian forces on 27 August 1855, and the remaining ships were set on fire and sunk. The Tsarist Empire was defeated and all its fleets (the Baltic, the Black Sea, and Vladivostok) were destroyed. Moreover, the terms of the Paris Peace Treaty of 1856 were unfavourable to the Tsarist Empire, practically forbidding the rebirth and development of the Russian Fleet, in general, and of the Black Sea one, in particular.

And yet it is worth noting the rapid recovery of Russia's fleets as we will see below. Russia did not necessarily comply with the restrictions imposed by rigorously pursuing its strategy of maritime expansion step by step, even if it had periods of so-called active stagnation, characterised by resilience.

In 1857, the tsarist government approved a shipbuilding programme for twenty years. The plan provided: for the Baltic Sea – 153 ships (18 liners, 12 frigates, 14 corvettes, 100 boats, and 9 paddle ships); for the Black Sea – 15 ships (six corvettes and 9 transport ships) and 4 paddle ships; for the Pacific Ocean – 20 ships (6 corvettes, 6 clippers, 2 transport ships, and a schooner). It can be seen that although under the restrictions imposed by the Paris Peace Treaty, the tsarist government did not stop the development and equipment programmes of the Black Sea Fleet, which had been decimated in the recent war.

The Ministry of the Sea (Russia established a dedicated ministry) developed plans for the construction of small ships for the defence of the coast, the main directions being the defence of the Dnieper-Bug estuary and the Kerch Strait. This experiment, which lasted for 5-6 years, proved to be wrong because it did not lead to the development of the power projection capabilities, a fact highlighted during the Russo-Turkish War, which was an offensive war between 1877-1878, when the Ottoman fleet managed to successfully oppose.

However, successfully using the army and having as allies the Romanian Principality and Bulgarian volunteers, Russia again managed to get very close to the main objective, namely the occupation of the Turkish straits. It stopped in San Stefano at the gates of Istanbul



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under the threat of the Great Powers, especially the British Empire, which supported Turkey in maintaining its hegemony over the Black Sea straits.

## THE PRE-WAR PERIOD, THE FIRST WORLD WAR, AND THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION

Realising the impossibility of achieving the goal of having unhindered access to the World Ocean through the Black Sea, blocked by the Great Powers, Russia turned its attention to Asia, making a gateway to the sea in Port Arthur (now Dalian-China), coming into conflict with the Japanese Empire that was trying the continental expansion in Asia (Manchuria and Korea). The conflict ended disastrously for Russia, losing the entire Pacific and Baltic fleets in the famous 1905 Battle of Tsushima.

The only fleet of the Tsarist Empire remained that of the Black Sea, which had an ambitious equipment programme, continued in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, so that in 1906 it had the following ships: 8 liners – battleships, 3 cruisers, 3 mining cruisers, 13 mining ships, 10 mine-laying ships, 2 mine transporters, 6 gunboats, and 10 transport ships. Two other liners – battleships and 4 mining cruisers were under construction. (Petrov, 1926, pp. 104-105).

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Other battles during that period between Russian ships and Turkish-German groups were: the Battle of Kefken Island, on 29 November 1915, the Battle of 10 May 1915, near the Bosphorus, and the Battle of 8 January 1916. In all those naval battles, the Black Sea Fleet demonstrated tactical skill and very good use of weapons. It is worth mentioning that the disasters of the Crimean War were not to repeat.

The revolution of February 1917 represented a serious blow to the fighting capability of the Black Sea Fleet, and after the October

Revolution, the Black Sea Fleet eventually lost its combat capability, because of the execution of officers by revolted sailors, leaving headquarters and ships without leadership.

The development of the economy and the industrialisation of the country created the conditions for a systematic revival of the fleet. The six-year (1926-1932) and five-year (1928-1933) shipbuilding programmes were adopted, and in July 1933 a decree of *“the Labour and Defence Council was issued on the military shipbuilding programme for 1933-1938”*. The three programmes laid the foundations of the new fleet and implicitly of the Black Sea one. To conclude, we can mention that the main direction of development of the Black Sea Fleet during this period focused on the submarine.

It is worth mentioning an epochal achievement of Soviet Russia in 1936. What the Tsarist Empire did not succeed by force somehow was achieved by Soviet Russia through diplomacy, having an impressive naval power as an argument. The Montreux Convention of 1936 provided a decisive legal umbrella to keep the Great Powers away from maritime security in the Black Sea. So, the Black Sea was left at the discretion of Turkey and Russia, which has continued up to present days. In addition, by this convention, Russia has unhindered military access to the World Ocean, somehow forcing it to maintain good diplomatic relations with Turkey, which militarily controls the straits and uses them at its discretion in case of war (for example, it closed them in the Second World War, achieving a strategic maritime situation favourable to Russia).

## THE RUSSIAN BLACK SEA FLEET PARTICIPATION IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In early 1941, the Soviet Black Sea Fleet was commanded by Vice-Admiral F.S. Octeabrskii. The Black Sea Fleet consisted of 1 old battleship (the liner ship *“Parijskae Komuna”* later renamed *“Sevastopol”*), 6 cruisers *“Cervona Ukraina”*, *“Krasnii Caucasus”*, *“Krasnii Krim”*, *“Voroshilov”*, *“Molotov”* and *“Cementers”*, 3 leading destroyers *“Moskva”*, *“Kharkiv”* and *“Tashkent”*, joined by 14 other small destroyers, smaller ships, and craft like minesweeping ships, 4 gunboats, more than 80 torpedo boats, 40-50 submarines, and other gunboats, auxiliaries, and support ships. (Marolda, 1975, pp. 39-54).



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The Fleet Air Force (commanded by Aviation General V.A. Rusakov and, starting in November 1941, by Major General Aviation N.A. Ostryakov) consisted of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Aviation Brigade and the 63<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Aviation Brigade, independent groups and regiments, eight independent squadrons and naval detachments, numbering 626 aircraft. The coastal defence forces (Commander-in-Chief Major General P.A. Morgunov) were composed of 26 artillery batteries (93 100-305 mm calibre cannons and other small calibre cannons). The air defence (Commander Colonel I. Zhilin) consisted of 50 anti-aircraft batteries, 119 anti-aircraft machine guns, and more other capabilities.

Under these conditions, the Black Sea Fleet was the largest maritime power in the Black Sea, having no competitors; the Nazi strategy did not rely on a serious fleet in the area, which would prove a serious strategic error.

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During the offensive of the Axis powers on land, the Soviet Black Sea Fleet participated in naval actions in support of the land forces, among which we can mention: the defence of Odessa, of Sevastopol and of the Caucasus. In those confrontations, the Soviets lost many ships so that in 1943 the Soviet Black Sea Fleet consisted of the following ships: the liner "Sevastopol" (former "Parijskae Komuna"), 4 cruisers, "Crasnii Caucasus", "Crasnii Krîm", "Voroshilov" and "Molotov", 1 leading destroyer "Kharkiv", 8 destroyers, 29 submarines. (Horkov, 1981, pp. 198-201).



However, the forces of the Axis powers could not prevent the Soviet Black Sea Fleet from maintaining some control of the sea. Between June and July 1942, submarines of the Black Sea Fleet carried out 78 marches in Sevastopol, delivering about 4,000 tons of ammunition and materials, and participated in the evacuation of more than 1,300 wounded soldiers and residents of the city. Although the loss of Sevastopol was a tactical failure, the ability of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet to continue its actions in conditions of air inferiority proved to be paramount for prolonging the fighting in Crimea. Thus, the Soviet Black Sea Fleet offered an operational victory through its ability to maintain control of the sea in the absence of air superiority. (Owen, 1997).

After the front was reversed on land in the spring of 1943, the main actions of the ships of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet were landing actions, among which we mention the landing operations at Kerch-Feodosiya and Odessa, actions hitting the lines of communications and convoys that were carrying troops following the withdrawal from Crimea (Operation 60,000). (militera.lib.ru).

It can be concluded that the period of the Second World War was the period of the greatest glory of Russia until then. Russia appropriated the lessons learned overtime on the need for the maritime and fluvial fleets, and thus realised the premise of further developing this strategic power, which is the maritime power, even globally.

## THE COLD WAR PERIOD

In the years after the Second World War, reconstruction programmes were developed and the Black Sea Fleet underwent a radical reorganisation. The Fleet was provided with new ships, new generation weapons, military equipment, and aircraft. The access to German technology, documentation, and scientists allowed both blocs, the Soviet Union and the West, to advance in technological development in the naval field. With the emergence of long-range nuclear weapons, the strategic value of any naval activity in the Black Sea has been dramatically reduced.

We cannot talk about the Soviet fleet without talking about Admiral Gorshkov, the artisan of the maritime power with global ambitions of the Soviet Union. S.G. Gorshkov persuaded Soviet political circles to build a strong naval force capable of meeting the challenges

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of the time. Among other things, it entailed adapting nuclear weapons so that they could be launched from submarines and aircraft, developing nuclear submarines and helicopters onboard ships.

To project Soviet military power, Gorshkov adopted the doctrines of Peter I, understood that the Soviet Union must have permanent access to the World Ocean, and decided to organise a permanent group in the Mediterranean, so the Soviet Navy's 5<sup>th</sup> Operational Group was established. Also, based on a bilateral Soviet-Syrian agreement, the 720<sup>th</sup> Logistical Support Section was established in the port of Tartus. For the Soviet Navy, this port would become an important outpost providing access to "warm waters".

After the establishment of the American naval base in Rota in 1965, the Soviet fleet had to react to maintain the desired balance in the Mediterranean. Until May 1965 the Soviets' naval presence in the area was ensured by ships from the composition of the Nordic Fleet and the Baltic Fleet. After this date in the Mediterranean was detached a group of ships from the Black Sea Fleet. (Monakov, 2008, p. 535). The 5<sup>th</sup> Operational Group of the Soviet Navy was established, in June 1967, with the main task of "discouraging any unfriendly action against the USSR and its allies" (Zabloțkyi, 2008, p. 85).

During the Six-Day War between Israel and the Arab countries, there were rumours that nuclear weapons were aboard the "Slava" cruiser. Some specialists claim that the establishment of a Soviet naval group in the Mediterranean Sea was also due to this conflict. In 1973, during the Yom Kippur War, the Soviet naval group consisted of 50 ships, including 11 submarines and various ships belonging to the Black Sea Fleet. During the conflict, there were many detachments of ships from Sevastopol to the eastern Mediterranean. On 16 October, Israeli planes bombed the port of Lattakia. Two Soviet minesweepers of the Black Sea Fleet, "Rulevoy" and "MTŞ-219", opened fire and shot down a plane. On the same day in the port of Port Said, where there were 8 landing craft and a destroyer, an Israeli plane was shot down following an attack on this Soviet naval group. Because of the mentioned incidents, the Soviets planned to execute a landing of Marines in the western part of the Suez Canal, a plan that was not implemented because, on 17 October, Israeli troops crossed the canal. (Şirokorad, 2007, p. 491).

In the '60s and the '80s, the Black Sea Fleet was largely developed, including in its organisational chart new ships, new aircraft (in the early '70s – the supersonic bomber Tu-22M). In the mid '80s an attack aviation regiment was established, with the Su-17 bomber, the Marines were reorganised and modernised, and S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems were deployed for the air defence of the Sevastopol base.

Starting on 1 January 1986, the Black Sea Fleet consisted of 303 battleships and submarines, including two missile submarines and 40 diesel submarines, 25 artillery and missile carriers, 66 anti-submarine ships, 38 minesweepers, 19 landing ships, 36 special ships, and 78 small warships. The air force of the fleet consisted of 330 aircraft, of which three aircraft regiments equipped with naval missiles (76 aircraft), three anti-submarine aviation regiments (21 aircraft and 107 helicopters), a reconnaissance aviation regiment (32 aircraft), a transport aviation regiment (20 aircraft) and 20 special aircraft. (Ib., pp. 499-500).

### THE RUSSIAN BLACK SEA CAPABILITIES IN THE MODERN AGE

A serious blow to the Black Sea Fleet was the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent period of political and economic instability. The politico-military issue of the Black Sea Fleet was closely linked to the territory of its main base – the city of Sevastopol – and to the potentially conflicting ethnical-political situation in Crimea, where the majority of the population preferred the reunification with Russia. This circumstance determined the particular complexity of the situation and the search for political ways to resolve it. At that time, Ukraine, which gained independence on 16 July 1990, found the largest strategic group in the former Soviet army with an indefinite status on its territory. A tense period ensued, with many bilateral meetings aimed primarily at issuing a fleet-sharing agreement.

The meetings ended on 28 May 1997, when three agreements on the Black Sea Fleet were signed in Kyiv: Agreement between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the Parameters of the Division of the Black Sea Fleet (which sets the number of Russian Black Sea Fleet soldiers at 25,000); Agreement between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the Status and Conditions of the Presence of the Russian Federation



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*The role of the Black Sea Fleet was to provide a means of expressing interests in the Black Sea and the adjacent area, now known as the Wider Black Sea Area. Russia's influence in this area was very high, and the main direction of its policy was the control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, which offer exceptional strategic advantages.*

Black Sea Fleet on the Territory of Ukraine; Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of Ukraine on Payments Associated with the Division of the Black Sea Fleet and Its Presence on the Territory of Ukraine. These agreements were ratified by the Verkhovna Rada on 14 January 1998, by the State Duma on 25 December 1998, and entered into force on 1 January 1999.

Of the total 655 ships, 338 ships (military ships, auxiliary ships, and merchant ships) were accounted for in Russia. Also, in the composition of the Russian fleet entered more than 106 aircraft, of which only 22 fighter jets, and Russia could not maintain on the territory of Crimea more than 25,000 soldiers, 132 fighting machines, and 24 pieces of artillery with less than 100 mm calibre. Sevastopol remained the main base of the Russian fleet, with three own bays and one in joint use with the Ukrainian fleet<sup>3</sup>.

The role of the Black Sea Fleet was to provide a means of expressing interests in the Black Sea and the adjacent area, now known as the Wider Black Sea Area. Russia's influence in this area was very high, and the main direction of its policy was the control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, which offer exceptional strategic advantages. Also, for the projection of force in the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea Fleet was a tool often used. In conclusion, the role of this fleet established by Empress Catherine II was defined as the way of expressing Russia's hegemonic desires in the Black Sea.

All this period of insecurity was mainly due to Russia's desire to regain control of the region. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, the political and security environment in the Black Sea changed rapidly and marked the transformation of Russia's political and security position in the Black Sea. The relations between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia have deteriorated, especially when the EU and the USA imposed sanctions for Russia's actions. Regional cooperation in the Black Sea has been obstructed and some activities have been virtually abolished, for example, the BLACKSEAFOR cooperation programme.

Russia's change of attitude has taken place amid evolving military and security policies in the Black Sea region. According to the Kremlin communiqués, Russia's policy of modernising the armed forces

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<sup>3</sup> Соглашение между Российской Федерацией и Украиной о параметрах раздела Черноморского флота/, <http://xn----7sbb5ahj4aiadq2m.xn--p1ai/others/srf0.shtml>, retrieved on 29 July 2022.



has been largely launched in response to previous local developments in the region. However, Russia's efforts to strengthen its military force in the Black Sea region have been aimed at strengthening its force to counter NATO's influence, in particular through substantially increasing the Crimean military forces, strengthening the Black Sea Fleet, strengthening its military presence in the South Caucasus, strengthening the military alliance with Armenia and improving political relations with Turkey.

The Black Sea is also the main basis for the projection of Russian power beyond this region. As a result, the Southern Military District, based in Rostov-on-Don in southern Russia, has become the focal point of Russia's military power for the three increasingly interconnected security zones: the Black Sea, the South Caucasus, and the Middle East. Crimea has become a central element of Russia's military force in the Black Sea region, being Russia's strategic pivot for countering NATO in the area and having an important role in force projection in the Middle East and beyond.

Russia is currently in the process of controlling the northern Black Sea coast following the annexation of Crimea, instigating and supporting the pro-Russian insurgency in the Donbas region. Crimea's control allows Russia to turn the Kerch Strait into its territorial waters and the Sea of Azov, de facto, under its control. It also expands Russia's maritime border and economic zone with natural gas and oil fields.

Russian authorities have considered that the Black Sea Fleet should be modernised and enlarged, and it has become part of the naval modernisation programme, included in the State Armament Programme (GPV/ГПВ-2020) for the 2011-2020 period, continued with the new programme signed on 26 February 2018, for the 2018-2027 period (GPV/ГПВ-2027) (iz.ru). Thus, Russia aims to develop a dual Black Sea fleet: one tailored for coastal defence (brown water) and one for the projection of power in the Mediterranean Sea and the World Ocean (blue water). As we find the missions on the official website of the Russian Federation Ministry of Defence: *"The main tasks of the Black Sea Fleet are as follows:*

- to protect economic zone and production regions, suppression of illegal production activities;
- to ensure the safety of navigation;



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*One of the main tasks of naval strategy in peacetime is to obtain sufficient space for the operations of one's naval forces and aircraft in times of war, so the size, configuration, and strategic position of the coast in a Narrow Sea do matter because they ensure rapid deployment and redeployment.*

- *to fulfil foreign policy acts of the Government in economically important regions of the World Ocean (visits, ships business visits, joint exercises, peacekeeping missions etc.)". (eng.mil.ru/en/structure).*

## SOME IMPORTANT LESSONS LEARNED

At first glance, Russia has properly mastered the lessons learned about naval warfare in Narrow Seas, observing the capabilities developed in this system called A2AD Anti-Access Area Denial. Taking as a reference a consistent and valuable book by Professor Milan Vego<sup>4</sup> from Naval War College, and bringing to attention some of the most valuable lessons learned in narrow seas from the book, some relevant aspects of the resilience of naval strategy, adapted for the Black Sea, can be presented.

One of the main tasks of naval strategy in peacetime is to obtain sufficient space for the operations of one's naval forces and aircraft in times of war, so the size, configuration, and strategic position of the coast in a Narrow Sea do matter because they ensure rapid deployment and redeployment; it is invariably a bad thing to rely on the use of a single major base in wartime (Russian Federation would have remained only with Novorossiysk without Crimea), therefore, the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by force should not be a surprise for the moment when the Russian Federation could no longer control it through peaceful bilateral agreements with Ukraine;

*"A major part or even an entire ship formation can be destroyed by a mass missile strike"* (Vego, 1999, 2003, p. 12). In this regard, Russia based its Bastion coastal missile system in Crimea and has equipped the ships with a series of modern missiles culminating in Kalibr, otherwise, the Russian naval tactics are based on launching missiles into the volley.

*"Land-based air power is one of the most effective means to carry out attacks against enemy..."* (ib., p. 12), thus the fire has developed an aviation regiment dedicated to sea combat against only ships.

The extensive use of electronic warfare can make difficult – if not impossible – the effective use of sensors and guided weapons,

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<sup>4</sup> Vego, M. (1999, 2003). *Naval Strategy and Operations in Narrow Seas*. Newport. Rhode Island: U.S. Naval War College.

thus the Russian Federation has developed modern jamming capabilities both at sea and on naval and air platforms.

In considering and analysing the physical environment, an operational rather than a tactical focus must be in place to employ successfully one's forces to accomplish operational or strategic objectives, thus the so-called A2AD system is a joint level capability with operational and geostrategic objectives.

Combat actions are carried out with intensity, simultaneously on the entire surface of the Black Sea. Thus, the aero-naval strikes are decisive. For this reason, airpower is more important than naval power. Airpower can decide war at sea. However, naval actions can have a decisive role in the evolution of the front for regaining control of the sea. The main condition is the air superiority in the maritime area of operations.

Due to the autonomy of modern platforms, military actions can expand into adjacent seas, such as the Mediterranean, the Azov, or the Baltic. However, the actions take place under the A2AD dome, which means that they are covered with coastal systems. Decisive military actions will be characterised by the predominant use of high-precision weapons, especially missiles (Vego, 2003, p. 12).

The main military actions took place near the coast, with land support. The manoeuvrability of modern ships offers the ability to combine manoeuvre and firepower both from land and from the sea. If that characteristic became an advantage on the battlefield, deployment of the littoral combat forces and manoeuvre can be more difficult, and that is a disadvantage. Depending on the situation and the configuration of the coast, an operational direction can be developed from the sea through an amphibious operation, having all the conditions met, including technological superiority.

In the Black Sea, after each air attack, the forces recovery can be most difficult because the time available between two successive attacks is not enough to reorganise the combat disposal, and it is not enough time for resupply.

SLOCs (Sea Lines of Communication) can easily be denied by the superior naval forces that manage to maintain Sea Control, but at the same time, a certain type of Sea Denial can be executed depending on the weaponry on the littoral, anyway not enough to combat a superior naval force.



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The war in Ukraine, as we note, validates these lessons, and because this article was conceived before the war began, there will be no analysis of the ongoing sea and littoral war.

## CONCLUSIONS

We can deduce some characteristics of the centuries-old strategy for the development of Russian maritime power (especially that of the Black Sea) and its projection capacity in the World Ocean:

- It is done step by step regardless of the regime, taking timely and rapid advantage of the favourable geostrategic situation (for example the weakening of Sweden in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the weakening of the Ottoman Empire in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the Montreux Convention and disinterest in the Black Sea at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century);
- It has periods of hibernation and modest development depending on geopolitically imposed barriers or internal problems, but it does not disappear (the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese War, the 1905 and 1917 revolutions); impositions through peace conferences (e.g., Paris, San Stefano);
- It has an impetuous and surprising explosion, it is resilient, it is opportunistic when it is allowed to develop extremely fast (e.g., after the Crimean War, after the First World War, after the Second World War, during the Cold War, and after the 2000s, during the Ukrainian crisis – the takeover of Crimea and the Russian invasion in Ukraine);
- The development of technologies and doctrines is done taking into account national interests and especially the lessons learned throughout history.

In conclusion, the Black Sea Fleet is the most experienced for military actions in the Black Sea, which is a narrow sea. The war in Ukraine has already demonstrated these characteristics of the development of the Russian Navy in the Black Sea, as well as the repeated shortcomings over time. Hibernation and the attempt to impetuously increase maritime power in a short time is not a recipe for success, the lack of modern capabilities for amphibious operations, the lack of modern anti-aircraft defence systems, as well as the lack of coherent operational tactics and operational maritime art explaining the unexpected losses

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of ships and platforms. However, modern submarines and frigates remain extremely important platforms that execute strategic, operational, and even tactical-level Naval Ground Force Support (NGFS). The bad news for the Ukrainians is that they do not synchronise with the land-based capabilities that are more recently countered with long-range strike weaponry in depth.

As for the other countries bordering the Black Sea, they have different interests in maritime security. Next, we will see a brief analysis of the way of manifestation of the regional interests among the littoral states.

Turkey, one of the important actors in the security of the Black Sea, amid the unbridled growth of President Erdogan's autocracy and the international promotion as a former rising power, is redefining and rediscovering the Black Sea in terms of newly discovered resources. As the depository and custodian of the Montreux Convention, however, Turkey has an important ascendant in the Black Sea area.

Georgia is an actor that no longer matters in maritime security in the Black Sea, but it can be said that it won the respect of its aggressive neighbour Russia in the 2008 war.

Bulgaria has no declared ambition to impose a certain type of security interest. Moreover, it does not have a certain position towards the imposition by a certain actor of maritime security that would prevail in Russia, taking into account the pan-Slavic spirit and the former historical friendship. So, any kind of maritime security favours the Bulgarian economy.

Romania is concerned regarding maritime security and has real difficulties in choosing the main support for ensuring its maritime security given the historical aversion to Russia. The good practices of a narrow sea, such as the Black Sea, dictate that security is negotiated and maintained by littoral states. At the same time, the Black Sea quasi-littoral actors, NATO and the EU have become important global players. Therefore, Romania was courted by Turkey for actually collaborating on security, through the offer of MILGEM Turkish corvettes, but the new EU requirements forced Romania to be open only to the European naval industry. The USA has clear interests to have an active politico-military presence on the eastern borders of Europe, to protect its interests, while the ambition of the European Union is to become a major player both regionally and globally. The result



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is a prolonged delay on a national conception of Romania on maritime security, as well as one on the acquisition of maritime platforms to ensure maritime security.

In essence, Romania will be obliged to hand over maritime security to another entity/country/alliance/company for the next probably 30 years.

NATO has important interests in the Black Sea due to the membership of three littoral countries. However, the Alliance is much more active in the Baltic Sea and on the north-eastern border.

Against this background, the Russian Black Sea Fleet thrives, develops, trains, and more importantly accumulates war experience, always one step ahead.

At this moment the Black Sea Fleet is exactly in the stage of an impetuous and surprising explosion, having no real obstacle. Even with the losses inflicted on the Russian naval forces, it remains generally unassailable for Ukraine and will create particular problems in the Black Sea trade. In conclusion, following history, we realise that Russia has learned to win more through war than through peace.

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