

The UK, United States, and the Black Sea

by Michael Curtis



The world is a dangerous place, and one of the most hazardous, and potentially destabilizing, spots is Russia's border with Ukraine and the Black Sea into which Russia has introduced considerable military forces, including three nuclear submarines, one of which is thought to have nuclear missiles. Since Catherine the Great in 1793 annexed the Crimea, thus achieving a warm water port navigable all year round, Russia has been an important player in the region, though challenged at different times by the Ottoman Empire and its successor Turkey, and Western countries. In the regime of the Soviet Union the Black Sea was regarded as a "Soviet lake." As the result of a number of agreements, Russia was given the right to lease the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol as the base of the Russian Black Sea fleet.

With Vladimir Putin as its ruler, Russia sees the Black Sea as vital to its geo-economic strategy, to its influence in the Mediterranean, and to its economic and trade links, especially on oil and gas, with European markets. Control of the Black Sea enables Russia to expand its influence, to establish a buffer security zone from the volatile south, to cement its annexation of Crimea, and to try to isolate Kyiv, capital of Ukraine, thus preventing neighboring states from joining NATO as Bulgaria and Romania have done.

Russia under Putin regards the Black Sea as its own province though it is bordered by five other countries, three of which are members of NATO. Putin has argued that Western operations in the Black Sea are a violation of Moscow's own sphere of

influence, and his intent is to block foreign naval ships from certain parts of the Black Sea. Putin has assembled more than 100,000 troops on the border with Ukraine, grabbed Crimea, and backed pro-Russian secessionists in the Donbar region, and threatened to block the Kerch Strait, cutting off foreign warships from the Black Sea.

The Western response has been to express continuous support for Ukraine, which like Georgia wants full NATO membership, and to condemn Russia threats of escalation. On the basis of the principle of freedom of navigation, the Western countries and NATO have a right to patrol the Sea, and the annual maritime drill, the Sea Breeze exercise in the Sea, aimed at improving collaboration and strengthening maritime security in the region, this year involving about 5,000 military personnel of the alliance of NATO members and others, and consisting of about 30 ships and 40 aircraft, and 18 special operations teams, and focusing on multiple warfare areas, is technically appropriate, though Russia may consider it aggressive. Russia held its own military exercises in the area.

Russia's Black Sea fleet has been based at the Crimean city of Sevastopol since the late 18th century, and most Crimean citizens are ethnic Russian, not Ukrainians. NATO warships routinely operate in the Black Sea, consistent with international law, though Putin holds the area is within Russia's sphere of influence. Western participation helps to strengthen Ukraine's capacity to protect its territorial waters after it had lost about 70% of its naval fleet to Russia in 2014. But Russia counters that threats from the Black Sea region have grown, as has the deployment of the NATO missile defense system in Romania. Russia has reacted aggressively to U.S. naval and air patrols in and near the Black Sea. It is both a question of projecting power in the region, and of protecting its economic assets in the Black Sea region, and trade and transportation lines.

Russia accused British vessel of illegally breaching its territorial waters near Crimea when the warship, HMS Defender, a type 45 destroyer, part of UK's carrier strike group sailed, as it claimed, in June 2021 together with a Dutch frigate, in international waters, twelve nautical miles limit of the coast, taking the most direct route across the Black Sea from Odessa, Ukraine to Georgia. The problem is that it passed just a few miles from the Crimean peninsula, internationally recognized as part of Ukraine but annexed by Russia in 2014, in a move condemned by the West. Russia regarded it as aggressive provocation. The question is whether it was a challenging provocation by the Royal Navy or the legitimate exercise of passage at sea.

It was a demonstration that the West supports Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, within recognized borders, does not accept the annexation of Crimea or the Russian claim to Crimean waters or the Russian argument that the ship was in Russian territorial waters.

Russia threatened to bomb British naval vessels if there were more actions by the Royal Navy off Crimea. Russia did practice bombing simulated enemy ships in the Black Sea using a range of fighter aircraft, bombers, fighter-bombers, and fighter jets. On June 23, 2021, a Russian warship fired warning shots, and a warplane dropped bombs in the path of the HMS Defender to force it away from Crimea.

Putin has said that the Defender and U.S. reconnaissance aircraft that took off from Crete and operated in concert with the British ship, was a provocation, involving both the UK and the U.S. He said, on June 30, 2021, that Russia could have sunk the Defender that had illegally entered its territorial waters, and could thus have started World War III. Putin boasted that the Westerners who were "conducting the provocation" knew they could not emerge as victors from such a war.

The uneasy reality is that Odessa has become Ukraine's main naval base, often used by NATO ships, while Russia has made Crimea into a fortress and controlled the Azov sea.

The ultimate aims and objectives of Russia remain in doubt, but it is noticeable and relevant that on July 1, 2021, a law was passed that bans comparing as similar the behavior of the Soviet army and Joseph Stalin during World War II to the actions of the Nazi Germany military and to Adolf Hitler. To do so, denies the decisive role of the Red Army in defeating Hitler. The law insists that the Soviet army was a liberator and therefore a benefactor of Europe, and that the

Soviet Union, the Russian people fought the main struggle against the universal evil of Nazism.

Forgotten in this self-exaltation is the non-aggression Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed in Moscow on August 23, 1939, enabling the two powers to partition Poland between them, and giving Hitler a free hand to attack Poland. The Soviet Union collaborated with Hitler until the Nazi regime invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, and the battle of Stalingrad became a major turning point in the war. Inevitably, this reminder of the role of Stalin, one of the most ruthless individuals in recent history, and his 29 year regime and the law banning "derogatory" statements about his activities, occasions comparisons with present day Putin as the heir to Stalin, eager to recover territory lost after the end of the Soviet Union, and as a decisive leader, an adversary of the West.

In view of recent Russian aggression in the Black Sea region, inducing concerns about Putin's intentions, it is disconcerting that a new poll of Russians by the independent Levada Center found that 39% of respondents had a positive opinion of Stalin, a proportion that has been increasing. Stalin's image had been removed from Red Square in Moscow, and the city named after him had been changed to Volgograd, but

for Putin he still lives. The West may ponder whether Putin is and will continue to be an heir to the model of strong, aggressive ruler, and ruthless suppression of enemies, that has started with the seizure of Crimea from Ukraine.

In the present uncertainty about Russian intentions, it is ominous that the question has been raised that the dismantling of the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, Iron Felix, head of Cheka, the first secret police in the Soviet Union, after a failed coup by Communist hard liners against Mikhail Gorbachev, in August 1991 outside FSB headquarters in Lubyanka Square in central Moscow was illegal, and should be reinstated. Putin on March 1, 2018, said the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest political catastrophe of the 20th century. In a poll of Russians in March 2018 of the most outstanding figures in world history, Stalin came first with 39%, Lenin got 30%, Putin 15%, and Einstein 19%. In another poll, 70% said that Stalin's rule had been good for the country, and 46% held that his repression was justified by the results.

Rehabilitation of Stalin and the dozens of new monuments to him, ignoring or forgetting the terror of the past, justifies caution about Putin. Paranoia about the U.S. and the West persists, as does espionage, fake news, cyber warfare. Putin may not be a clone of Stalin, but he is a tough authoritarian, with his own secret police, a strong nationalist, with a proclivity to blame the U.S. for the ills of his nation. The West is right to have a robust strategy towards Russia, particularly in the Black Sea.