

# From Sevastopol to Sukhumi – and back again: British naval liaison in action with the Red Navy in the Black Sea, 1941–1945

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## Abstract

During World War II, Britain established a liaison officer with the Soviet Fleet in the Black Sea. Military cooperation between the western allies and the USSR is often regarded as minimal and unsuccessful, but this post demonstrated more positive cooperation. There were two crises when there were accusations of misbehaviour, and there were occasions when he was idle, but these were handled successfully in Whitehall. The post endured, and successive officers did a good job of operational liaison, as well as providing unique intelligence insights from a Soviet fighting front, right up until the end of the war in Europe.

## Keywords

World War II, allied cooperation, Anglo–Soviet relations, Black Sea, Royal Navy

When Germany launched its attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, Prime Minister Winston Churchill's decision to align with the Soviet struggle brought Britain and the USSR together as military allies. A military mission had already been offered a few days earlier, should such an attack take place. It arrived in Moscow on 27 June, to be followed by a reciprocal Soviet mission in London. The British mission was headed by a soldier, Lieutenant-General Noel Mason-Macfarlane, and included air and naval branches.<sup>1</sup>

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- 1 War Cabinet minutes WM(41)58<sup>th</sup> mtg 9 June, 59<sup>th</sup> mtg 12 June 1941, Cabinet papers CAB65/22, British National Archives, Kew (TNA); Joan E. Beaumont, 'A Question of Diplomacy: Military Missions to the USSR 1941–45', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies*, 118/3 (1973), p. 75.

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Fired by concern to keep their new allies in the fight as long as possible, the British also sent various experts to advise the Soviet forces about their own war experience. In many instances, the Soviets themselves requested such assistance, especially if it was accompanied by supplies of useful weapon systems, such as minesweeping devices, or concerned new aspects of warfare, such as air raid precautions. Such was the interest at this point in liaison between the forces of the two countries that on 13 July 1941, the Deputy Chief of the Soviet Naval Staff, Rear Admiral M. M. Dolinin, suggested to Rear Admiral Geoffrey Miles, who headed the naval section of the Mission in Moscow, that a liaison officer (LO) might be sent to the Black Sea Fleet (BSF).<sup>2</sup> On 19 July, the commissar for the Navy, Admiral Nikolai Kuznetsov, volunteered that the British could send officers to see their Black Sea warships without any requirement for a reciprocal gesture.<sup>3</sup>

As a consequence of this unsolicited, but welcome, offer from the Soviet side, a British naval officer served in the Black Sea from then until the end of the war in Europe. Aspects of British military liaison in the USSR have been subject to detailed analysis, but with the exception of Bradley Smith's extensive study of intelligence exchanges, which also covers the US mission in Moscow, the tendency has long been to regard the experience of liaison as largely negative.<sup>4</sup> This was the tone of most recollections of British personnel who took part. Early accounts, written at the height of the Cold War, tended to assume that the cooperation between the western democracies and the USSR was inherently impossible and, further, that it was the Soviets that made it so by deliberate obstructionism. Russian historians' accounts have tended to regard cooperation in a little more positive light, and to find the British to be as much to blame for its limitations, because of their anti-Soviet attitudes.<sup>5</sup> Recent western studies have tended to apportion the blame more evenly than before, acknowledging the effect of attitudes in Whitehall such as anti-communism, or long-standing imperialist prejudices, in addition to the impossibility of sustained cooperation between a democracy and a dictatorship. The overall impression remains of a failed enterprise and certainly one of little relevance to the successful conduct of the Allied war effort.<sup>6</sup>

However, the yardstick for such judgements is often narrow, with the tendency to take the extraordinary multi-layered and often informal liaison achieved between the British and American forces as the norm. If we examine the goals of the British liaison activities

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2 Naval Mission Diary, 13 July 1941, Admiralty papers, ADM199/1106, TNA.

3 Naval Mission Diary 19 July 1941 ADM199/1102; NID note 23 August 1941 FO371/29563/N4511, TNA.

4 Bradley F. Smith, *Sharing Secrets with Stalin. How the Allies Traded Intelligence* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996).

5 М. Супрун, *Ленд-Лиз и Северные Конвой* (Moscow: Andreyevskii Flag press, 1997), pp. 2–8, 66–74, 141–8; A. Golovko, *With the Red Fleet* (London: Putnam, 1965), pp. 90–1, 83–4.

6 Alaric Searle, 'Uneasy Intelligence Collaboration, Genuine Ill-Will, with an Admixture of Ideology: The British Military Mission to the Soviet Union, 1941–45', in D. Stoker, ed., *Military Advising and Assistance: From Mercenaries to Privatization, 1815–2007* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 61–80; Ryan E. Bock, 'Anglo-Soviet Intelligence Cooperation, 1941–45: Normative Insights from the Dyadic Democratic Peace Literature', *Intelligence and National Security*, 30 (2015), pp. 890–912; Smith, *Sharing Secrets*, pp. 205–6.

in the USSR, and the detail of what took place, then the undoubted difficulties and limitations are still evident, but it also emerges that contrary to what one might expect, some continued and effective liaison could and did take place, right through the war, and was valued sufficiently by both sides to overcome their basic instincts (which were on both sides to shy away from regular liaison) and keep it functioning. In particular, there was a difference in experience between the services. While army experiences were often frustrating, and RAF (Royal Air Force) ones scarcely less so, the RN's experience was rather more varied. This was especially evident for the successive British LOs in the Black Sea (BNLO).<sup>7</sup>

The goals of services liaison with and in the USSR were set out at the start of the Mission to Moscow in its directives. Critics have often overlooked the diverse nature of these goals, to see the effort solely in terms of intelligence acquisition and exchange. Gathering intelligence about the enemy (order of battle, weapons systems, intentions) and indeed about the Soviet forces themselves was one function, but not the only one. British personnel were expected to perform a larger range of tasks, which sometimes, indeed often, clashed with the intelligence-gathering, especially the clandestine aspect. They were directed to facilitate cooperation in the prosecution of the war, to act as operational liaison for joint activities and coordinate on diverse matters including supplies, equipment usage, political issues, armistice, and occupation duties.<sup>8</sup> Operational liaison and general, continuing, cooperation were thus significant tasks. The balance of importance attached to them in Whitehall and in the Mission itself varied over time and between different agencies and individuals.

The BNLO remained with the Soviet BSF from 1941 to 1945 and even went into combat with Soviet forces. It was the only such posting with an active Soviet front-line command during the war, naval, army, or air, with the exception of the officers posted in North Russia servicing the convoys (and it was British operations there that they were dealing with). In successive phases, the posting raised the issues of operational liaison, management of cooperation and tactics of handling the Soviets, intelligence exchange and acquisition, the issue of generally maintaining cooperation for its own sake, and then operational liaison issues again, of a different and more pragmatic sort. This analysis will demonstrate the significance of personality in shaping whether cooperation was smooth. It will highlight how attitudes were often shaped by emotional reactions. Examining the experience of the BNLO, Black Sea, therefore, gives fresh insight into the nature of and influences on the cooperation between two such dissimilar states.

The British Admiralty's own retrospective history characterises the mission as essentially futile, since it was faced from the outset by 'personal insults and humiliations, clumsy duplicity, professional incompetence and downright treachery' on the Soviet side. Moreover, the account complains that they resisted all attempts to improve their naval performance – of which it is highly critical. It calls the Soviets 'sluggish and caitiff

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7 The full story of Army and RAF liaison, beyond intelligence exchange, is yet to be fully explored: this is part of a larger project by the current author. For their frustrations, see Collier to VCAS 1 February 1942 AIR20/2441, Hugo's tank assembly mission in WO208/1792 and 1797, Exham to DMI 3 June, 8 June 1942 WO193/645A, TNA.

8 Directive to Miles 24 June 1941 ADM223/506.

Slavs' and warns of the difficulties of cooperation with such a 'suspicious and semi-civilised ally'. Although this is an interesting insight into early Cold War attitudes, as an account of the actual experience of the liaison in the Black Sea, it is misleading, in spite of the fact that the author drew (selectively) upon the mission diary. Close analysis of the BNLO's reports and the interactions of the two governments on the issue of cooperation in the Black Sea shows, on the contrary, a picture of inter-allied cooperation, within certain bounds for sure, right through to the end of the war, of a kind seldom acknowledged when the Anglo-Soviet alliance is appraised.<sup>9</sup>

Smith rated the intelligence product of the posting as one of the British triumphs of the war, but in the initial phase of the mission, the main purpose was clearly operational liaison.<sup>10</sup> The retrospective account of the mission was to complain that the Soviets did not allow the British officer to direct the actions of their fleet on 'Anglo-Saxon lines'.<sup>11</sup> It is certainly evident from the early reports of the BNLO that he believed that he was there not only to share Royal Navy experience and knowledge but, further than that, to try and ensure that it was applied.<sup>12</sup> It was also intended that there should be exchange of information: the BNLO should find out whether the Soviets had any innovative equipment or tactics, in return for his valuable advice, and should gather and supply operational intelligence. However, although the mission fell under the oversight in London of the Soviet section of the Naval Intelligence Department (NID16), this was a bureaucratic convenience, rather than an indication that intelligence was the sole, or even initially the prime, purpose. The principal concern at the start was to keep the Soviet forces fighting the enemy for as long as possible. The hope was that British personnel could help to stiffen this resistance and, should it fail, help to ensure that resources were destroyed rather than fall into German hands.

The selection of personnel reflected the primacy of the task of operational liaison. The large Soviet submarine service was believed to be the best part of their navy, and Captain Barney Fawkes, latterly commander of a submarine flotilla in the Mediterranean, was sent from England with Commander Geoffrey Ambrose, who was a Russian speaker and was also fresh from active service. British naval personnel already in Sevastopol when they got there on 14 August, and who remained until the end of August, were Lt Cdr J. H. Powell, a minesweeping expert, and Commander Derek Wyburd, who was Miles' chief of staff and interpreter. With them was a naval political commissar officer, Lt Gusev, as an interpreter/watchdog. They had a cordial meeting with the Commander-in-Chief of the

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9 'Skeleton History of NID', and also 'Naval Mission to Russia, 1943-45' ADM223/506 – undated, but internal evidence suggests they were drafted in 1944 and then lightly revised shortly after the war. One appendix glosses the BNLO war diary, but only as far as 1943. This account was used in the official history, F. H. Hinsley et al., *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence On Strategy and Operations*, vol. 2 (London: HMSO, 1981), and forms a major source for Joseph Francis Ryan, 'The Royal Navy and Soviet Seapower, 1930-1950: Intelligence, Naval Cooperation and Antagonism' (PhD Dissertation, Hull University, Hull, 1996).

10 Smith, *Sharing Secrets*, p. 55.

11 Appendix to 'Skeleton History' ADM223/506.

12 BNLO war diary 9 September 1941 ADM199/1107.

BSF, Vice-Admiral Filip S. Oktyabrskii. Although Oktyabrskii was uncertain what their function was, he assigned Ambrose to a destroyer, *Bodri*, and Fawkes to one of the submarine brigades. Visits to warships began quickly with Fawkes viewing submarine S33 on 19 August.

Fawkes and Ambrose proved themselves perceptive and sympathetic. Fawkes showed understanding of the Soviet way of looking at things and of treating himself. He evinced a sensitivity and realism regarding his own position and showed no signs of his views being distorted by British armed forces' anti-Communism. Fawkes noted soon after arrival,

. . . it is only natural that everyone is extremely busy (and apprehensive) and has little time to spare for British liaison officers . . . I can picture the arrival of a Russian submarine officer at Portsmouth during the height of an invasion scare and with Port Block-house pre-occupied with preparing submarines for sea, etc and the amount of time that could be devoted to him, to realise only too well my own position.<sup>13</sup>

In common with many British visitors to the wartime USSR, Fawkes was predisposed to look out for signs of primitiveness in basic Soviet facilities. An ethnic stereotype of Russians as barbaric and backward was the baseline against which things were observed and judged.<sup>14</sup> Fawkes and Ambrose, however, as young and active officers, showed themselves to be culturally tolerant as their mission went on, making them useful and fairly objective observers of the conditions in the BSF and its area of operations.

On 26 August, Ambrose went into combat with his host ship. He was probably the first serviceman from the USSR's western allies to accompany its armed forces into combat. *Bodri* escorted some freighters to Odessa, which was under siege, and engaged in shore bombardment. Ambrose was impressed with the shooting, though noting that it was done while stationary. He found *Bodri* to be clean, and to handle well – better, he said, than a British destroyer. However, he had a number of criticisms of the vessel and Soviet practices. He felt its officer-to-men ratio was too high. There seemed too many on watch at a time, and the ship spent too long at action stations. Consequently, the men got very tired. This high intensity while at sea and in way of danger may explain a phenomenon remarked upon a number of times by RN officers with the Northern Fleet at Murmansk, namely, that Soviet ships tended to stay at sea for relatively short periods before returning to port.

While he was clearly gaining good first-hand intelligence of front-line Soviet forces, Ambrose was frustrated. His hosts were welcoming but showed no eagerness to get his advice, nor to learn anything new or derived from Ambrose's war experience. The effect of their indoctrination seemed to over-ride anything else: he found them to be 'very self-satisfied'. Whenever alternative techniques were pointed out, the response would be 'well, in Russia, we do it rather differently'. Ambrose observed that his new comrades had been told that everything in the USSR was the best.<sup>15</sup> This rendered the role that he,

13 Fawkes 'General Remarks,' BNLO war diary 21–27 August 1941 ADM199/1107.

14 Fawkes report 20 August 1941 ADM199/1106; Martin H. Folly, *Churchill, Whitehall and the Soviet Union, 1940–45* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 44–7.

15 Ambrose report of voyage on *Bodri* August 1941 ADM199/1106.

and Fawkes, believed they were there to play – educating the Soviets with the fruits of the RN's accumulated wisdom and recent combat experience – impossible to perform. Since both were operational officers, not intelligence men, this was particularly saddening for them. It has to be said, however, that each successive BNLO, although a fighting sailor, accommodated himself to this situation and exhibited little of the bitterness that is observable in British officers stationed elsewhere in the USSR.<sup>16</sup>

Fawkes summarised his impressions regarding his own specialism on 15 September, after having had a voyage on the submarine D5. He had already come to the conclusion that there was little to learn from the Soviets, in terms of submarine warfare.<sup>17</sup> Once again, he commented on the 'Japanese-like' super-secrecy – and most importantly observed the watertight compartments existing between those responsible for different aspects of submarine operations. Fawkes had hit upon a larger characteristic of the Stalinist system, and it is noteworthy that the BNLOs understood its nature and ramifications, both in terms of explaining Soviet military and naval performance and with regard to the experience of liaising with them. This compartmentalisation, with rigid demarcation and lateral secrecy, was not always understood by Allied officers involved in liaison elsewhere, who often took it as a deliberate rudeness. Fawkes perceived that the problem was systemic and cultural. When one is told, he observed, 'I don't know' in answer to a simple question, it was quite true that they did not, for everyone was very much in his own watertight compartment. Overall, though, Fawkes felt that he was making progress.<sup>18</sup>

Three days later, Fawkes went to sea in a Soviet submarine for the third time and, as Ambrose had, went into combat with his Soviet allies. On a five-day war cruise, the submarine M34 patrolled off Constanza, Romania. It attacked a convoy with torpedoes and was depth-charged by the escorts. On firing the torpedoes, the inexperience of the officers showed in that the conning tower of the M34 broke surface, revealing its position, a common beginner's error.<sup>19</sup>

Ambrose gained further insight into the surface fleet when he visited the cruiser *Voroshilov*. He gave two lectures to the officers, in Russian. Dozens of questions were asked, with particular curiosity about the duties of the RN chaplain. Fawkes had earlier given eight lectures on his own specialism, through his interpreter, and they had been well-received, ending usually in mildly alcoholic parties.<sup>20</sup> Ambrose witnessed damage control exercises and overall appears to have been allowed a really good look at a sizable Soviet warship.

Fawkes and Ambrose set out to try and effect real liaison, while being very careful to not provoke suspicions that they wished to pry into Soviet secrets. Above all, Fawkes noted, they were concerned to avoid giving even the slightest hint of a patronising attitude, or convey to their hosts that they believed they had come down to the Black Sea to

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16 See for example, Fisher to Rushbrooke 10 April, Maund to Rushbrooke 26 August 1943 ADM223/249, Collier to CAS 1 November 1941 CAB121/465.

17 Fawkes report on submarines 15 September 1941 ADM199/1106.

18 Fawkes report 12 September 1941 ADM199/1106.

19 BNLO war diary 18–23 September 1941 ADM199/1106.

20 Fawkes noted that after their experience confirmed what he had said in his lecture, his standing with his Soviet comrades was enhanced, report 7 October 1941 ADM199/1106.

teach them their job (though they had). Their idea was that they would be available to relate the lessons they had learned from the war, if that was welcome. Fawkes went on in his report, somewhat ruefully, to conclude that despite their best endeavours, 'really close liaison has not been achieved, and I am sure that they do not want it, although I think it can be said that we have now won their confidence'. By 'really close liaison', he had in mind British participation in tactical, and even strategic, decision making and shaping of doctrines along Royal Navy lines.

The obstacle to this happening was at two levels. At the strategic level, the BNLO was too junior to have any real influence, even setting aside the fact that the Soviet Navy's fundamental concept of the war that it was waging in the Black Sea was different to what the Royal Navy would have done. The Red Navy was tied to a supporting role for land operations and, over and above that, was itself responsible for the land defence of its ports, which involved it in major ground campaigns in Odessa and Sevastopol and subsequently in amphibious operations on the Kerch peninsula and at Novorossisk. It possessed significant superiority in surface warships and submarines over Axis strength in the Black Sea, but the role of this force was consistently conceived to be a 'fleet-in-being' – to exercise strategic (and political) influence by its existence, rather than to be used as an operational asset. The power to be impressed was neutral Turkey as much as the enemy. These two factors together meant that the surface ships were rarely used in offensive operations, because of the risks from mines, aircraft, and enemy submarines. Royal Navy analysts in NID16 found this lack of interest in attacking the Axis shipping routes to be evidence of lack of fighting spirit, indeed unbecoming to a proper blue-water navy, but it went quite contrary to how the BSF saw its role in the war in its theatre. The BNLOs were able to report in detail on how the Soviet Navy's own practices and doctrines reflected this and tended to mean such operations were outside its abilities, while still at times pushing for more active and offensive operations, such as destroyer sweeps.

At a more tactical level, Fawkes and Ambrose were able to discuss Royal Navy methods, but any hope on their part of altering Soviet practices came up against the fact that such matters were decided in the USSR at a command level and were not open to alteration by subordinate officers – though it should also be noted that the Royal Navy itself was unlikely to take such advice proffered by foreigners very sympathetically. It is thus hardly surprising that this did not happen, and comments to that effect should not be taken as signifying that cooperation as a whole was not fruitful – though this has been how such statements have been read. Fawkes himself characterised relations as extremely cordial.<sup>21</sup>

Fawkes, however, became a victim of the politics of liaison in Moscow, and for a while, the BNLO posting itself appeared to be under threat, for reasons unconnected with its actual functioning. The problem began when Stalin made a complaint during a conversation with the British Ambassador, Sir Stafford Cripps, on 20 September. Cripps had presented a summary of difficulties being faced by the Military Mission in Moscow.<sup>22</sup>

21 Fawkes report 7 October 1941 ADM199/1106.

22 Stalin conversation with Cripps 20 September 1941 FO371/29490/N5458; Cripps diary 20 September 1941 in Gabriel Gorodetsky, ed., *Stafford Cripps in Moscow 1940–1942 Diaries and Papers* (Elstree: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007), p. 163.

While Stalin acknowledged that it took time to develop cooperation, and that Soviet officers were overworked and lacked 'order and method', he then pushed back by making complaints of his own: that British intelligence was not always reliable and that 'not all members of the British mission conducted themselves as they should'. As an example, he said an officer at Sevastopol had been guilty of anti-Soviet propaganda in a conversation with a Soviet naval officer.<sup>23</sup> Foreign Commissar Vyacheslav Molotov subsequently told Cripps that three officers were involved: Powell, Wyburd, and Fawkes.<sup>24</sup>

The actual incident was trivial. The officers had been ordered to steer clear of politics in discussions with Soviet personnel. They had done so. However, in the course of a dinner with Gusev on 21 August, the latter had made a comment about the Royal Navy's lack of provision for its married personnel. Powell had corrected what appeared to be incomplete knowledge, only for Gusev to insist on the accuracy of what he had been told. The Admiralty enquiry concluded that the three RN officers were not at fault. It was noted that Gusev was already distrusted by them, because he was believed to have been responsible for the recall to Moscow (and purging) of a Soviet naval attaché in London before the war, with whom Wyburd had been acquainted. The retrospective NID 'Skeleton History' described Gusev as 'an odious little Judas Iscariot'. It is quite possible, therefore, whatever the findings of the Admiralty hearing, that they had been rude to Gusev.<sup>25</sup>

The issue quickly came to be defined in terms of prestige by the British. Cripps and Mason-MacFarlane recommended a strong protest against the accusation.<sup>26</sup> Since this matter had ramifications for overall relations beyond the purely military, the Foreign Office (FO) took an interest. Focusing on the immediate benefit of retaining the post, even if it meant creating a precedent, the FO's Northern Department, which had responsibility for Soviet relations, recommended against contesting the allegation: if Fawkes and the others could be withdrawn quietly, then the BNLO posting could be retained.<sup>27</sup> The Admiralty preferred to overtly retaliate in some way, but the force of the arguments about keeping an officer in the Black Sea was recognised. There was a continuing hope, particularly for Admiral John Godfrey, the Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI), that a similar posting could be obtained in Vladivostok.<sup>28</sup> In any case, the matter went to a higher level. It was considered at War Cabinet on 2 October. The prime minister declaimed that it was undesirable that members of the missions should talk politics.<sup>29</sup> Churchill proposed to tell Cripps that while the Soviets had behaved badly in making unsubstantiated accusations, 'the missions were sent there to make things go better and not to make them go worse'. The officers should be removed and not replaced, unless the

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23 Cripps despatch 20 September 1941 WO32/15548.

24 Cripps to FO 30 September 1941 FO371/29491/N5679.

25 A V Alexander to Eden 24 November 1941 FO371/29494/N6901; Note on inquiry by ACNS(H) and DNI 31 October 1941 ADM233/506.

26 MacFarlane letter to Davidson (DMI) 20 September 1941 WO32/15548.

27 Dew, Cavendish-Bentinck and Sargent minutes 1 October 1941 FO371/29491/N5679.

28 Smith, *Sharing Secrets*, pp. 39–40; Naval Mission War Diary 2 October 1941 WO178/25; JIC(41)19<sup>th</sup> mtg 26 June 1941, Godfrey minute 16 September 1941 ADM223/506.

29 War Cabinet meeting WM(41)99<sup>th</sup> 2 October 1941 CAB65/19.



Soviets said they wished the places filled. He even suggested asking Molotov if there were any other officers he wished should be removed. It was, though, not a matter on which to make heavy weather: 'They are far more dependent on us than we on them', added the prime minister.<sup>30</sup>

Although the British assumed the officers were now unacceptable to the Soviets, the fact was they had carried on their duties, regardless of Stalin's canard of 20 September. The implication in some of the subsequent reviews of the incident that this was a deliberate attempt by the Soviets to close down the BNLO posting by fabricating charges seems to be wide of the mark. Fawkes was withdrawn because Gusev's complaint gave Stalin the opportunity to score a point with Cripps, but Ambrose quietly remained in the Black Sea.<sup>31</sup> Continuity in the post was retained. Stalin had made his point, while the British had kept the substance by placing continued cooperation above prestige.

Ambrose therefore became BNLO, Black Sea, and was in a great position to report on the unfolding of the Soviet–German war on its crucial front in the summer of 1942. The Axis advances along the Black Sea littoral cut Crimea off from the rest of the USSR, and while Sevastopol continued to hold out, the fleet's main units withdrew to the nearest usable ports, which were on the eastern shore. Ambrose evacuated with them, to Tuapse, in November 1941. In January, the Soviets agreed that he could have an assistant, who could act as cypher clerk. A member of the RNVR (Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve) Special Branch, Paymaster Sub-Lieutenant Hugh Veysey, joined him two months later. Ambrose was made acting captain in March 1942.<sup>32</sup> His role now shifted to the supply of signals intelligence materials to the BSF. A radio link was established with Admiral Kelly, the British assistant naval attaché in Istanbul, and to the Naval headquarters in Alexandria. Information of considerable value to the Soviets on movements of Axis shipping through the Bosphorus into the Black Sea was provided to Ambrose and passed on by him. In return, he was given operational and intelligence summaries, on a reasonably regular basis – though there were periods when they were not forthcoming, for no obvious reason.<sup>33</sup>

Ambrose continued to report his observations, and 1942 represents the phase of the mission when intelligence was the prime function, with the precarious position of the BSF caused by the German advance into the Caucasus, leading to the loss of the important naval facilities at Novorossisk meaning that operational liaison was out of the question. By contrast to later Admiralty analysts, Ambrose's assessment of the Soviet Navy in action was quite balanced.<sup>34</sup> He rated its discipline and morale as very high, and the ships he visited to be efficiently kept and run. The BSF, though, had had a difficult time. There was little in the way of a surface enemy, as Romanian destroyers rarely ventured

30 Churchill draft telegram to Cripps 3 October 1941 FO371/29491/N5679.

31 Smith, *Sharing Secrets*, p. 100, Beaumont, 'A Question of Diplomacy', p. 76. Mission War Diary 7–8 October 1941 and see MacFarlane to DMI 6 October 1941: Fawkes was still receiving intelligence summaries from the Soviets on that day WO178/27.

32 Naval Mission Diary 21 January, 24 March 1942 ADM199/1102.

33 Ambrose gave a detailed first hand report of the airfield at Lazarevka, 2 April 1942 AIR46/26.

34 Ambrose note December 1941, Notes on BSF June 1942 ADM223/248. See 'Naval Mission to Russia, 1943–45', Appendix A, ADM223/506, a document crackling with a smug air of Royal Navy superiority. It found the 'lethargy of the Black Sea Fleet' hard to explain.

out. It had been almost continuously under air attack and, with a scarcity of naval aircraft, had to rely on its own anti-aircraft fire for its defence. Ambrose accurately pointed out that the BSF had different priorities to those central to the Royal Navy's doctrine. It was mainly assigned to engage in shore bombardments in support of the campaign on land, and the supply of beleaguered ports. There had been serious losses from air attack and repair facilities in the ports now available as fleet anchorages were rudimentary. Due to this, Ambrose noted, it was impossible to say how good the fleet would be in combat with a surface opponent, 'but from what I saw, it would give a very good account of itself', even though he felt from his experience on board Soviet ships that the officers 'lacked sea sense', and the higher command, tied into their shore-support roles, had doubtful ability to use the fleet to advantage as a sea-going instrument. He was aware that orders from Moscow were that Oktyabrskii was not to risk his ships. The NID's in-house historian derided this as a Soviet 'fear of the open sea'. Ambrose, however, refrained from criticism of the lack of offensive action by the surface fleet.<sup>35</sup>

In the face of the German advance into the Caucasus, Ambrose was relocated to Sukhumi, positioned between, but some distance from, the fleet's remaining anchorages at Tuapse and Poti. He was relieved by another Russian-speaking officer, Captain Robert 'Tubby' Garwood, at the end of August. In the course of 1942, Ambrose, Veysey, and Garwood contributed a number of reports from deep in the heart of the Soviet war effort, of a kind, and from a location, which foreigners were seldom able to produce in Stalin's USSR.<sup>36</sup> Veysey in particular clearly kept his eyes open and took every opportunity to make observations of conditions and facilities outside the purely naval.<sup>37</sup> This undoubtedly fulfilled the desires of both the service intelligence departments and the FO but, as Miles warned, was potentially in conflict with the liaison and cooperation functions.<sup>38</sup>

The Soviets were predisposed to be suspicious of members of the Special Branch of the RNVR. They were often used as interpreters, and a document of the Soviet Northern Fleet accidentally leaked to the British later in 1943 was to reveal that all such officers were regarded by the Soviets as intelligence operatives.<sup>39</sup> So they were already inclined to suspicion of Veysey. It was only, though, after another personality clash that the Naval authorities moved to stop this activity.

On 30 October 1942, Rear Admiral Vladimir Alafusov, the Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff, complained to Miles that the officers in the Black Sea had been engaging in

35 Ambrose report, 'Some Conclusions after a year's service as Naval Liaison Officer, Black Sea', 31 August 1942, Lamplough (NID) to Ambrose 1 November 1942 ADM223/248; 'Skeleton History' ADM223/506.

36 The DNI said Ambrose was 'the only British officer who has spent such a long period in daily contact with Russians and his opinions as to Russian character, etc are most valuable,' coverer to Ambrose final report 17 November 1942 ADM223/249.

37 Black Sea Report 4 January 1943 WO178/1750: see Veysey's report of 11 January 1943, which includes his observations and information about 21 ports and towns in the region ADM223/248.

38 Dew (FO) to Chatwin (NID16) 25 August 1941 FO371/29563/N4511.

39 See 'Instructions to Soviet Liaison Department' FO371/43361/N469. It was a common assumption overseas that the RNVR special branch officers were intelligence operatives, Morgan paper 'Naval Intelligence 1939-42', pp. 54, 59 ADM223/474.

anti-Soviet talk and accused them of attempting to acquire information clandestinely. He said that they no longer fulfilled any useful function. Alafusov said that on 10 October, Veysey had 'permitted himself to apply brusque and unseemly expressions to the Head of our Government' in front of the Soviet LO, Captain Lieutenant Zhmailo, and other senior officers. He had then abused Zhmailo and knocked off his cap. Moreover, Alafusov said Veysey 'barefacedly busies himself with collecting information which should have no connection at all with his duties'. He had 'shown an obstinate proclivity' towards gathering information on Caucasian roads and had continually tried to take walks in places he was forbidden to go. He had even tried to sneak looks at papers on Zhmailo's desk. It was assumed that he acted under instructions, as Garwood too showed interest in these roads.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, Garwood had just been on a war patrol on a submarine from Poti, and had had supper with the fleet's chief of naval intelligence, which suggested that the BSF had no problem with helping him to undertake the prime duties of British LO.<sup>41</sup> Miles had already been told by Garwood and Veysey that there had been an incident with Zhmailo, with whom they shared an apartment in Sukhumi.<sup>42</sup> Miles, therefore, believed there to be some foundation for the Soviet complaint, both because he knew there had been a quarrel and because he thought that the officers in the Black Sea had been subject to too many requests for information. This probably influenced his readiness to recommend that the officers should be withdrawn, without an equivalent gesture. He had warned Alafusov that the British might demand the withdrawal of Commodore Egipko, Soviet liaison with the Home Fleet, but argued to the Admiralty that there was little to be gained by so doing, adding that 'they'll always win in the end'.<sup>43</sup>

As before, the instinct of the Admiralty was to retaliate. First Sea Lord Admiral Dudley Pound fumed, 'I don't see why we should be bullied by these people without hitting back'.<sup>44</sup> Pound welcomed the pretext to remove Egipko, but the First Lord of the Admiralty, A. V. Alexander, told Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden that unlike his uniformed colleagues, he was opposed to reprisals. He added that he was very indignant about the request to withdraw the mission in the Black Sea on the ground that it served no useful purpose, because he was anxious for cooperation with the Soviet forces – moreover, the mission had 'proved a most valuable source of information for us as to what was going on there'.<sup>45</sup>

Alexander's inclination to 'let sleeping dogs lie' worked.<sup>46</sup> Alafusov returned to the matter on 19 November and asked for a decision. He asked again a week later. Miles sent a little homily to the NID about the prime need to focus on good relations:

40 Alafusov to Miles 30 October 1942 ADM223/248. Miles and Garwood both transliterated Zhmailo's name as Jmailo.

41 Garwood report 8 October 1942 ADM223/506.

42 Veysey report to Garwood 13 October, Garwood report to Miles 14 October 1942 ADM223/248.

43 Miles to Pound 31 October 1942 ADM223/506.

44 Pound to Alexander 9 November 1942 ADM223/248.

45 Harvey note of telephone conversation 11 November, Dew minute 12 November 1942 FO371/32902/N5838. Rushbrooke to Miles 6 December 1942 ADM223/249.

46 Jarrett note 12 November 1942 ADM223/506; Alexander to Eden 27 November 1942 ADM223/248.

I would submit that in the long run it is far more important for British officers in the Soviet Union to cultivate good relations and to try and break down the barrier of suspicion that at present exists than to jeopardise all this for the problematical acquisition of intelligence.

Miles felt Alafusov's repeated question showed 'that the Oriental in them has won, and that they are now frightened of losing face by giving in'.<sup>47</sup>

Although the NID disliked what they regarded as a policy of surrender, their sense of the operational value of the BNLO posting was such that they embraced Miles' overall viewpoint.<sup>48</sup> Veysey should be withdrawn, but Miles was to tell Alafusov that while it would not be insisted that Garwood should remain, it would be preferable to retain him as there were so few British officers fluent in Russian. If, however, he had to go, Miles should tell Alafusov that 'we think the Liaison still serves a useful purpose to both Allies' and express the hope that Garwood could stay until a relief could be sent. He was to impress on the Soviet DCNS

that we ourselves do not treat liaison between allies as necessarily a strictly utilitarian matter and in our view the more contacts that can be kept up between the forces of the two nations, the more efficient the alliance is bound to be.<sup>49</sup>

This final point was disingenuous: it certainly reflected the view of Miles, but was a minority view among the services in Whitehall, whose inclination was much more towards just such a 'utilitarian' approach. There continued to be a hankering after a policy of reciprocity, reprisals, and protests. However, the attraction of retaining an officer in the Black Sea had persuaded the NID at the least, of the advantages of taking a broader view of cooperation. In this they were in line with their political chief, Alexander, if not with the First Sea Lord. As it turned out, Alafusov's own chief felt the same way. When Miles saw Alafusov on 3 December, he was told that the answer had been so long in coming that it had to be referred upwards to Kuznetsov, the naval commissar (which suggested to Miles that he had been kept in the dark about the matter up until then). On 5 December, Alafusov told Miles that Garwood could stay, subject to his good behaviour. He saw no reason for the BNLO to have an assistant, but did say that Miles could ask again later.<sup>50</sup>

This incident showed it was incorrect to assume that all parts of the Soviet machine followed the same line: while parts of the Navy may have been uncomfortable with the BNLO's presence, on this occasion, there was no pressure from the security services or the Kremlin, and Kuznetsov had clearly ruled in Garwood's favour. NID16 determined to provide higher grade intelligence through the BNLO from the Mediterranean and Middle East in order to deter the Soviets from changing their minds. There was no suggestion of bargaining this information for anything in return: the mere continued presence of Garwood in the eastern Black Sea was sufficient.<sup>51</sup> The new DNI, Commodore

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47 Miles to DNI 26 November 1942 ADM223/248.

48 Nicholls (NID) note on draft to FO 27 November 1942 ADM 223/248.

49 Pound to Miles 2 December 1942 ADM223/248.

50 Miles to Admiralty 5 December 1942 ADM223/248.

51 Rushbrooke to Miles 9 December 1942, Nicholls to Fisher 17 May 1943 ADM223/249.

Edmund Rushbrooke, also noted that other departments would be told to stop making requests of the BNLO for information about the region wherein he was posted.<sup>52</sup> It was continued cooperation that was the prime concern, with anything else a bonus. Garwood was required to keep good contacts, to pass on intelligence from Alexandria and Istanbul, to report on the strength and activities of the BSF when he could – but never at the expense of putting his position in jeopardy.

In August 1943, when looking around for a suitable relief for Garwood, Rushbrooke once again described the post as of ‘great importance’ – it was the only British link to an important theatre of war and it would be foolish to run any risk of provoking the Soviets to shut it down (for instance, by appointing too low a grade of officer). That month, indeed, Garwood was able to visit the Soviet cruiser *Krasnyi Kavkaz*, because he was awarding British medals – a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and Distinguished Service Medal (DSM) – to Soviet officers. He was able, at the same time, to look over the battleship *Sevastopol* (formerly *Parizhskaya Kommuna*).<sup>53</sup> Garwood was told by NID16 that though he might try and extract something interesting from the Soviets in return for the fact that their naval attaché at Istanbul had witnessed the Sicily landings on a British cruiser, ‘on the other hand, I am not at all anxious for you to press the Russians unduly on intelligence matters, since the main object at present is to keep your post open in face of whatever difficulties arise’.<sup>54</sup>

Garwood’s being ‘on good behaviour’ does not seem to have led to an increased degree of ostracism. There certainly were constant frustrations. Although supposedly a liaison with the fleet, he was sequestered at Sukhumi, a long way from the fleet’s command staff or its major warships at Poti and Tuapse. When he visited Poti to present the medals on the *Krasnyi Kavkaz*, he had a friendly talk with the commander-in-chief and was promised he could move to Sochi. It took months before this actually took place, with the continual pretext being the unavailability of accommodation. Garwood eventually moved there, a little closer to Tuapse, in November 1943.<sup>55</sup> In his recollections after his mission, Garwood suggested that an inferiority complex was at work: the Soviets were sensitive to the poor quality of accommodation, facilities, and foodstuffs. So they responded by not socialising at all, and by keeping the BNLO isolated at arm’s length.<sup>56</sup> He thought this explained why, when he did get the chance to interact with the staff, they were extremely friendly. When passing on the intelligence from Istanbul, Garwood was careful to be tactful about offering any operational suggestions on how to act upon it. He reported that there were some signs they were being more active in attempting to intercept the Axis merchant vessels he informed them about.<sup>57</sup> However, he emphasised, as Fawkes had, how the endemic compartmentalisation within the Soviet forces meant that his intelligence information, and operational plans generally, was not effectively

52 Rushbrooke to Miles 22 December 1942 ADM223/249.

53 Garwood report of visit to Poti on 27 June 1943 ADM199/1105.

54 Rushbrooke to Fisher 8 August, Lamplough to Garwood 15 August 1943 ADM223/249.

55 BNLO war diary 31 July, 22 September 1943 ADM199/1105.

56 Garwood report, ‘Black Sea Fleet’ March 1944 FO371/43397/N1708.

57 BNLO war diary 8 August, 13 August, 31 August 1943 ADM199/1105.

disseminated. All lines of authority ran from top down, meaning there was little lateral linkage between different agencies within the Black Sea region.

Apart from this phenomenon, which was an insight into the Soviet forces, Garwood tried to explain the limited nature of naval operations in the Black Sea. A submariner himself, he found the general quality of submarine commanders to be poor. Communications with submarines on patrol were rudimentary.<sup>58</sup> The larger warships – the battleship, cruisers, and destroyers – were almost entirely inactive as the Soviets moved onto the offensive in the South. The reasons, Garwood reported, were the inability to give them air cover and the lack of repair facilities on the Caucasian coast to which they had been driven.<sup>59</sup> Even when Novorossisk, Sevastopol, Nikolayev, and Odessa were recaptured, the facilities had been so severely damaged that the problem remained acute.<sup>60</sup> The consequence was that the smaller vessels – motor torpedo boats and armed cutters – bore the brunt of the principal task of the Navy, which was clearly defined by Moscow as support of the advance of the Red Army. This was interpreted in a direct, tactical way, so that waging a separate campaign against Axis shipping, even though that shipping serviced the German land effort, was never prioritised over support for landings of troops and shore bombardments.<sup>61</sup> As far as Royal Navy traditions were concerned, these were secondary tasks for a proper sea-going fleet, and this explains some of the critical attitude to the Soviet Navy in the war – though it has to be said that Garwood and his fellow BNLOs, while regretting the lack of offensive and independent spirit in the BSF, clearly grasped the political position in which it had to function.<sup>62</sup>

Having served in the Black Sea for fifteen months, Tubby Garwood was finally relieved by Commander W. C. Lea in January 1944. Garwood had kept at his job, soaking up setbacks and what appeared to be obstructiveness and insult, and maintained a personal sense of proportion and detachment. He seems to have understood how life in the USSR was and how the operatives he dealt with were to a degree prisoners of it, and to understand that the maintenance of his post over-rode issues of personal dignity. The FO Northern Department, which was never slow to criticise military personnel's diplomatic shortcomings, was deeply impressed.<sup>63</sup>

Lea was already fully cognisant of the nature of day-to-day relations with the Soviets, having been in Moscow for some time in the Naval Mission. Lea was also a Russian speaker. For a short while the problem of the SBNO being on his own was relieved by

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58 Garwood report March 1944 FO371/43397/N1708.

59 Garwood report of visit to Poti on 27 June 1943 ADM199/1105.

60 Wyatt (NID) note 'German Methods of Denying the Use of Evacuated Ports to Allied Shipping', 17 August 1944 FO371/43397/N5093.

61 BNLO war diary 30 July 1943 ADM199/1105.

62 On 6 October 1943, *Kharkov* and two destroyers were sunk by German dive-bombers while operating off Kerch – this was reported by the BNLO, but it was not known that Stalin as a consequence ordered that the fleet not be exposed to such risks in future, NID16 report 17 November 1943 ADM223/248; Friedrich Ruge, *The Soviets as Naval Opponents 1941–1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1979), pp. 113–4.

63 G. M. Wilson minute 23 March 1944 FO371/43397/N1708.

the presence of his wife.<sup>64</sup> He was joined in April by another naval officer, on a fact-finding mission. This was Lt G. F. Shirley RNVR, of the Admiralty bomb and mines disposal unit, who came to study German techniques of sabotaging port and dockyard facilities when they retreated. Although this mission was described by Shirley's superiors as 'a lamentable tale of non-cooperation all round', accompanied by Lea and an American expert, Lt Lexow, in fact, he visited not only Anapa and Novorossisk on the eastern shore, but the major ports of Nikolayev, Odessa, and Sevastopol.<sup>65</sup> They were driven in two jeeps all the way from Sochi to Nikolayev on dirt roads, with Lea's LO, Lt Krektyshchev, and the ubiquitous Zhmailo. Shirley was able to talk freely with Soviet officers responsible for dealing with German demolitions and booby-traps.<sup>66</sup>

After Shirley departed, Lea's main concern was to try and get himself as close to the fleet's command as possible. Consequently, much of his time was taken with trying to get out of Sochi, and to the time-consuming interactions with the Soviet bureaucracy involved in arranging his accommodation in any place to which he managed to move.<sup>67</sup> His posting continued to be valued in the Admiralty, not only for the observations he was able to provide from this privileged position in the back area of a Soviet front but also because he would be useful if British shipping began to pass into the Black Sea.<sup>68</sup> Sure enough, the slack period passed and the BNLO was as busy in the last six months of the war as he had been at any time, as the mission shifted again to a more operational liaison role, albeit a different kind of liaison to that attempted by Fawkes and Ambrose. He was brought to Sevastopol in November, and now had an insider's view of comings and goings into Sevastopol's naval port, and he appears to have been quite free to wander about and observe.<sup>69</sup>

As the Admiralty had anticipated, the opening of the Black Sea to allied shipping at the start of 1945 confirmed the wisdom of retaining the BNLO, despite the lean months of little activity. Lea was closely involved in arrangements for vessels coming to Odessa with American supplies and carrying Soviet personnel being repatriated after capture on the western fronts with the German forces.<sup>70</sup> These vessels were then used to take liberated Allied prisoners-of-war home. He acted as a major channel of communication providing information of these ships, their courses, and ETAs (estimated time of arrival).

Quite apart from their readiness to have Lea stationed at the fleet's base at Sevastopol, two incidents were indications that the Soviets themselves valued the post. One was the

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64 Lea to Clanchy 27 May 1943, Fisher to Rushbrooke 1 February 1944 ADM223/249; Fisher to Director of Navy Accounts 9 March 1944 ADM223/248.

65 'The Shirley Saga' 4 April – 2 June 1944' ADM223/248; Archer to Rushbrooke 12 July 1944 ADM199/1105.

66 Shirley report to Director, Unexploded Bomb Disposal, 30 June 1944 FO371/43397/N5093.

67 Lea to Admiral Archer in Moscow 9 August 1944 FO371/43397/N4958.

68 Rushbrooke letter to Archer 7 November 1944 ADM223/249; Smith, *Sharing Secrets*, p. 196.

69 BNLO war diary 13 October, 29 November, 28 December 1944 ADM199/1105.

70 Lea witnessed the arrival of 3,800 repatriates on the *Duchess of Bedford*, and the ceremonial welcome laid on, probably to impress the Allied officers like himself who were present, BNLO war diary 5, 6 March 1945 ADM199/1105.

agreement that the BNLO should have an assistant again. Sub-Lieutenant Martin, RNVR, joined Lea on 20 November 1944.<sup>71</sup> Soon after that was agreed, the fleet made its first request for information from the BNLO in a long time. Lea's comment was: 'in view of the small amount of use I have been them of recent times, and in hopes of further justifying my position in Russian eyes, it's earnestly hoped I'll be able to give satisfactory replies'.<sup>72</sup> In fact, though the replies were delayed, this did not seem to affect Lea's own position, probably because his duties became more operational, with the arrival of the allied merchant ships, the PoWs issue, and the importance the BSF staff attached to the smooth-running of the Yalta conference. Lea was active in making arrangements for the ships that moored at Sevastopol in connection with the conference and that housed the British staffs. He found that the fleet authorities were exceedingly cordial in discussions of conference issues and unusually speedy in granting his requests.<sup>73</sup>

Lea continued busy after the conference. On 23 February, he had his first visit on board a Soviet warship, when he was shown around the *Voroshilov*. He had supper with the captain and his wife, and though they remained in harbour, he was treated to the sight of all the guns being fired, in the salute to honour Red Army Day. His overall impression of the ship was that it was not very robust – 'rather tin-kettley' and roughly made – and clean, but untidy. Martin journeyed to Odessa on a sub-chaser, probably the last occasion when a British officer observed a Soviet warship on active mission during the war. Martin was impressed by the seamanship of the crew under difficult conditions.<sup>74</sup>

The difficulties posed to the BNLO by Soviet punctiliousness about rank and hierarchy were brought home to Lea by a comment by his LO, Major Chernitchkin, when the latter warned him that it was not appropriate for a junior officer to bombard seniors with questions.<sup>75</sup> Lea had had some difficulties with his Soviet LOs. He complained direct to Oktyabrskii about one of them, Krektyshv, after an incident (unspecified in the diary, but it seems to have also involved his cook) meant he could no longer trust him. Lea shared accommodation with his LO, making personalities crucial in maintaining good relations. Krektyshv's replacement, Chernitchkin, tended to act as if he was the sole channel of contact to the fleet. All the LOs, however, seem to have rendered Lea good service and to have looked after his interests.<sup>76</sup> The impact of personalities on the ease or otherwise of cooperation, and the effect of the (understandable) personal anxieties of Soviet officers put in the position of having to interact with foreigners, should not be underestimated, and should be factored in to more ideological explanations of the difficulties involved.<sup>77</sup>

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71 Archer to Rushbrooke 24 September 1944 ADM223/249; BNLO war diary 20 November 1944 ADM199/1105.

72 BNLO war diary 27, 31 October, 27 November, 17, 19 December 1944 ADM199/1105.

73 BNLO war diary 10, 15, 18, 23 January 1945 ADM199/1105.

74 BNLO war diary 24 April 1945 ADM199/1105.

75 BNLO war diary 28 March 1945 ADM199/1105.

76 BNLO war diary 10 July, 8 August, 2 September, 25 November 1944 ADM199/1105.

77 BNLO war diary 11 June, 21 June 1945. Lea concluded that though Chernitchkin sneered at British information, 'this appears to be his personal line and whenever I have personal contact with staff there is little of this sort of thing. . . .' BNLO war diary 12 April 1945 ADM199/1105.



The post of BNLO Black Sea came to an abrupt end in July 1945. Although its justification had largely ceased with the end of the war in Europe, Lea clearly was not anticipating it, as he was in the process of arranging accommodation at a sanatorium in Yalta at the time, to help his recovery from a bout of paratyphoid. On 18 July, he and Martin left the Black Sea, though the Mission in Moscow itself continued on until after the Japanese surrender and finally departed in October 1945.<sup>78</sup>

A British officer had served with the Soviet BSF for all but the first two months of its World War II campaign. The Royal Navy's own subsequent assessment downplayed the mission so much that the final two years it was in place were not discussed at all, and it was as a whole used as a salutary warning against cooperation with the Soviet Union. The emphasis on Soviet obstructionism and the ethnic deficiencies of people described as 'semi-civilised' meant any possible positive outcomes were minimised to the point of exclusion. While Bradley Smith has brought out the tangible intelligence gains, this overall picture of non-cooperation has proved an enduring one. Yet the Admiralty at the time – and notably its Naval Intelligence Department, which was never noted for positive attitudes towards the USSR – saw the post to be one of continuing importance and well worth any efforts to retain. This even extended to compromising their preference for reciprocity. Interestingly, despite what is implied in the Navy's subsequent narrative, the Soviet authorities themselves did not exert pressure to do away with it, despite having at least two occasions when a suitable pretext to insist arose. They showed in other instances, in relation to army and air force personnel, that they were quite ready to push for the removal of allied servicemen.

The question remains, though, why Rushbrooke, Alexander, and others regarded the post to be of 'great importance'. Was it – either narrowly in terms of British naval interests or more broadly as a contribution to the allied conduct of the war? Smith does not go into a lot of detail with regards to the intelligence gains he rates so highly. The operational significance of the intelligence provided by the BNLO to the Soviets could have been significant had the BSF adopted a different approach to their campaign. At times, they did use the information provided from Alexandria and Istanbul to interdict Axis transports, but this was limited in scope by a number of factors incidental to the quality of the intelligence – most of them grasped by the BNLO and reported, fewer of them fully internalised by the NID in Whitehall. The intelligence provided by the Soviets in exchange was of no operational value to Britain, but it did keep the British Chiefs of Staff reasonably well-informed of events in the Black Sea, provided Axis order-of-battle on a fairly regular basis and helped provide collateral confirmation for materials gained from Britain's own interception of German signals. It provided useful insight into Axis resources and tactics on this front, which otherwise would not have been known. Although, as elsewhere, the Soviets were much more reserved about providing their own order of battle, it was here that the BNLO made a real difference. The BNLO was able to make observations over an extended period of time. Although he had periods of months – especially while sequestered at Sochi – when he had little to do, he could still keep his eyes and ears open. There were precious few Allied personnel – let alone Russian-speaking ones – based over the

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78 Naval Mission Diary 21 July, Egerton to Admiralty 11 August 1945 ADM199/2492.

long-term in the Soviet back areas. The BNLO was able to supply detailed observations of the state of the Soviet home front – Veysey's reports are a particular example of the quality of this reporting – which provided significant information on the morale of Soviet civilians, especially of the ethnic groups in the Caucasus, on the food and material supplies situation and on transportation, all of which was important raw material for both services and FO assessments of the USSR.

Moreover, even though stationed apart from the fleet's headquarters (three hours away) until the return to Sevastopol in November 1944, it is not correct to say that the BNLO had no contact with it. He was able to file reports from first-hand observations of Soviet warships, including some action on war-cruises. Even more important, he was in a position to provide information on the resources, tactics, and doctrine of a Soviet fleet in a war zone. Although the post war NID critique made much of the deficiencies of the BSF, in its failure to show offensive spirit (or to follow RN guidance in that direction), the very fact that the BNLO was able to report on the Soviet Navy's doctrines and practices, which were so different to those of the RN, was valuable and rare intelligence. In particular, insight was gained into the Soviet use of small craft, the Navy's role as support for land campaigns, the tactics of its submariners, assets and deficiencies of the submarine force. As a result, the NID had a complete picture of the Soviet BSF, its vessels, and the shortcomings of its commanders. It was alerted to the poor coordination and excessive compartmentalisation of Soviet forces even on the front line. That such insight was not always factored into strategic assessments towards the end of the war was more a result of political concerns in Whitehall, than in the shortcomings of raw intelligence.<sup>79</sup> In the postwar period, the navy was rarely to be so well-informed.

Important as this was, as pointed out at the start of this article, the purpose of British liaison in the USSR was not limited to intelligence, and indeed intelligence was not the prime function of the BNLO. It was intended to contribute operationally to Soviet resistance. In this respect, Fawkes may have made a little difference, with his series of lectures on submarine tactics to active crews, but by-and-large, the BSF showed no desire to learn from the foreigner. However, apart from the utility of the intelligence he passed on from Istanbul, the BNLO proved in the final nine months of the war to be a posting of operational use to both sides as the Black Sea, while no longer a combat zone, and became a point of interface between the constituent members of the Grand Alliance. By contrast to his months in Sochi, Lea was a busy man in that period, and while this remained a secondary theatre of allied liaison, his experience shows, whatever the NID's retrospective account insisted, and counter to the generally accepted pattern of diminishing returns of cooperation between dissimilar states, that cooperation was not only possible between British servicemen and their Soviet counterparts but, given certain conditions, was mutually beneficial in both military and more broadly, political, ways. Personalities needed to align – interestingly, these appeared to be a more important determinant than ideology – but ultimately cooperation could still take place over a regular, extended period. With

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79 See, for instance, JIC(44)366(O) 'Russian Capabilities in Relation to the Strategic Interests of the British Commonwealth' 22 August 1944, which acknowledges Soviet naval shortcomings in the main text, but in its summary ignores them, CAB81/124.

will and interests coinciding on both sides, cooperation between dissimilar powers is possible. As the FO commented with reference to Garwood, you just need to pick your personnel carefully with a mind to the special and distinctive qualities required. By accident, perhaps, rather than design, the Admiralty got this right in the BNLO Black Sea posting, right through from 1941 to 1945, from Sevastopol to Sukhumi and back again.

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