

# The Sinking of the Kursk

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Even though more than a month has passed since the Kursk submarine abruptly sank in the Barents Sea on August 12, very few aspects of the tragedy have been explained satisfactorily. Overall, the situation is just as murky today as it was on the night the Russian vessel went down.

What caused the accident? What accounts for the Russian government's abysmal response? Was there a possibility of rescuing any sailors who might have survived the initial explosions? What will be the military and political consequences of this affair in Russia?

The only honest answer to the first question--regarding the cause of the accident--is that we simply do not know yet. Indeed, we may never find out. A US submarine, the Scorpion, went down near the Azores in 1968, and to this day we do not know what caused it to sink. Scrutiny of the equipment and sensors on the Kursk--which we can only hope will be undertaken by Russian naval authorities--may someday reveal what caused the two explosions that tore apart the Kursk's two front chambers, but it is entirely possible that we will never ascertain the precise chain of events.

## **What Exactly Happened?**

So far, all reliable evidence indicates that the two explosions on August 12, separated by 2 minutes and 15 seconds, were caused by an on-board accident, most likely with one of the Kursk's torpedoes. According to an August 18 article by Igor Kudrik in the main Russian military newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star), the Sevmash shipbuilding complex in Severodvinsk convinced the Russian navy to save expense by accepting reconstructed torpedo tubes that relied on relatively inexpensive liquid fuel instead of ultrahigh-energy silver-and-zinc batteries and pressurized oxygen.

Because Kudrik provided no details about the type of liquid fuel that was allegedly used in the reconstructed torpedoes, it is impossible to know how volatile the propellant would have been. Nonetheless, his account is borne out by the recent comments of Stanislav Proshkin, the director of the Gidropribor Central Research Institute, a leading Russian design bureau for torpedoes and other weaponry. In the specialized Russian military-industrial journal *Voenny parad* (Military Parade), to which Proshkin frequently contributes, he provides essentially the same description of the reconstructed torpedo

tubes. The only difference is that Proshkin says the liquid fuel was used because it produced better performance, not because it was cheaper. That difference aside, the two men agree on the basic point that at least some of the torpedoes on the Kursk were powered with a liquid propellant. If their accounts are accurate, we can surmise that an initial explosion involving nitrate ester in the liquid fuel could have swiftly built up the volatility of the forward chamber housing the torpedoes, which then triggered the second, much larger explosion.

No conclusive evidence has yet emerged to support the theory of a torpedo accident, but all the evidence now available, including seismological readings from Norway and highly classified acoustics signals and other sensitive data gathered by US and British naval intelligence platforms, is fully consistent with the theory.

By contrast, none of the evidence is--or ever has been--consistent with the theory favored by some elements in the Russian defense ministry, who continue to assert that the accident resulted from a collision with a foreign submarine. The US government has acknowledged that it deployed two submarines, the Memphis and the Toledo, in the Barents Sea in August 2000 to monitor Russian naval exercises in the area. The US Navy also had a hydroacoustic ship, the Loyal, nearby to keep careful track of Russian submarines, including those like the Kursk that were operating in shallow waters. In addition, British sources have disclosed that the Royal Navy deployed a submarine in the Barents Sea for surveillance purposes during the Russian exercises.

Shortly after the accident was announced, Captain Sergei Prokofiev, the hydroacoustics officer on the Admiral Chabanenko, a Russian large anti-submarine warfare ship taking part in the exercises alongside the Kursk, acknowledged on Russian television that none of the foreign submarines in the Barents Sea had been anywhere near the Kursk at the time of the accident. If a foreign submarine had been present, Prokofiev added, "I would have been among the first to know about it." Subsequent evidence indicates that the Memphis and Toledo were both at least 8-10 kilometers away from the Kursk when the explosions occurred.

The three American and British submarines have been sighted during port calls in the weeks since the Kursk went down, and it is very evident that none of them suffered any damage. Yet if a vessel like the Memphis or Toledo had collided with and crippled a huge Oscar II-class submarine, the accident would have inflicted grievous damage on the American boat, most likely causing it to sink. The absence of any sign that the American and British surveillance vessels were impaired underscores the implausibility of the collision scenario.

When proponents of the collision theory are asked to produce evidence, they often claim that damage was caused to the exterior of the Kursk. But the Kursk, as an enormous, double-hulled submarine, is designed to withstand massive traumas from outside, including collisions and explosions. What it cannot survive are very large explosions from inside. The Norwegian divers, who saw the whole vessel from outside, have explicitly denied that they found any damage to the outer hull that could have been

caused by a collision. Their testimony is corroborated by footage released from underwater cameras that was broadcast on Russian and Western television. Although the film clips reveal damage from the bow to the fin, they show no problems on the exterior of the Kursk that could possibly be attributable to a collision. Some footage has not yet been disclosed (evidently because of Russian secrecy concerns), but it is reasonable to assume that if visual evidence of damage from a collision existed, it would have been released long ago by the Russian authorities. The fact that no such evidence has been produced suggests that none exists.

### **Russia's Response**

As for the Russian government's response to the disaster, the deluge of unabashed lies and disinformation reveals something more than just a temporary bout of panic, to which almost any leader can succumb. It reveals the engrained Soviet mentality of so many of the officials whom President Vladimir Putin has brought to power, especially those from the internal security apparatus, which Putin formerly headed. Unable to deal with an emergency, they resorted to a Soviet-style coverup.

Of course it is inherently difficult, during an accident like this, to obtain accurate information early on. Some degree of misinformation and error is bound to arise. But the endless stream of erroneous and often disingenuous statements in the days and weeks after the accident was dismaying. Numerous Russian commentators have rightly pointed out that the behavior of Putin and of many of his subordinates, including his defense minister, Marshal Igor Sergeev, reflected a worrying tendency to value the state's interests over human rights. Surprisingly, though, Putin's high ratings in opinion polls have barely been affected by his callous, slow, and inept response to the crisis.

The public's failure to hold Putin more accountable for his handling of the disaster is especially surprising because of mounting evidence that at least a few lives might have been saved. The initial explosions and subsequent flooding of compartments undoubtedly killed most of the 118 sailors on board either immediately or shortly after the accident. But Norwegian surveys of the interior damage and remotely collected intelligence suggest that scattered air pockets may have been present for at least a few days. If so, it is conceivable that a small number of sailors--perhaps as many as 15 to 20--were still alive during part or all of that first week, when Russian naval rescue crews fumbled around, trying (with inadequate equipment and training) to gain access to the Kursk.

If Putin had accepted Western offers of aid right away, it is certainly plausible that a combination of Norwegian, British, and American forces could have opened the submarine in time to rescue the handful of survivors. After all, it took the Norwegians only a few hours to open the rear escape hatch of the Kursk once they were finally permitted to begin their salvage mission. It would have been costly to bring Western rescue units into the Barents Sea at such short notice, but if even a single person could have been saved, it would have been worth the effort and expense.

Despite the prompt offers of assistance from Western countries, Russian naval officers insisted that they would take care of the situation themselves, and Putin himself initially remained at his vacation resort on the Black Sea. Valuable time was squandered.

Moreover, the erroneous statements by Russian officials greatly hindered the subsequent Western rescue effort. Russian claims that the sea was unusually turbulent and the rescue unusually difficult turned out to be untrue. Moscow's repeated insistence that the rear escape hatch of the Kursk was too badly damaged to be opened also turned out to be false. The officer overseeing Norway's operation, Rear Admiral Einar Skorgen, voiced frustration in recent interviews that "the spurious and distorted information" and "outright lies" from Russian officials "did a disservice to everyone" and "threatened the security of [Norwegian] divers." British rescue personnel expressed similar complaints, adding that "lives may have been lost" on the Kursk "as a result of the Russian government's vacillations, lies, propaganda, and dithering."

## **Implications**

What about the longer-term consequences? Potentially, this incident could have been a turning point in Russian politics, comparable in its impact to the flight of Matthias Rust into Red Square in May 1987. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev used that opportunity to dismiss senior military commanders, including the Soviet defense minister, Marshal Sergei Sokolov, and to allow glasnost (greater openness) to extend into the military's sphere. Until May 1987 the military had been largely immune from all the criticism that was beginning to emerge about other Soviet institutions, but from June 1987 on the army was subject to highly critical scrutiny.

Ideally, Putin would have used the Kursk incident to embark on drastic reforms and reductions of the Russian armed forces, giving life to all the empty talk of "military reform" over the past decade. In particular, he should have immediately fired the senior naval officers responsible for the large-scale exercises in the Barents Sea, beginning with the commander-in-chief, Admiral Vladimir Kuroedov. Those officers obviously knew that they had no rescue equipment to deal with an accident, but they decided to press ahead with the maneuvers anyway. The dismissal of the Navy's top brass would have been an effective signal that the old era of incompetence, negligence, and spurious "reform" would no longer be tolerated and that the era of genuine reform was beginning.

Rather than using this opportunity, however, Putin immediately announced that he would not be dismissing any senior military officers. He reassured Marshal Sergeev, Admiral Kuroedov, and all the other top naval commanders that they would be retained in their posts until a full "investigation" is completed. Unfortunately, we know from experience that such "investigations" frequently start in Russia but are rarely completed. It may well be that no one will ever be held accountable for the Kursk disaster.

Putin's disinclination to turn the crisis into a springboard for change at the top, and his own belated and uncaring response to the tragedy, do not bode well for the future of

Russian military reform. The day before the Kursk sank, the Russian Security Council chaired by Putin had approved sizable cuts--of roughly 350,000--in the armed forces, but constant follow-up will be needed to ensure that these plans amount to more than paper slogans. Despite Marshal Sergeev's announcement on September 8 that the cuts will be fully implemented by 2003, it will take a lot more than reductions alone to prevent the Russian army and navy from continuing to decay.

### **Political Impact**

It is also conceivable that the tragedy will have adverse political repercussions. Throughout the crisis, Putin has encountered torrents of harsh criticism in the Russian press after many months of laudatory coverage. It has obviously been jarring for him to see that the press, which was crucial in his emergence last year as the leading presidential contender and has been unusually deferential to him in its coverage of the ongoing Chechen war, could turn so abruptly and sharply against him. Conceivably, his irritation will inspire him to launch a gradual clampdown on the press, a step adumbrated in the past few weeks by his further use of the tax police and the Federal Security Service to harass disobedient media outlets.

A full-scale attempt to crack down on the media, even if carried out gradually, may not succeed. Indeed, the whole crisis may simply embolden journalists in Russia to persist with and step up their critical scrutiny of Putin's performance. If so, that will be the one positive thing to emerge from the tragedy. But it is also plausible that Putin will resort to his old Soviet instincts, viewing the critics as enemies who must be crushed. In that case, the sinking of the Kursk will be a double tragedy--and a tragedy not only for Russia but for the whole world.

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