

Did a Collision Sink the 'Kursk'?

by Michael Liebig

As of this writing, the reason why the Russian nuclear submarine *Kursk* sank in the Barents Sea on Aug. 12, is not known. The flow of official information from Russia is meager and partly contradictory. The United States, which, according to official sources, had at least two submarines in the area at the time, and which also maintains a comprehensive sonar surveillance in the Barents Sea, initially said nothing, and then claimed that there was evidence of "explosions" in that area of the sea in which the *Kursk* sank. It is apparent that neither the Russian nor the American leadership want to officially say what they know to be fact at this time. The *Kursk* catastrophe is, in any case, considered so important that President Bill Clinton telephoned President Vladimir Putin, and National Security Adviser Sandy Berger spoke with Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov.

A purely technical accident, without outside intervention, is highly improbable as an explanation for the *Kursk* catastrophe: The submarine sank too rapidly, and the observed damage to the vessel's hull is too massive to permit such an explanation. Only two hypotheses thus remain to explain the sudden sinking of the *Kursk*: 1) a violent explosion from within the submarine, or 2) a collision of the submerged *Kursk* with some foreign object.

Russian's Military Leadership: It Was a Collision

While the first hypothesis, that there was an explosion (with the possibility that it was due to sabotage), is the one the Americans offer, it is officially rejected by the Russian leadership. The Russians stated repeatedly that they are assuming a *collision* to be the cause of the loss of the *Kursk*. The commander of the Russian fleet, Adm. Vladimir Kuroyedov, said on Aug. 15, "There is evidence of a large and severe collision." On Aug. 17, Russian Defense Minister Marshal Igor Sergeyev said: "Evidence is accumulating for the version that the incident was caused by a collision with a foreign object."

On behalf of the Pentagon, Adm. Craig Quigley categorically denied that an American ship had been involved in the sinking of the *Kursk*.

Yet, the fact that there have been numerous collisions of American with Russian submarines in the Barents Sea

indicates that the statements of Kuroyedov and Sergeyev are not simply defensive subterfuge. This underwater war of nerves tests the extent to which the naval component of the Russian nuclear armed forces is still capable of carrying out its mission.

One such underwater collision occurred in 1993, in the post-Cold War era. This incident, which fortunately cost no human lives, became publicly known, and it is said President Clinton became angry with the leadership of the U.S. Navy. According to military experts, this was no isolated incident. Several such collisions have occurred, of which the public was never informed. In 1989, the Soviet nuclear submarine *Komsomolets* sank in the north of the Norwegian Sea, caused, according to Western military sources, by a collision with an American submarine in that case, although it was never admitted in public.

The 'War of Nerves' Continues . . .

If the *Kursk* did sink as a consequence of a collision with an American submarine, such a collision, as in the earlier cases, would be the result of a deliberate "war of nerves" between the American and the British hunter submarines, on the one hand, and Russian missile submarines, on the other. The Americans not only "shadow" the Russian submarines; they creep up to them so close that it is a signal to the Russians that, should there be a real conflict, they would have no chance and would be destroyed just outside their own home ports in the North Sea, before they could fire off their nuclear intercontinental missiles.

This is no military game for the sake of tickling nerves: What is at stake is the capability and the credibility of the Russian nuclear forces. Despite its truly immense problems, Russia will remain for the foreseeable future the sole nuclear-strategic rival of the United States. In parallel with the Americans, the Russian nuclear forces form a "strategic triad": 1) land-based intercontinental missiles in bunkered silos; 2) long-range bombers with cruise missiles; and 3) submarine-based long-range missiles. The submarines are the relatively least vulnerable "leg" of the nuclear forces and, thus, represent an assured second-strike capability. The United States, Russia, Britain, and France have such submarine-based nuclear weapons; China and Israel are obtaining that capability.

The nuclear forces of Russia are shrinking in a kind of involuntary disarmament, as a result of the country's economic crisis. It is foreseeable that 60-70% of the land-based nuclear missiles will soon be incapacitated for technical reasons. The Russian long-range bombers—always the weak leg of the nuclear forces—have also suffered attrition in combat capability. That gives the nuclear-strategic submarines a decisive importance for sustaining the strike capability and credibility of the Russian nuclear forces. That President Putin, immediately following his inauguration in May, visited the Russian Northern Fleet to great media fanfare,

demonstrates the importance attributed by the Russian leadership to their nuclear submarines.

The *Kursk* is a nuclear-powered attack submarine of the Antei class (called “Oscar” by NATO), which can be armed with cruise missiles. Its firepower is designed to destroy an aircraft carrier battle group. It can operate as a deep sea hunter-killer sub, or in conjunction with the Russian Navy’s ballistic missile-launching submarines.

In the event of war, the Russian missile submarines must quickly leave their home ports in the North Sea and in the Far East in order to reach their firing positions in the Barents Sea or in the northern Pacific. That is just what the 80-odd American hunter submarines, all of which are nuclear powered, and lurk in the vicinity of the Russian bases, are supposed to prevent.

Last year, the Russian Northern Fleet took part in global naval maneuvers modelled on the “Okean” series of exercises, developed by the Soviet Navy during the previous two decades.

In the 1985 version, for example, the Northern Fleet practiced forming a “barrier” of some 30 submarines between the Norwegian and Barents Seas, as an underwater line of defense against U.S. attack submarines, whose wartime mission would be to penetrate the Barents Sea, and seek out and destroy Russian ballistic missile subs.

The Russian fleet maneuvers this year, during which the *Kursk* catastrophe occurred, were the latest practice of these capabilities, obviously testing a “breakout” of missile submarines into the Barents Sea—under strong cover of surface ships and their own hunter submarines. It may be presumed that the American hunter submarines—as if in a “mirrored” maneuver—were naturally testing their own early thwarting of this breakout of the Russian submarines.

... And Even Escalates

That brings us back to the hypothesis that the *Kursk* catastrophe was the consequence of a collision with an American submarine. In view of the approaching systemic financial and economic crisis of the West, which is no secret to the Russian leadership (see p. 12), there is a grouping in the Anglo-American establishment, which—prophylactically, as it were—would like to teach the Russian leadership a lesson, that the naval component of the Russian nuclear triad is no longer worth very much, and can be neutralized by the American fleet. British military expert John Erickson recently said that he is deeply upset that a “virus of geopolitical chicken games” is spreading through Anglo-American leading circles, with ever less consideration given to the consequences.

An American hunter submarine would surely not ram a Russian submarine intentionally, but the question is, whether the advisories for “shadowing” and “creeping” to the American hunter submarines were intensified, such that a collision could occur.

Russia Accuses British ‘Halo Trust’ of Hand in Chechen War

by Rachel Douglas and Dean Andromidas

Close observers of President Vladimir Putin’s salvoes this Summer against certain of the so-called “oligarchs” of the young Russian business class, could not help but ask, whether he would ever challenge the higher oligarchy, the Anglo-American financial cliques of London and Wall Street. For that reason, the harsh attack issued on Aug. 7 by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) against the Halo Trust, a British non-governmental charitable organization engaged in the removal of land mines, was a turn of potentially great strategic importance. Flying in the face of London’s efforts to curry favor with the Putin regime, ranging from fawning over his economic team to the latest offer of assistance to the sunken submarine *Kursk*, Moscow’s decision to charge a British establishment institution with aiding and training the Chechen guerrillas in their war of secession, came just as Russians were absorbed in the aftermath of a bloody bombing under Pushkin Square in central Moscow. Furthermore, published elaborations of the FSB exposé implicated British Intelligence in bombings in the Russian interior, not only the North Caucasus republic of Chechnya.

The FSB charged that the Halo Trust, which employs former military personnel for clearing land mines in former and current war zones, has been working illegally in Chechnya since 1997, and that Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov provided Halo with an office and security.

FSB spokesman Aleksandr Zdanovich declared: “Halo Trust is supposed to be engaged in humanitarian work, clearing mines. But the road to hell is paved with good intentions. In fact, this organization’s staff and its recruits—it trained more than 100 people—were trained not to clear mines, but mainly to lay minefields, to lay explosives on the roads used by federal troops, as a result repeatedly exploding their charges on the roads, laying their bombs in the forest, killing people, servicemen, and peaceful civilians. . . . Under cover of mine-clearing operations, they [Halo Trust] organized the training of combat engineers, and carried out full-scale topographic surveillance of Chechnya, fixing Chechen villages to the NATO frame of reference.”

The FSB accused one Matthew Middlemis, leader of a 15-man Halo Trust team in Chechnya last November, of being a career British military intelligence officer.