



Part Two: Implications, Parallels and the Sea That Cannot Be Cleared

By Robin Ashby June 2026

The Ghost of Tsushima

There is a particular quality to Russian naval failure. It tends to be comprehensive, unhurried and accompanied by a stubborn official refusal to acknowledge what is happening until the evidence becomes impossible to deny. The Black Sea Fleet's decline since 2022 shares these characteristics with an earlier catastrophe that sent shock waves far beyond the theatre in which it occurred.

In May 1905, at the Battle of Tsushima Strait, the Imperial Japanese Navy destroyed the Russian Baltic Fleet in two days of fighting. The Russians had sent their fleet on a seven-month voyage around the world to relieve the siege of Port Arthur — only to find Port Arthur had already fallen. Of 38 Russian warships, 21 were sunk and six captured. Russian casualties exceeded 10,000. It was the most decisive naval defeat since Trafalgar and the first time in the modern era that a European great power had been comprehensively beaten at sea by a non-European opponent. The shock was profound. Within weeks, the 1905 Revolution had begun. Within a decade, the strains exposed by the war had contributed to the conditions that would produce 1917.

The parallel with the Black Sea Fleet is not precise — parallels rarely are — but the structural resonance is striking enough to be worth drawing. In both cases, Russia possessed a fleet that looked formidable on paper and proved unable to operate freely in its own theatre. In both cases, the opponent was one that Russia had comprehensively underestimated. In both cases, the fleet was unable to protect even its principal bases: Port Arthur fell to Japanese siege; Sevastopol was progressively abandoned under Ukrainian drone and missile attack. In both cases, the Russians attempted to compensate by deploying forces from other theatres — in 1904, the Baltic Fleet's passage to annihilation; in 2022, the cruisers Marshal Ustinov and the

Varyag on their fruitless Mediterranean cruise trying to enter the Black Sea.

The differences matter too. Japan in 1904 was a rising conventional naval power executing a sophisticated combined-arms campaign. Ukraine in 2022 had virtually no conventional navy at all. The Black Sea Fleet was not destroyed at a single battle — it was eroded over four years by a combination of precision missiles, unmanned surface vessels, and latterly unmanned underwater vehicles, each innovation arriving faster than Russian countermeasures. In that sense the Ukrainian achievement is arguably the more remarkable. Tsushima required a fleet. The attrition of the Black Sea Fleet required ingenuity, industrial improvisation, and the willingness to learn faster than the adversary.

The institutional consequences may prove comparable. Tsushima triggered a complete reconstruction of the Imperial Russian Navy, a new officer corps and a thoroughgoing reassessment of doctrine. Whether Russia draws equivalent lessons from the Black Sea — and whether it has the industrial and financial capacity to act on them — is the central question for the fleet's future.

The Drone War: What It Means

The Ukrainian unmanned maritime campaign deserves more than the operational summary given in Part One. It represents a genuine discontinuity in naval warfare — one that the world's principal navies are still working to absorb.

The Magura V5 achieved in the Black Sea what theorists had long predicted but practitioners had struggled to demonstrate: that inexpensive, mass-producible autonomous systems could threaten, disable and sink major warships operated by a conventionally superior force. The cost asymmetry is extraordinary. A Magura V5 costs somewhere between \$250,000 and \$300,000. The Sergei Kotov, which it sank, cost approximately \$60 million. The Ivanovets was worth rather more. The mathematics of attrition run overwhelmingly against the conventional force when it is confronted by a sufficiently capable and numerous drone fleet, and Ukraine demonstrated that the threshold of capability required to achieve this was substantially lower than most analysts had assumed.

Several aspects of the campaign are instructive beyond the headline loss figures. The development cycle was measured in months rather than years. The Magura V5 evolved from early prototypes to combat capability in roughly eighteen months; the subsequent V7 variant,

armed with AIM-9 Sidewinders capable of engaging aircraft, followed within a year of the V5's operational debut. The Sub Sea Baby underwater drone that struck the Kolpino in December 2025 represented a further domain expansion — taking the autonomous attrition campaign below the surface to threaten the one class of vessel that had appeared relatively immune. Each Russian countermeasure — boom defences, helicopter patrols, electronic warfare, the deployment of up to thirty anti-drone helicopters simultaneously — was met by Ukrainian adaptation, usually within weeks.

The action-reaction-counteraction cycle that Navy Lookout has documented in detail is perhaps the most important lesson. It is not simply that drones are effective. It is that a force willing to learn and adapt faster than its opponent, operating with shorter decision cycles and cheaper development pipelines, can sustain operational pressure that a larger, slower-moving institutional adversary cannot easily absorb. Russia's naval procurement and doctrine cycle is measured in years and decades. Ukraine's was measured in weeks.

The implications extend well beyond the Black Sea. USNI Proceedings noted in June 2026 that by autumn 2025 Ukraine had achieved near-complete denial of the Black Sea using unmanned platforms and precision munitions — without a conventional fleet. The United States Navy is now explicitly drawing on Black Sea lessons for its Distributed Maritime Operations concept in the western Pacific. The principle that littoral sea denial is achievable by a technologically capable but conventionally inferior force, provided it can sustain the innovation cycle, is now established doctrine rather than theoretical proposition.

For Russia, the lesson is uncomfortable in a specific way. The Black Sea Fleet was not simply outgunned. It was out-thought. Institutional rigidity, slow adaptation, an inability to counter systems it had not anticipated — these are not problems that more ships or larger budgets straightforwardly solve.

The Waterway Question: A Partial Answer

Part One noted that the Montreux Convention sealed the Black Sea Fleet inside its theatre for the duration of the conflict, preventing reinforcement by major warships. The question of whether Russia could partially compensate through internal waterways deserves an answer, because the answer is: yes, partially, and with significant limitations.

The Volga-Don Canal, opened in 1952, connects the Caspian Sea through the Volga and Don

rivers to the Sea of Azov and thence to the Black Sea. Russia controls it entirely. The Foreign Policy Research Institute assessed that up to three small Caspian Flotilla missile boats equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles were transferred into the Black Sea through this route before the full-scale invasion began. In December 2023, OSINT tracking confirmed that a Karakurt-class corvette — the Tucha — had appeared in the Black Sea having transited from the Zelenodolsk shipyard on the Volga. The same vessel was subsequently tracked returning to the Caspian via the same route in May 2024.

The canal's constraints are decisive, however. Its lock dimensions limit transit to vessels of relatively shallow draught and modest displacement. Corvettes of the Buyan-M and Karakurt classes can make the passage; submarines, frigates, and larger surface combatants cannot. The Improved Kilo boats that represent most of the fleet's remaining strategic strike capability are stranded in the Black Sea for the war's duration. There is no inland waterway route by which they could be evacuated for repair at better-equipped facilities, nor by which replacement submarines could be introduced.

Russia has announced a \$10 billion programme to widen and deepen the canal, with a target completion date of 2030 and reported Chinese industrial involvement. Completion would allow year-round transit by larger vessels, potentially including small frigates. It would not solve the fundamental problem — the major combatants and submarines that have been lost cannot be replaced through the canal even after widening — but it would give Russia a more flexible reinforcement and dispersal option in future. Whether the programme survives competing budget pressures, sanction-induced material shortages, and the general strain of the Ukraine war on Russian industrial capacity is another question. The 2030 date should be treated with scepticism.

The canal also connects to a broader strategic picture. Russia and Iran have been jointly investing in the International North-South Transport Corridor, which runs from the Russian heartland through the Caspian and the Iranian rail network to the Indian Ocean — a sanctions-resistant trade route that uses the same Volga-Caspian waterway system. The military and commercial dimensions of Russian inland waterway investment are inseparable, which may make the canal upgrade more resilient to budget pressure than a purely military programme would be.

Prestige, Mythology and the Sevastopol Complex

The Black Sea Fleet's losses need to be understood not only as operational setbacks but as blows to a particular strand of Russian national mythology. Sevastopol is not simply a naval

base. It is arguably the most freighted place name in Russian military culture after Stalingrad.

The first Siege of Sevastopol, from October 1854 to September 1855, saw Russian defenders hold the city for eleven months against British, French, Ottoman and Sardinian forces before finally yielding. The Black Sea Fleet was scuttled in the harbour to prevent its capture — an act of deliberate self-destruction to deny the enemy a prize that became, in the subsequent mythology, an act of heroic sacrifice. The second Siege of Sevastopol, from October 1941 to July 1942, saw Soviet defenders hold the city for 250 days against German assault before a further evacuation. The city was awarded Hero City status. Its defence is woven into Soviet and Russian identity in ways that go beyond military history into something closer to sacred narrative.

Against this background, the progressive abandonment of Sevastopol as an operational base — the withdrawal of the flagship's successors to Novorossiysk, the dispersal of submarines, the repeated Ukrainian strikes on the naval headquarters itself — carries a symbolic weight that Russian official statements cannot paper over. The fleet was not driven from Sevastopol by a besieging army. It was driven out by a country it had invaded, using systems that cost a fraction of what it had spent on its own defences. The humiliation is specific and pointed.

The dismissal of Fleet Commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov in February 2024 — followed by the appointment and subsequent dismissal of his successor Admiral Sergei Pinchuk within months — suggests an institutional culture of blame-shifting rather than honest failure analysis. The pattern is familiar from 1905, when Tsar Nicholas II's response to Tsushima was to dismiss commanders rather than examine the systemic failures of doctrine, training and procurement that had made the disaster inevitable. A navy that cannot acknowledge what went wrong cannot reliably fix it.

This matters for the future. Russia will almost certainly attempt to reconstitute Black Sea Fleet capability when the conflict ends. The question is whether it will do so by building more of what has already proved vulnerable, or by genuinely absorbing the lessons of the drone campaign. The institutional and cultural pressures point toward the former. The strategic logic demands the latter.

The Mines That Will Outlast the War

There is a dimension of the Black Sea conflict that will persist long after any ceasefire, receiving

rather less attention than it deserves. The sea is now extensively mined by both sides, and the process of clearance will take years — possibly decades — with humanitarian, economic and environmental consequences that extend far beyond Ukraine and Russia.

Russia has deployed hundreds of naval mines since February 2022: floating mines, anchored contact mines, and sea-bottom mines. Some have been deliberately placed in or near humanitarian shipping corridors, including the grain export route through the western Black Sea. Others have broken free from their moorings in stormy weather and drifted. NATO's Maritime Command issued repeated navigational warnings through 2023 and 2024 as drifting mines were detected and neutralised across the northwestern, western and southwestern Black Sea — including in Turkish, Romanian and Bulgarian territorial waters. Ukraine has laid mines of its own, primarily in approaches to Crimean ports.

Both sides are also operating in a sea with a pre-existing mine legacy. The Black Sea retains ordnance from both World Wars: Russian Imperial, Soviet, German, Romanian and Allied mines laid between 1914 and 1944. Post-conflict surveys regularly locate and destroy this material; the current conflict has added substantially to the problem while also disrupting the clearance work already under way.

In January 2024, Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria signed a memorandum of understanding establishing the Black Sea Naval Mine Action Group, which achieved operational status in July 2024. The operation employs minesweeping vessels, helicopters, drones and divers. The United Kingdom, while not a formal member, has been supporting Ukrainian navy demining training. The initiative is significant but its scope is limited — it operates in the western corridor where grain shipping moves, not across the full extent of the minefield, and Russia has not participated.

The post-conflict clearance challenge will be formidable. The Lieber Institute at West Point has identified three broad options: unilateral national clearance by each littoral state in its own waters, a multilateral international operation, or a combination. None is straightforward. Russia's cooperation will be necessary for comprehensive clearance of the northern and eastern Black Sea; obtaining it will be a matter of post-conflict politics rather than technical capability. In the meantime, the mines constrain freedom of navigation for all Black Sea states — Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia — and represent an ongoing risk to civilian shipping and to the grain export route that remains essential to food security in parts of Africa and the Middle East.

The December 2024 oil spill in the Kerch Strait, when two ageing Russian tankers broke up in stormy weather and discharged an estimated 2,400 to 5,000 tonnes of mazut into the sea, illustrated the additional environmental vulnerability of Black Sea waters under wartime conditions. The Russian Ministry of Transport acknowledged it was the first such spillage of mazut in recorded history. The combination of uncleared mines and an ageing shadow fleet operating under wartime pressures represents an ongoing environmental hazard whose consequences will be measured in years.

What Remains and What Comes Next

The Carnegie Endowment's April 2026 assessment concluded that Russia's naval losses in the Black Sea could be estimated at between 25 and 75 percent of capability across key domains — a range that reflects genuine uncertainty about the submarine force's status rather than analytical vagueness. The UK Ministry of Defence characterised the surface fleet as 'functionally inactive' in its strike role as early as March 2024. By mid-2026, the picture is considerably worse.

What Russia retains is a residual force with three meaningful capabilities. The surviving Improved Kilo submarines can still launch Kalibr cruise missiles against Ukrainian targets, provided they can be maintained at operational readiness in conditions of growing technical strain and persistent underwater drone threat. The Bastion-P and Bal coastal missile systems continue to provide genuine anti-access capability in the northern Black Sea — these shore-based assets have proved more resilient than the surface fleet and have not been significantly degraded. And the electronic warfare and air defence networks covering Crimea and the adjacent sea areas remain active, though increasingly pressured.

Against these residual capabilities must be set the structural constraints that are unlikely to resolve for the conflict's duration. The Montreux closure means no major reinforcement is possible. Ukrainian long-range strike systems now reach Novorossiysk routinely, having made Sevastopol untenable for major units. NATO surveillance from Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey provides near-continuous monitoring of fleet movements — the fleet operates in a goldfish bowl. And the Volga-Don Canal, while a genuine reinforcement route for corvette-sized vessels, cannot compensate for the loss of major combatants and submarines.

The longer-term trajectory is toward a smaller, predominantly defensive force structured around submarines, coastal missiles and unmanned systems, operating from dispersed basing under heavy shore-based air defence cover. The amphibious mission is gone, almost certainly permanently given the time required to rebuild both the ships and the naval infantry brigades

that crewed them. The power-projection mission — Syrian logistics, Mediterranean deployments, the implicit threat to Ukraine's southern coastline — is gone for the foreseeable future. What remains is sea denial, missile strike, and the defence of Crimea.

Whether Russia can reconstitute even this reduced force depends on questions that go beyond naval affairs. Defence budget allocations in 2024 and 2025 heavily prioritised ground forces and air defence replenishment. The navy, a long-lead procurement business at the best of times, faces a queue behind more immediately pressing requirements. Western sanctions have disrupted the supply of components for precision guidance systems, marine turbines and electronics. Russian domestic shipbuilding capacity was already stretched before the war; the loss of Ukrainian-sourced components for certain systems has created additional bottlenecks. The financial and industrial constraints on reconstitution are substantial and should not be underestimated.

The Laboratory and Its Lessons

The Black Sea Fleet's decline is, in the end, a story about the future of naval warfare as much as it is about Russia's present difficulties. What Ukraine demonstrated between 2022 and 2026 will be studied in naval colleges for decades.

The core lesson is not that drones beat ships — it is that a force capable of sustained innovation, operating shorter decision cycles than its opponent and willing to accept tactical losses in pursuit of strategic attrition, can neutralise conventional naval superiority in a constrained maritime environment. The Black Sea is an unusually confined theatre, and the lessons do not transfer automatically to open-ocean operations. But the principles — cost asymmetry, iterative development, the vulnerability of large platforms to swarming attacks by cheap autonomous systems, the decisive importance of learning faster than the adversary — will shape naval doctrine across every theatre.

The United States Navy is drawing these lessons explicitly for the western Pacific and for potential operations against Iranian forces in the Gulf. The Royal Navy is watching carefully. China, which has its own extensive unmanned maritime programmes and its own interest in Taiwan Strait operations, is drawing its own conclusions. The Black Sea, for the next generation of naval planners, is what the Spanish Civil War was for air power theorists in the 1930s: a confined, brutal proving ground whose lessons were stark enough to be impossible to ignore.

Russia faces a harder task in drawing lessons from a campaign in which it was the losing side. There are signs of adaptation — the dispersion to Novorossiysk, the boom defences, the helicopter patrols, the evident investment in its own naval drone programmes. But adaptation is not the same as transformation, and transformation is what the Black Sea experience demands. A navy structured around the prestige of large surface combatants, headquartered in a city whose sacred status made intellectual honesty about its vulnerability difficult, commanded by admirals whose instinct was to report upward what was wanted rather than what was true — that navy is poorly configured for the kind of radical institutional rethinking that the evidence demands.

The rhyme is audible across the centuries. Tsushima demanded transformation. It took a Revolution to deliver one.

The Tsar's response was to build new battleships.

ÂÂÂÂ **Note on Sources used by Claude.ai Sonnet 4.5**

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