

The Royal Navy in the Caspian Sea 1918-1920

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(Note: Place names are those in general use at the time. Where applicable present names are given in brackets)

The operations by British naval, army and air forces in support of anti-Bolshevik forces in northern Russia 1918-1919 are fairly well known, much less so are the concurrent operations in southern Russia and the Caspian Sea.

In the aftermath of the March 1917 Russian revolution and the Bolshevik *coup d'état* of the following November the politics of the regions bordering the Caspian Sea were of labyrinthine complexity.

It could be said that the peoples to the east of the sea were divided vertically into four main ethnic groups: Muslim Azerbaijanis and related peoples, then generally (and inaccurately) known as Tartars; Georgians; Armenians; Russians. Politically these were divided horizontally into three main groupings: royalists who hoped for the restoration of Czarist rule; so called Social Revolutionaries who favoured various ill-defined forms of democracy but were united in their determination to be independent of Russia; Bolsheviks loyal to Lenins Moscow regime. Each main political group encompassed many sub-groups. Most factions controlled armies of varying degrees of reliability and effectiveness and there was an intricate and constantly changing pattern of alliances and internecine strife. For a few months there was an unstable multi-ethnic coalition government of the whole region based at Tiflis (Tbilisi) but by mid-1918 this had collapsed and Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia had declared themselves independent sovereign states and all had unstable anti-Bolshevik governments.

In Azerbaijan the Tartars formed the majority of the population overall and were avidly anti-Bolshevik but in the capital city Baku there were large numbers of Armenians and Russians, many of whom were Bolsheviks. By early summer 1918 pro-Bolshevik Armenians and Russians controlled the city and a small surrounding area, making in effect an independent city state which, although small, was important because it controlled the Caspian oil wells and refineries.

To the east of the sea in Transcaspasia (now Turkmenistan) the pattern was similar but there were only two main ethnic groups, Turkomans and Russians. The land bordering the sea was mostly desert but there was a small port, Krasnovodsk (now Turkmenbashi), opposite Baku and from it a railway to the interior of Central Asia and the Afghan border. Both the railway and the port were strategically important and a considerable quantity of raw cotton, an important war material, was awaiting shipment at the port and along the railway. Such government as there was was Bolshevik.

The Moscow Bolsheviks controlled the River Volga and the north coast except an area to the north east where the Ural Cossacks favoured the royalists. Most of what had been the Imperial Navys Caspian Flotilla was under Bolshevik control and based at Astrakhan on the Volga delta about 100 km from the sea.

In Persia (Iran) the writ of the central government did not extend to many areas. The provinces in the Caspian region were in open revolt, some were ruled by local tribal chiefs, others by remaining Russian forces who were mainly Bolshevik. Small British forces were established in some areas, including the western border. In early 1918 they had with difficulty taken control of the small Caspian port of Enzali, close to the Azerbaijan border, from which there was a very rough, tortuous and mountainous road link of some 650 miles to Baghdad, headquarters of the British forces in Mesopotamia.

In the spring and early summer of 1918 the Entente powers could see no prospect of an early end to the war, despite the fact that they had been joined by the United States. In France, making use of divisions freed from the Eastern Front the Germans launched an offensive which almost broke through to the Channel coast, in Palestine Allenbys army had captured Jerusalem but was held up further north; the British in Mesopotamia had captured Baghdad and pushed north but there was now clearly no hope of their planned link up with Russians advancing south from the Caucasus. By the Treaty of Brest Litovsk the Germans had acquired Ukraine and the Crimea and were pushing south towards the great prize of the Baku oil fields. By the same treaty the Turks had regained their eastern provinces but were advancing beyond their old frontiers. To the disgust of his German allies, Enver Pasha, effectively ruler of the Ottoman Empire, had withdrawn troops from other fronts and was pursuing a personal ambition to establish a new Muslim empire among the Turkic peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Seasoned Turkish divisions were advancing towards Baku and were being welcomed by most local Tartars.

British concerns in the region were twofold. The first was the prospect of Germany obtaining Baku oil and the stockpiles of cotton on the opposite shore of the Caspian. The second was that the collapse of Russian power in the Caucasus/Transcaspasia left a gap in the outer defences of British India. The exploitation of this gap by Turko/German armies, as had been considered in 1915/16, was now unlikely but infiltration from a new Turk-dominated Muslim Empire causing disaffection among Indian Muslims was seen as a real possibility. The Entente Allies all wanted to deny the Central Powers access to the oil and cotton and the British particularly wanted to see stable and friendly regimes in the region. Very few troops could be spared, but perhaps, it was thought, small numbers to stiffen local forces and help with their training and organisation might further these aims.

The problem was which of the many sides to back.

At this stage the British, intent on thwarting Envers ambitions in Central Asia, were not averse to treating with Bolsheviks and tried to persuade the Baku leaders to accept military assistance. These prevaricated until in July 1918 they were overthrown and replaced by a Social Revolutionary regime, the Centro-Caspian Dictatorship, another unstable coalition, this time of Russians and the more numerous Armenians, Tartars were excluded. Their army was mainly Armenian and promptly massacred most of the Tartars in the city, causing the survivors to be even stronger supporters of the Turks, who were very close. In the port there were craft from the old Imperial Flotilla: two modern gunboats, *Kars* and *Ardahan*, and some smaller armed vessels, known as the Centro-Caspian Flotilla..

At about the same time, across the Caspian Russian Social Revolutionary railway workers rose against the Bolsheviks and set up a government of sorts based at Krasnovodsk.

The new Centro-Caspian parliament (which still called itself a soviet) voted, far from unanimously, to ask for British military assistance. The prospect was not inviting, particularly in view of the long and tenuous the Line of Communication via Enzali. However, it was the only game in town. A weak infantry brigade group, named Dunsterforce after its commander Brigadier General Dunsterville, was despatched. Its task was to assist in the training and organisation of the Baku defenders and to assist them in defence.

A naval element under Commodore Norris accompanied the force. The task they were given was vague. In general they were to obtain control of the Caspian Sea and merchant shipping therein in order to support the force in Baku and to prevent the Turks from crossing to Krasnovodsk and advancing from there.

The plan was to set up a base at Enzali. This was to include seaplanes. The Royal Air Force had been formed a few months previously but most the men and machines to be deployed were ex-Royal Naval Air Service so for all practical purposes in the Caspian they remained part of the Royal Navy for the duration of the operations.

It was assumed that the Centro-Caspian Flotilla would co-operate. In addition, suitable merchant ships would be chartered, some for logistic support of Baku and others for fitting out with 4-inch guns taken from the Tigris gunboats and dispatched from Bombay by the Royal Indian Marine. The operation was to be under the direction of GHQ Mesopotamia, which in turn was responsible to the government of India.

The build up of the British force in Baku was slow but eventually all arrived, including a naval advance party who set about chartering suitable ships. The following first phase of operations, against the Turks, lasted little more than a month and achieved nothing, so can be described very briefly.

The city was in chaos and the government a collection of mutually hostile committees.

The official commander of the Centro-Caspian flotilla, a cavalry colonel, promised results if suitably bribed but the pro-Bolshevik flotilla soviet actually in charge thought otherwise and refused to give up their ships, to share the use of the naval dockyard or to take part in the defence. Nevertheless, the Royal Navy party did manage to charter some merchant ships with their crews.

On land the situation was worse. There was a state of virtual siege, the city and town were well within range of Turkish artillery. The Armenian troops had understood, or claimed to have understood, that the British would undertake complete responsibility for the defence and made little or no effort to help. British troops took over key positions and held off one Turkish assault but suffered heavy casualties when Armenian units on their flanks disappeared without warning.

Eventually General Dunsterville decided that he was not prepared to waste more British lives defending a regime that would not defend itself and on his own responsibility ordered the force to evacuate and return to Enzali. This they managed to do 15 September, despite efforts by the Centro-Caspian Flotilla to stop them.

The city was then wide open to the Turks, who delayed their entry for two days to leave the Tartars free to take their revenge on the Armenians.

The British Government, having ordered the tune did not like it and shot the pianist Dunsterville was removed from his command.

That might well have been the end of the Royal Navys brief sortie into the Caspian but they remained at Enzali with the few ships they had chartered and their Russian crews. Their task to prevent the Turks from getting across to the eastern shore remained. Some 40 other ships had escaped from Baku and anchored off the port. A start was made on choosing suitable ones and converting them with the very meagre resources available. By the end of October five ships had been armed and ammunition for them was in the Persian mountains on the way to them (by camel!).

However, the facilities at Enzali were insufficient for a base and it was not well placed to prevent a Turkish move into Transcaspasia. The railway workshops at Krasnovodsk on the eastern shore seemed better. The Commodore visited there in *SS Kruger*, a small freighter with some passenger accommodation, the first ship to be armed and destined to be the Royal Navys flagship in the Caspian. At this stage her armament consisted of four field guns lashed to bales of cotton on the forward cargo hatch. The ship was greeted by a brass band and the British officers were lavishly entertained by the local Social Revolutionary government. Clearly

the natives were friendly and the workshops were much better than those at Enzali. The line of communication to Mesopotamia would be even longer and more tenuous but it was decided that this was to be the operating base.

Rapid developments soon caused a change of plan. Within a few weeks all combatants in the World War agreed armistices and peace conferences were convened.

In retrospect and with hindsight, the British would have been well advised to have left the squabbling Caucasian factions to their own devices, but things looked different at the time. All Entente governments now saw Bolshevism as a menace and were, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, supporting anti-Bolshevik forces in the Russian Civil War and at that stage it did seem that these had a good chance of success if only they could resolve their internal differences. Baku oil was still important and Great Britain continued to be concerned about India's metaphorical back doorstep.

The anti-Bolshevik forces were coming to be known collectively as White Russians but their armies were then more usually referred to as Volunteer armies. Entente support varied from direct military intervention, as in north Russia, to the supply of arms (of which there was no shortage in the aftermath of the war) and advice (also in plentiful supply). British involvement in the Caucasus fell between these two extremes. After the armistices the area became much more accessible, Entente fleets moved into the Black Sea, the port of Batumi was available to them and the railway from there to Tiflis and Baku was reasonably reliable. The British 27 Indian Division was despatched to the Caucasus and the authorities in Baku made it known that they would welcome the return of the British.

There was clearly no point in the RN Caspian Flotilla remaining in Krasnovodsk and they returned to Baku, where they arrived 17 November 1918. They found in residence the Centro-Caspian Flotilla, in theory a White Russian formation, and an equally unreliable Volunteer Army unit with whom they were to co-operate.

Once again the aim was to assist and train local forces, this time against the Bolsheviks, and to deter the latter from advancing from the north. The official position of the British Government and its allies was that they were acting in support of the Whites as the legal government of Russia and that the new Caucasian republics remained part of Russia. The ships of the British Caspian Flotilla had been taken up with their crews (mainly Russian, with some Tartars) with only very few RN officers and ratings, the latter manning the armament and the embarked army W/T sets. They were wearing the Russian ensign and expected to integrate the Centro-Caspian flotilla into their force.

At this point it is convenient to consider the Caspian Sea in more detail.

The sea is about 1,000km N-S from the delta of the River Volga to the Persian (Iranian) coast and 250km E-W. Baku lies on the western shore at approximately the mid-point and from there to the mouths of the Volga delta is about 600km. In early 1919 Astrakhan was threatened by advancing Volunteer armies. Roughly half way between Baku the delta close to the western shore lie a cluster of small islands, of which the largest is Chechen Island. For a considerable distance south of the Volga delta river silt has reduced the depth 2-3m or less, depth varies with season and was very badly charted or not charted at all. In winter months the sea freezes over completely as far south as the latitude of Chechen Island.

The flotilla wasted no time and the first four ships were on patrol in the north in early December. They were to have been accompanied by two Centro-Caspian vessels but their crews declined to take part. At the same time one ship went to Guriev in the far north east with supplies and general encouragement for the beleaguered Ural Cossacks, a regular task in the following months.

The Flotilla was soon in action for the first time. Intelligence had been received that the Bolsheviks planned to set up a base at Staro-Terechnaya on the mainland near Chechen Is. On 8 December *the British Zoro-Aster* and *Alla Verdi* were anchored off the island when three similar Bolshevik armed ships appeared escorting three transports and opened fire. The British hurriedly got under way and a brisk fire fight ensued as the Bolshevik ships, despite their advantage in numbers, withdrew. Both sides registered hits, a fire was started in one Bolshevik and *Zoro-Aster* sustained three hits but suffered no casualties. The British expended a considerable amount of ammunition in this skirmish, which was a cause for concern because of the difficulty of obtaining more. However, the expenditure proved to be well worthwhile, the Flotilla had established a moral superiority from the start. The beginnings of the Bolshevik base were found and destroyed by gunfire on 29 Dec. Thereafter patrols were maintained until the north Caspian iced up in mid-January but the Bolsheviks made no further attempt to establish the base.

The Flotilla retired to Baku for the winter, keeping one ship at Pavlovsk to make occasional patrols of the ice edge. The rest were far from idle and used the enforced lie-up to get themselves more organised than had thus far been possible in their hasty deployment and subsequent moves. Improvements were made to the ships and their engines and boilers refitted. The boilers of most were old and in a bad state, not improved by the local practice of using sea water as feed, this contained little salt but was hardly ideal for the purpose, even in ships where the working pressures were between 65 and 110 lbs/sq.in..

Much reorganisation of personnel was also required. British demobilisation at the end of WW1 was not handled well and men in remote stations who had enlisted for Hostilities Only or who were regulars retained beyond their engagements felt, with justification, that others with less service were being released before them and getting the best jobs. Many men of the Caspian Flotilla fell into this category and

had been away from home for years. Replacement drafts were urgently needed and in addition it had been found that a greater proportion of the crews needed to be British. These were first provided from the Mediterranean Fleet - to howls of protest from its commanders, who had similar problems - and later from the UK. Thirty additional junior officers were also found.

At the same time, a proper base was organised in Baku (see below).

Inevitably, much of SNOs time was taken up with politics. The Baku regime, although corrupt and inefficient, welcomed the British presence and ministers were for the most part genuinely anti-Bolshevik but they did not wish to see a return to the pre-revolution situation where the Russians ruled as the colonial power. There was a broad consensus of support for autonomy within a Democratic Russian Federation rather than complete independence. The wearing of the Russian Imperial Ensign by the RN Flotilla was not popular. Bolshevik influence was strong among the Russian working class citizens and the trade unions, which led to frequent strikes. The British were not too much affected by the latter, they could take a strong line because unlike local employers they were able to pay wages when due. They were, however, forced to concede union demands for minimum manning levels and had to carry more Russians than they needed.

A more difficult problem was the Centro-Caspian Flotilla and the Volunteer Army unit. It had long been known that they were unreliable and engaged mainly in racketeering but during the December 1918 operations radio intercepts showed beyond doubt that the ships were in contact with the Bolshevik Flotilla at Astrakhan and were thus very much worse than useless. Obviously, this was a very delicate subject because they were nominally under General Denekin, the White Russian commander-in-chief. Eventually the British Government decided that their forces would have to take more direct charge and in March 1919 the Volunteer Army unit was ordered out of the city and the Centro-Caspian Flotilla forcibly disbanded, the gunboats were immobilised and disarmed and the best of the armed merchant ships incorporated into the RN Flotilla. This, of course, meant that more RN officers and ratings were required. The ships hoisted the white ensign, adopted the prefix HMS, and became truly a RN formation and Commodore Norris hoisted his broad pendant in *SS* (now *HMS*) *Kruger* (an unlikely name for a British warship less than 20 years after the Anglo-Boer War!).

The Flotilla and its support organisation were still growing and would continue to do so until in mid-summer, near its peak strength, it consisted of:

Ships: (all coastal freighters unless otherwise stated)

Kruger - freighter with some passenger accommodation; 5 4-in.; flagship

Windsor Castle (*Lieutenant Smidt* renamed by RN) - 4 4-in; half-leader

Emile Nobel - Oil tanker; 3 6-in, 1 4.7in (the flotilla dreadnought).

Bibiabat - 3 4-in.

Slava - 1 6-in., 1 4-in.

Dublin Castle (*Jupiter* renamed by RN) - 2 6-in.

Ventuir (sometimes known as *Venture*) - 3 4-in.

Asia - 4 4-in.

Zoroaster (usually in reserve as too unreliable for operations) - 2 4-in.

Ala Verdi - Defective boilers, paid off

12 Coastal Motor Boats (CMB) - The first Motor Torpedo Boats; 55ft craft brought by rail for use in the shallow northern Caspian.

Edinburgh Castle (*Soyous* renamed by RN) - CMB carrier; 1 12 pdr.

Sergie - CMB carrier; 1 12pdr, one AA pom-pom

Orlionoch - seaplane carrier; 2 aircraft; 2 4-in.

A.Yusanoff - seaplane carrier (unreliable, in reserve)

2 Stores, water, livestock carriers.

1 Water tanker

1 Oil tanker

Notes:

(1) *Lieut Schmidt*, *Jupiter* and *Orlionoch* were taken over from the Centro-Caspian Flotilla in March 1919.

(2) The 6-in guns were old types without gunshields; some 4-in were old BL type, others more modern semi-automatic.

(3) Between sorties the seaplanes had to be unrigged, hoisted inboard by derrick, rearmed -serviced, hoisted out, rerigged. The process was much limited by weather.

(4) CMBs were hoisted in/out by derrick and also limited by weather.

Aircraft

The Royal Air Force had been formed in April by the merger of the Royal Flying Corps and Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). A detachment was deployed to the Caspian which, as we shall see, grew to a considerable size. Most of its personnel were ex-RNAS and throughout the operations by far the greater proportion of their effort was directed towards working with the Royal Naval Flotilla. The RAF commander, Lieut. Col. F.W. Bowhill had a varied career. He started in the Merchant service and obtained his masters certificate in sail. He then transferred to the Royal Navy and later to the RNAS and qualified as a pilot. He had a distinguished career in WW1, including command of a seaplane carrier in the North Sea. In the RAF he rose to the rank of Air Chief Marshal and held important command appointments, including Commander-in-Chief Coastal Command 1937-41.

Shore Installations:

The shore installations evolved over a period of months, especially after the events of March 1919:

A very old (built Newcastle 1875) passenger paddle steamer, *SS Tula*, was taken over in Krasnovodsk as depot/accommodation ship and transferred to Baku with the base, where it soon proved to be too small for the task. A block of flats was taken over and converted as RN Barracks Baku (its official title) with accommodation for 25 officers and 104 ratings, complete with sick bay, dental surgery and cells(!). Elsewhere in the town were a stores depot/magazine and a base for the CMBs. The RAF set up a seaplane base in a bathing pavilion.

As the main area of operations was in the far north a forward operating base was necessary. This was established at Petrovsk (Makhachkala), just south of the winter ice edge, not far from and at the northern point of 27 Div deployment and conveniently near an anchorage off Chechen Island much used by the ships. The RAF established an airfield on the island from which they eventually operated 40 DH9/DH9A aircraft, a remarkable feat in such a remote place.

In July 1919, at about peak strength, RN personnel in the Caspian totalled 47 officers and 1,063 ratings, plus 307 Russian crews/shore staff in this case Russian meaning locally employed, which included Tartars, Russians, Armenians and one or two locally resident British expatriates.

In mid-April 1919 the north Caspian became ice-free but there were frequent fogs. Patrolling was resumed. The four ships of the Flotilla which were ready moved up to Chechen Island anchorage and remained there for most of the summer using the Petrovsk advanced base, other ships joined as they were completed,. The seaplane and CMB carriers remained in Baku at short notice to join them. The Bolsheviks

also began to sortie as the ice cleared in the Volga. Their destroyers were faster than the makeshift British conversions and also of shallower draft, giving them much more freedom to manoeuvre. They should have been able to regain and retain the initiative but on the occasions when the two sides met, usually at long range, and occasionally exchanged fire the Bolsheviks invariably withdrew and made no attempt to use their advantages.

By 21 April the RAF airfield on Chechen Island was operational. The first air raid on two Bolshevik naval bases in the Volga delta was mounted and these continued in subsequent months when the weather was suitable. They involved a flight of about 300km each way, mostly over the sea, a considerable distance for the aircraft of the time, with little hope of rescue for any aircrew who ditched, as most of the sea was too shallow for the British ships to attempt search and rescue. The air reconnaissance revealed the Bolshevik strength as 6-12 destroyers, six armed merchant ships and numbers of smaller armed craft. They were thought also to have 2-3 submarines.

The biggest and most successful operation by the Flotilla occurred in mid-May. It was discovered that most of the Bolshevik ships had left the delta and moved to the large harbour at Alexandrovsk, on the east side of the sea about 240km roughly due east of Chechen Island, probably because their previous bases were threatened by Volunteer Army advances. The British seaplane and CMB carriers had recently been completed and were summoned. The intention was first to examine the coast in the vicinity of Alexandrovsk, where there were many uncharted shoals and from which all navigation marks had been removed. Aircraft were to examine the harbour and then if the situation was right CMBs would attack. This plan was frustrated by the weather, which alternated between thick fog and periods when it was too rough to operate seaplanes. A Bolshevik convoy of three armed ships and two large barges escorted by a destroyer was encountered. The escort abandoned the barges, which were sunk, and made off. There followed a rather ponderous chase at 9 knots before the fog came down again and the British returned to Chechen. Months later it was discovered from Bolshevik deserters that their fleet was at sea at the time intending to attack the Chechen anchorage but became lost in the fog and returned to harbour, some to the delta but most to Alexandrovsk. The two sides had passed each other unawares during the foggy night.

A very adventurous reconnaissance of Alexandrovsk by a seaplane from Petrovsk 18 May revealed that eight destroyers, five armed ships, 14 armed motorboats and two gunboats were in the harbour (there were, in fact, also 2-3 submarines, a minelayer and two small base/depot ships). Another attack was mounted.

The Caspian Flotilla ships taking part were *Kruger*, *Windsor Castle*, *Emile Nobel*, *Asia*, *Ventuir* and three carriers; *Sergie* and *Windsor Castle* (CMB) and *A. Yusanoff* (seaplanes). They arrived off Alexandrovsk in the early hours of 20 May 1919.

The harbour is roughly V-shaped, six miles long with the mouth facing north. The eastern side was protected by unmarked sand banks.

Weather conditions were marginal but a seaplane flew a bombing and reconnaissance sortie which was unsuccessful in both tasks. A second was attempted but crashed on take off. The carriers were then told to withdraw while the ships endeavoured to find out what was in the harbour and awaited *Slava* and *Bibiabat*, who were on the way from Baku. *Zoro-Aster* had to return to Petrovsk with engine defects.

The next day, 21 May, dawned bright and clear - favourable conditions at last. Commodore Norris decided to close the harbour for a good look. Two or three destroyers were outside the harbour to the north and it was hoped to cut them off but they disappeared at high speed. Other craft at the harbour mouth opened accurate fire without registering hits. Norris decided to be bloody, bold and resolute in the best tradition and led his slow and ramshackle line into the harbour, banking on his enemys customary lack of appetite for battle.

On the approach only *Emile Nobels* 6-in. and *Ventuiers* modern 4-in were within range but these made good practice. Two of the most formidable Bolshevik craft, a barge with two 6-in. or 8-in. guns and a large armed ship near the harbour entrance were set on fire and abandoned, their other ships retired up harbour. During this exchange *Emile Nobel* was hit in the engine room and suffered damage and casualties. The action became confused. The Bolshevik ships still had plenty of firepower and a shore battery joined in. If the British stayed in the outer part of the harbour their targets were out of range of most of their guns, if they closed the range the harbour narrowed and there was very little room to manoeuvre the very unhandy low-powered ships. At 1330, after 75 minutes of action, Norris ordered his ships to haul off out of harbour, *Emile Nobel* had reported that she would be unable to steam for much longer and his own ship had damaged steering gear.

There was now an ideal opportunity to mount a CMB attack but the carriers old and unsuitable W/T sets let them down. Norris was unable to summon them and withdrew to south to find them and to sort out his force. *Emile Nobel* limped back to Petrovsk and *Zoro-Asters* engines finally gave up. After detaching these with escorts only *Kruger*, *Ventuir* and the carriers were left

Next day, 22 May, activity on was confined to bombing Alexandrovsk with *Yusupoffs* one remaining seaplane, which managed five sorties but had not returned when the fog came down again shortly before nightfall. By great good fortune, the Flotilla found the pilot and observer next day cling to the one remaining float of their aircraft and having been in the water more than 24 hours.

After a foggy night, *Kruger* and *Ventuir* were suddenly confronted by two of the largest Bolshevik destroyers south of Alexandrovsk. There was an exchange of fire

but once again the Bolsheviks failed to take advantage of their greatly superior speed and gun range and soon disappeared to the north. It later transpired that all the remaining Bolshevik ships had left Aleksandrovsk after the action and returned to Astrakhan. The two sides had passed

during the fog without sighting each other. The British returned to the scene of the action to find that in their raid they had sunk one Bolshevik destroyer, a small depot ship and smaller craft. As it turned out, encounter on 23 May was the last time the British saw their opponents, who went further up the Volga and yielded command of the Caspian. At the time, of course, the British were not to know this and for their remaining time led a boring existence patrolling from the Chechen anchorage in stiflingly hot weather. Ironically, it was just at this time that the Flotilla received the long awaited reinforcements of officers and ratings, enabling them to be properly manned for their task.

Norris became more and more preoccupied with politics and diplomacy.

As remarked above, British policy was to support the White Russians, whose policy was that they were not authorised to agree the granting of autonomy or independence to any part of the old empire, such matters must wait until after the defeat of the Bolsheviks, which had to be first priority. This was not unreasonable but it was obviously in their interest to have the de facto regional governments to their south on their side and this entailed tact and a conciliatory attitude.

Unfortunately the attitude adopted by Denekin and his staff was quite the reverse, that of an arrogant imperial power. The British tended to be caught in the middle.

The Caspian had always been the least fashionable and the least popular station of the Imperial Russian Navy and remained so. Naval officers on Denekins staff were pressing for assistance in resuscitating the Russian Black Sea Fleet, which, with the British and French fleets present in strength would have been quite pointless and made no contribution to the fight against the Bolsheviks. White staff officers also visited Baku and asked support by the British Flotilla for land operations in the north Caspian region. Unfortunately their requests were quite impracticable in that they involved the ships operating in waters much too shallow for their draughts. Instead the Russians were given guns and assistance in fitting out motor gunboats for use on the coast and rivers. This in turn caused great offence to the Baku authorities, who were eventually persuaded to agree.

In June word was received from the Peace Conference that the area was to become an Italian mandate and that their forces would take over from the British. This plan collapsed after a change of government in Italy. There followed a period of uncertainty, the White Russians were to take over, then they were not, then they might, finally they did. The ships, mostly fitted with newer and more effective armament and all RAF aircraft were handed over with all stores in stages in July-August 1919.

In their last month the British Flotilla did a little tidying up. They assisted Baku troops to expel armed Bolsheviks from offshore islands and also dealt effectively with a Bolshevik gunboat whose crew had set themselves up in the small Persian port of Ashurada (Bandar-e Torkman) in the south east corner of the Caspian and were flouting their Bolshevik principles by engaging in private enterprise piracy.

27 Div gradually withdrew from outlying positions and the last troops left Baku 24 August. The senior officers were dined by the government and all parted on the best of terms. A few days later the last ships steamed to Petrovsk for handing over and on 2 September 1919 the RN Caspian Flotilla ceased to exist. The crews were given an even more warm send off on their long rail journey to the Black Sea.

In retrospect, the British governments political decision to become involved in the Russian Civil War was ill advised but, given a very difficult task, the RN Caspian Flotilla accomplished much with very meagre resources. Their adversaries were superior in numbers, but not in morale - unlike some British units sent to Russia at the time the men of the Flotilla maintained their discipline and morale throughout.

The handing over the ships to Russian crews was not quite the end of the Royal Navys association with the Caspian.

On return to the UK Commodore Norris was almost immediately sent as head of a small naval mission with the embassy in Teheran. The intention was to persuade and assist the Persians to found a North Persian Navy in the Caspian. He remained some months but was able to achieve nothing. The northern provinces were quite out of the control of the Teheran government.

A British military mission remained in Tiflis and at Denekins HQ after the departure of the British forces. In 1921 they reported that their Russian hosts had asked for assistance in maintaining the British guns in what was now their Caspian Flotilla. A party of 29 ratings and a warrant officer was despatched to Baku under the command of a gunnery specialist, Commander B.A. Fraser (later Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fraser of North Cape). They found the weapons in a very bad state, apparently not having been maintained since the British left. They had hardly started work when yet another coup brought the Bolsheviks to power in the city once more. The British were arrested and imprisoned in appalling conditions with members of the ousted regime and common criminals. There followed a hostage crisis such as became all too familiar in the later years of the century. After some weeks they were moved to a disused school, where the conditions improved but they remained in confinement. Eventually, after some six months in captivity and prolonged negotiation with the Georgian government as intermediary they were released and returned to the United Kingdom by warship, almost ignored by the press who, unlike their successors, did not think such a story particularly newsworthy.

*(The **True Glory, The Royal Navy 1914-1939, A Narrative History** by **Max Arthur** includes an account by one of the hostages. This was told to the author many (70+) years later when the narrator was a very old man. They suffered much but in some important aspects his story does not accord with Frasers official report written immediately on his release (in PRO)).*

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