

Opinion

Second guessing Soviet weaponry

by John Howard Oxley

If Mr. Glenn Walton, in his article entitled "The Russians are Coming!!!" (*the dalhousie gazette* 08/02/79, p. 7) thought Vice-Admiral Boyle's comments were provocative, he has at least repaid that gentleman in kind. While the conclusions to which he comes have some merit, some of the statements Mr. Walton uses to support these conclusions are contentious, to say the least.

The first contentious statement is the reference to naval warfare being inefficient, ruinously expensive, and ultimately ineffective, useful mainly to demonstrate 'presence'. This is an oversimplification of recent history, resulting in a statement which cannot be borne out by the facts. It is difficult to establish the exact nature of 'efficiency' in warfare, but if it is quantified in terms of harm done to the enemy as a result of a given expenditure in men and materials, then naval warfare cannot be regarded as inefficient. Comparison of the relative costs and effectiveness of the British army and navy in World War I, or of the RN and RAF in World War II should demonstrate this clearly (see, for example, Anthony Verrier's *The Bomb-*

er Offensive). That naval warfare is ruinously expensive is another misrepresentation of the facts. True, an individual naval unit is very expensive. But when the 'life' of that unit is amortized over its probable peacetime and wartime service span, the cost is not so great. Warships are very 'conspicuous consumers' of the taxpayers' dollars, in a way that army and air force bases are not, even though all three may be equally expensive in the long run. The claim that naval warfare is ultimately ineffective simply will not stand up under even the most cursory examination of history. In fact there have been many examples where naval warfare was ultimately effective (e.g. the Union riverine campaign in the U.S. Civil War) and there have been others where naval warfare was not effective (e.g. Royal Navy activity in the English Civil War). Moreover, while warships have vastly greater functions beyond demonstration ought not to be ignored.

Equally contentious is the statement that "World War II was not, by any stretch of the imagination 'almost won by the Germans' because of the great number of submarines

they had. In fact, the war was almost won by the Germans, in spite of the small number of submarines they had! A careful examination of the Battle of the Atlantic will show how few submarines the Germans had (usually fewer than 50 on station until late 1941). Nor should it be doubted that this battle had war-winning potential for the Germans (even if it was the Soviets who eviscerated the *Wehrmacht* on land) —Churchill himself has testified to that fact. Nor was naval power decisive **only** in the Pacific Theatre. The landings in Normandy would have been impossible without Allied naval superiority. The argument that 'the bomb' ended the war against Japan in and by itself is one which will never be settled—what is certain is (as Mr. Walton admits) that naval warfare had reduced the Japanese to a state of effective impotence. Clearly the historical 'evidence' Mr. Walton uses to justify his claims about the relative unimportance of naval warfare is simply invalid, based as it is on historical error.

One can also have reservations about Mr. Walton's claim that Soviet influence in the Middle East is at an

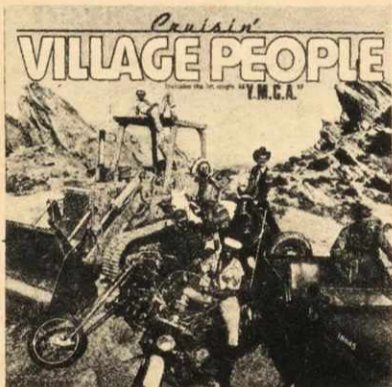
all-time low in the light of Camp David. The recent events in Iran, coupled with the intransigence of the remaining Arab nations and endemic Turkish disaffection with the USA, have given the Soviet Union diplomatic opportunities upon which it will, no doubt, be quick to capitalize. Soviet initiatives in this area will, moreover, certainly not be hindered by the presence of their large and modern fleet.

In his otherwise interesting discussion, Mr. Walton fails to answer two questions. The first being: is Canada (or NATO) menaced by the nature and extent of the Soviet naval build-up? The answer here must be ambiguous, since the current Soviet force structure has multiple capabilities, and there is some doubt about Soviet naval intentions. The very least that can be said is that the augmented Soviet navy will make NATO's mission more difficult in the event of any war short of nuclear Armageddon. The second question relates to the broader issue of Soviet weapons development in general. From available evidence it seems indisputable that the USSR has embarked on an unprecedented build-up in every category of major modern and conventional and nuclear weapons, coupling expansion in numbers with improvements in kind. Moreover, and in-

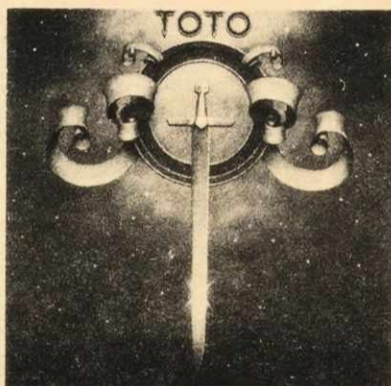
creasing proportion of this weaponry has either dual-purpose, or offensive-specific capabilities, in sharp contrast to the 'defensive' orientation characterizing previous generations of Soviet armaments. So the second question is simple: why such an armaments build-up in the face of increasing NATO disarray and disintegration? Although the concern which the Soviet Union must feel about China has had every reason to deepen in recent weeks, this explanation alone is insufficient to explain the hideously expensive concentration on weapons production and development on the Soviets' part. Again we are faced with the necessity to guess for an answer, but that there is some cause for disquiet, if not alarm, seems beyond dispute.

As Mr. Walton sagely points out, both the present position of the Soviet Union and its future prospects are not such as to inspire Soviet leaders with any unalloyed confidence. It is just this sort of latent insecurity which makes Mr. Walton's ultimate argument less comforting. Nobody has ever conquered the world. But does the Soviet Union understand that this is equally impossible (or undesirable) in the future? On the answer to that question hangs the real menace in current Soviet weapons development.

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