

Michael Fredholm von Essen. *The Hunt for the Storozhevoy: The 1975 Soviet Navy Mutiny in the Baltic*. Havertown, PA: Helion and Company, Europe@War Series, Casemate Publishing, www.casementpublishing.com, 2022. 64 pp., illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, index. US \$29.95, paper; ISBN 978-1-91507-070-8. (E-book available.)

A sclerotic Soviet regime was in its sixth decade in power when a committed Communist attempted to launch internal reform in November 1975. He was naval officer Valery Sablin whose improbable scheme was to seize control of his powerful ship, the destroyer *Storozhevoy* (“Sentry” or “Picket,” a traditional Russian navy destroyer name first used in the Tsarist fleet) and take it 300 nautical miles to Leningrad. There he would call on national television for an uprising to cleanse the regime. Valery Sablin had control of *Storozhevoy* for only thirteen hours before it was surrounded by pursuing ships and aircraft and crew members not loyal to his cause wounded and captured him. *Storozhevoy* returned to Riga from where it had sailed, the crew was interrogated and dispersed to other ships, and the ship joined the Pacific Fleet with a new crew. This dramatic story did not receive public notice in Russia until 1990. Once media restrictions were loosened, there was a torrent of Russian-language articles, videos, and books. Each significant five-year anniversary since has triggered articles and opinion pieces in Russia about the incident. Most see Sablin as a misguided idealist, whose aim was political reform, but some portray him as a traitor, a term which triggers stronger reaction in Russia than in the West. *The Hunt for the Storozhevoy* is the first extensive English-language account since *The Last Sentry* by Young and Braden (2005). The author is Michael Fredholm von Essen, a Swedish academic, historian, and geopolitical analyst who has published several books about Sweden when it was a leading European power. His output has included articles about contemporary Swedish intelligence. This nicely produced, slim volume is one of new series of similar shortish “Europe at War” booklets about Cold War topics being published in the UK by Helion & Company.

Von Essen’s account is straightforward and thorough. He begins by setting *Storozhevoy*, commissioned only two years before the incident, into the context of Soviet defence doctrine. This section includes a succinct summary of the evolution of Soviet defence concepts and of warship types. He very carefully describes the various types of warships and aircraft that pursued *Storozhevoy*, the combat organizations to which they belonged, and where they were based. These descriptions are accompanied by useful data tables and well-chosen photographs. The narrative traces basic details of how Valery Sablin, the specialist officer responsible for political education on board took control of his ship through subterfuge, how he started for Leningrad, and how he was intercepted at sea.

Once the Soviet chain of command became aware that *Storozhevoy* was underway, it scrambled what became a powerful combination of warships and aircraft. According to von Essen, this eventually involved 30 medium-range bombers, 20 fighter bombers, two maritime patrol aircraft and even the venerable cruiser *Sverdlov* and several powerful warships. While several participants contributed to written accounts and documentaries in later years, these were compiled fifteen or more years after the events. Most of the eyewitnesses had been young conscripts, aged 18 to 20 in 1975. There are inconsistencies and exaggerations in these accounts. Von Essen records that naval and frontal aviation records were ordered to be destroyed. Other official records, if they survived the end of the USSR, are not available. *The Hunt for the Storozhevoy* is the first published account in a language other than Swedish to draw directly on contemporary Swedish intelligence. Von Essen uses these reports and was able to discuss them and events with officials who were involved.

One of *The Hunt's* eight chapters is a welcome description of the evolution of Swedish intercept capabilities for Soviet signals and radar transmissions. We learn that going back to 1952, the United States shared intelligence with Sweden on the same basis as Denmark and West Germany under a secret arrangement (6). Valery Sablin's unsuccessful venture happened on a weekend, Saturday evening until Sunday forenoon. Swedish intercept stations recorded unusual levels of Russian radio and radar traffic on the other side of the Baltic, but the analysts who collated this data worked a five-day week. When the recordings were analysed starting on the Monday it was thought that they had registered a series of unusual exercises. The analysts deduced that a fleet of several warships including *Storozhevoy* had "exercised" with multiple aircraft from both naval and frontal squadrons. The early analysis stated that *Storozhevoy* had been "possibly attacked" by frontal aviation, but the notion that an actual attack had occurred seemed so implausible that it was dismissed. Moreover, no signs of other heightened Warsaw Pact military activity had been detected. The narrative suggests that the Swedish analysis was based on intercepted plain text traffic and radar surveillance of airspace. It was not until several days later that a Human Intelligence (HUMINT) source in Latvia, a dockyard worker, reported to his Swedish handler via a contact in a third country that a warship had sustained combat damage. By the end of November 1975, Swedish intelligence had begun to form a picture of what really happened, and a story appeared in a tabloid in January 1976. One of the Swedish intelligence analysts later observed that because the surveillance system failed to provide immediate warning Swedish decision makers and military units would have had no advance warning had *Storozhevoy* reached Swedish waters (46).

Valery Sablin was a Soviet insider. He and his brothers had grown up in a naval family living in naval towns and he would marry the daughter of a naval officer. After training at the most prestigious Russian naval academy, he had served in the fleet for several years. Long interested in Communism, he then volunteered for four years of study at the Military-Political Academy in Moscow. This specialist training qualified him as a political officer. His first ship in this position was the new Project 1135 (NATO type designation KRIVAK) *Storozhevoy*. Dissatisfied by the wide gap between Communist doctrine and Soviet reality, Sablin decided that he would engineer an internal revolution on his own.

He chose to act when his ship was part of a fleet moored off Riga to celebrate the anniversary of the 1917 Revolution, a time when several officers were conveniently absent on leave. After using subterfuge to lock up his commanding officer, Sablin mustered the ship's officers and youthful ship's company separately to explain his project to broadcast a national appeal in Leningrad where the Communist revolution had started. The few officers and a handful of sailors who chose not to support the plan were locked up. Participants later related a feeling of euphoria at being part of a daring venture. *Storozhevoy* had recently completed a long voyage to Cuba and the political officer would have been well known to his listeners because of his regular political indoctrination sessions and a penchant for one-on-one chats.

A dissenting officer managed to make his way to the "duty ship" in the river. His report about the planned exploit sounded so implausible that it took some time until it was reported up the chain of command. Meanwhile, Sablin did not get *Storozhevoy* underway until 0215, almost four hours after the dissenter had made his escape. Within the hour, air stations and naval bases in the area were receiving urgent orders to intercept. One air base was informed that a NATO warship had penetrated Soviet waters. As his ship headed in darkness through the Gulf of Riga toward the open Baltic, Sablin communicated by radio with the admiral commanding the Baltic Fleet and transmitted his demands to broadcast to the nation to Admiral Gorshkov, the C-in-C Soviet Navy.

The first units to intercept *Storozhevoy* were KGB Border Guard cutters inside the entrance to the Gulf of Riga at 0742. Sablin ignored their semaphore instructions to stop, told them that he and his crew remained loyal to the USSR, and headed out the wide Irben Strait at the entrance to the gulf. Shortly afterwards Admiral Gorshkov took command from Moscow of the naval interceptions – minutes later *Storozhevoy* was located by Ilyushin-18 maritime patrol aircraft. They passed his location to Tupolev-16 naval medium bombers that launched from what is now Belarus. Nine planes in flights of three arrived overhead at 0915 as Sablin, now clear of the entrance, was steering northwest on the first leg of a deep-water track around Estonia to Leningrad. For the next

hour, the medium bombers made increasingly low passes over the ship, firing their machine guns into the water next to the ship. Sablin manoeuvred his ship aggressively to avoid presenting a steady target. The medium bombers were armed with single anti-ship missiles. These had to be launched from a range of 110 km after the bomber had acquired the target on radar preparatory to guiding the missile on its flight. All ships in the vicinity of *Storozhevoy* were ordered to clear to a safe distance of 10 km, a standard procedure before an anti-ship missile attack from the air in case of a miss.

Meanwhile, other forces were closing on *Storozhevoy*. About twenty Air Force Frontal Aviation Yakovlev-28 fighter bombers armed with 250kg bombs had taken off from a field near Riga by 1000. The Minister of Defence, Marshal Grechko had ordered them to attack and, if necessary, sink the destroyer. Their aircrews had been trained to strike NATO airbases, not targets at sea. Hampered by patchy visibility and low cloud cover the YAK-28s at 1020 launched bombs ahead of a ship that turned out to be a Soviet freighter that promptly radioed that it was being attacked. Minutes later the YAKS dropped bombs ahead of a small destroyer that had been scrambled from a base further south. The attack stopped when the destroyer fired flares. Bomb fragments landing on board caused damage.

The buzzing by medium bombers and their machine gun volleys, accompanied by the violent evasive manoeuvring of their ship, rattled several crew members who released their commanding officer and seized weapons from the ship's small arms storage. They headed to the bridge where the commanding officer wounded Sablin with a pistol shot. Minutes later at 1032, *Storozhevoy* signalled to ships in the vicinity that the attempted uprising was over. The narrative shows that air and surface units were not communicating seamlessly, nor were the naval and frontal aviation units communicating with each other. At 1016 a Tu-16 medium bomber was ordered to launch an anti-ship missile. It manoeuvred into firing position even as *Storozhevoy's* commanding officer regained control below. Von Essen speculates that this aircraft might have carried a nuclear missile, but concedes authoritative records are not available (40-41). At 1045 the launch aircraft radioed that it had a radar malfunction and ordered the other two aircraft in its flight to attack, but a minute later all medium bombers were ordered to cease attacking. *Storozhevoy* headed back into the Gulf of Riga.

A special commission headed by Admiral Gorshkov interrogated the crew. Its report chastised Sablin as "somebody who has hidden his fervent anti-Sovietism and hostile views for a long time" (43). It also found fault with his hapless commanding officer and three officers in Riga who had been slow to report while evaluating what they had thought was an improbable seizure of control by Sablin. The commanding officer was reduced in rank

(but later promoted) and never served at sea again. He, Sablin, and the three other officers judged wanting in Riga were evicted from the party. Thirteen *Storozhevoy* officers and other crew members who had actively supported Sablin were given the equivalent of dishonourable discharges. Sablin and a 20-year-old conscript who had acted as his assistant were formally tried months later. The sailor spent eight years in Russian jails while Sablin, whose idealism impressed his KGB interrogator, was shot. His family were not informed of his fate for almost a year.

The Soviet regime suppressed information about the incident while denying that it could ever have happened. Eyewitness accounts tell of the repercussions within Soviet Frontal Aviation. Von Essen discusses changes to internal Swedish intelligence reporting procedures and how operating hours for analysts were increased.

The Hunt for the Storozhevoy is illustrated with clearly reproduced photographs and adequate maps. Colour plates of Soviet naval uniforms do not add to the story and are padding. This book is a careful account of an ill-fated attempt to initiate internal political reform in the USSR fifteen years before its collapse. Details about this episode remain obscure because official records are not available or were destroyed. Michael Fredholm von Essen's meticulous use of Swedish intelligence records in addition to Russian-language accounts that appeared years later make this as close to an authoritative record as possible.

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Matthew Willis and Jim Laurier (illustrator). *Royal Navy Torpedo-Bombers vs Axis Warships 1939-45*. Oxford, UK: Osprey Books, www.ospreypublishing.com, 2022. 80 pp., illustrations, maps, chronology, bibliography, index. US \$22.00; CDN \$29.00, paper; ISBN 978-1-47285-248-9.

During the Second World War, torpedo-carrying aircraft achieved remarkable results against shipping and warships as well as targeted strikes directly in naval anchorages. The increased air threat, in turn, evoked a counter response in more and heavier anti-aircraft armament provided onboard ships, to shoot down attacking planes before allowing them to get too close. Land-based maritime aircraft such as Coastal Command's Bristol Beaufort and Beaufighter, and flying boats like the Short Sunderland and Consolidated Catalina, were multi-role aircraft types pressed into offensive air operations over the sea. Only a handful of interwar navies possessed carriers capable of launching and retrieving aircraft on flight decks. Those practising the necessary tactics