



The Tsar's Last Armada: The Epic Journey to the Battle of Tsushima

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On May 14-15, 1905, in the Tsushima Straits near Japan, an entire Russian fleet was annihilated, its ships sunk, scattered, or captured by the Japanese. In the deciding battle of the Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese lost only three destroyers but the Russians lost twenty-two ships and thousands of sailors. It was the first modern naval battle, employing all the new technology of destruction. The old imperial navy was woefully unprepared. The defeat at Tsushima was the last and greatest of many indignities suffered by the Russian fleet, which had traveled halfway around the world to reach the battle, dogged every mile by bad luck and misadventure. Their legendary admiral, dubbed "Mad Dog," led them on an extraordinary eighteen-thousand-mile journey from the Baltic Sea, around Europe, Africa, and Asia, to the Sea of Japan. They were burdened by the Tsar's incompetent leadership and the old, slow ships that he insisted be included to bulk up the fleet. Moreover, they were under constant fear of attack, and there were no friendly ports to supply coal, food, and fresh water. The level of self-sufficiency attained by this navy was not seen again until the Second World War. The battle of Tsushima is among the top five naval battles in history, equal in scope and drama to those of Lepanto, Trafalgar, Jutland, and Midway, yet despite its importance it has been long neglected in the West. With a novelist's eye and a historian's authority, Constantine Pleshakov tells of the Russian squadron's long, difficult journey and fast, horrible defeat.

The Tsar's Last Armada: The Epic Journey to the Battle of Tsushima Details

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From Reader Review The Tsar's Last Armada: The Epic Journey to the Battle of Tsushima for online ebook

Christopher Carbone says

A really drab, dreary and excuse-filled book into the floundering Russian Empire's embarrassing Navy, up to its defeat at the battle of Tsushima. The book is doubly bad for all the excuses the author uses for Russian Admiral, Zinovy Rozhdestvensky, who - even with the author's desperate apologist leanings- comes across as incompetent, bumbling and utterly out of his depth.

The book does only one thing well- and even that is only in passing -and that is describing the ascendancy of the Japanese Navy. Overall, I would avoid this book.

Scott says

Constantine Pleshakov details the causes of the failures of the Imperial Russian Navy at the turn of the 20th century and does so very well. I was appalled at the lack of forethought that Czar Nicholas II put into his tactical decisions. To send an entire fleet of substandard warships with mostly untrained and undisciplined crews halfway around the world to recapture a derelict port from a superior enemy is madness! Admiral Rozhdestvensky did his absolute best to carry out his campaign but the Imperial Japanese Navy proved to be too much as he was sent home in disgrace. This epic tactical failure explains in part why the Russian people demanded a new form of government. This book was well written and I highly recommend it.

Juniper Shore says

It's really hard to find any in-depth histories of the Russo-Japanese War, although that may be my problem, since I don't read either Russian or Japanese. Still, this is a war that more Americans should know about: it marked the first time in centuries that an east Asian nation defeated a major European power; it began the rise of Japan and the fall of Tsarist Russia; the United States played a significant role in ending it, serving notice to the world that America was a rising power in its own right.

The book is well-written and captivating. You have to feel for the hapless crews of the Russian expeditionary force, (view spoiler). Pleshakov has some harsh words for the Tsar's government, and he seems to imply the country got what it deserved at the Battle of Tsushima.

The author's note explains that he could not use Japanese sources during his research, which is unfortunate, since I think we would benefit from seeing the climax from the other side. Still, this is by far the best introduction to the war that I've ever seen.

'Aussie Rick' says

Constantine Pleshakov's new book; *The Tsar's Last Armada: The Epic Voyage to the Battle of Tsushima*, is a

compelling account of the voyage undertaken by a Russian Fleet half way around the world which ended in its total annihilation at the hands of the Japanese during the Battle of Tsushima. The book concentrates more on the actual events leading up to the decision to send the Russian fleet on this journey, the voyage itself and the personalities involved. Some previous reviews have made mention of the lack of detail on the actual battle itself, however the book's titles gives you a fair idea of the content and I think it was a story told well, full of interest and drama.

In the introduction the author makes it very clear that the story is told from a Western viewpoint:

"The Russian and British archives that I have used allow one to tell the story of Tsushima with some hope of being objective and complete, yet, I know that my research is deficient. I do not read Japanese, and without Japanese archival evidence it is not possible to write anything truly comprehensive about the war. So this is the story of Tsushima told from a Western perspective, as it was seen through Russian, British, French, and German eyes - nothing more, but also, hopefully, nothing less."

Overall I found the story interesting and although I too would have liked more on the Battle of Tsushima there was enough to complete the story. The book has filled me with an urge to learn more of this decisive engagement and I will look around for another book to complete my education. The narrative was well presented and held my interest throughout the journey. Towards the end of the book I felt quite sorry for Vice-Admiral Rozhdestvensky who appeared to have done the best he could under most trying circumstances.

This is decent account and I think accomplishes what the author set out to do, to tell the story "of the Russian squadron's long, difficult journey and fast, horrible defeat." One complaint that could be leveled at the author would be the standard of the maps provided. I am sure anyone who enjoys stories of man's determination and perseverance against adversity will enjoy this book. However you will need to look further for a more comprehensive account of the Battle of Tsushima.

Billy says

The story of the epic voyage of the Russian Baltic Fleet to its disastrous fate at the Battle of Tsushima. The author is a native Russian with access to Russian and British archives, but not Japanese ones. As such, the story is exclusively told from the viewpoint of the European powers involved in the Russo-Japanese War.

The book is well-written and a fast read, though sometimes the language is bit non-idiomatic both for English and naval parlance (i.e., referring to junior naval enlisted as "privates" vice "seamen").

This book is not a battle history of Tsushima. There are no maneuver maps of the battle. Even the maps of the voyage from the Baltic to the Korea Straits are very sketchy. A major weakness. Also, at no point does he tell you the capabilities of either fleets: the displacement of the Mikasa, what caliber guns the Suvorov carried, the range of the torpedoes on the Japanese boats, etc. In fact, very few of the Japanese ships in the battle are even mentioned by name.

The author does delve heavily into the personalities of the Russian fleet and political apparatus with guest appearances from the royal families of England and Germany, which makes for interesting if not salacious reading.

An enjoyable but flawed read meant for the layman not the naval historian.

Darryl Updegrove says

Very interesting story leading up to a short but decisive battle.

Rick Eng says

Excellent recount of the events leading up to a significant battle in naval history and a major disaster for Russia. What was most striking was the sense of doom that permeated the Tsar's officers and sailors, most notably the man selected to shepherd the imperial fleet 18,000 miles from the Baltic to the Pacific, Admiral Rozehestvensky. I sensed parallels between him and Duke of Medina Sidonia, the man King Philip II of Spain chose to lead the armada to its infamous defeat. An intelligent and thoughtful leader, the Duke like the Russian admiral understood the challenges and impracticality of the plans that inspired their monarchs however fueled by incompetent courtiers. With Tsushima, Rozehestvensky should be credited for holding together his motley fleet through hostile waters and unforgiving climates. Part of the tragedy is the battle had begun around 2:00pm and before nightfall, most of the Russian battleships were at the bottom of the straights. My only criticism of the book is with the illustrations. No where do we see the battleships involved, not even Admiral Togo's flagship, the Mikasa.

Alex says

A solid and thoughtful chronicle of one of the strangest and most depressing episodes in naval history. When Japan wounded, blockaded, and eventually destroyed Russia's Pacific fleet, the Tsar hatched the bizarre plan to send the Baltic fleet on an 18,000 mile voyage for a rematch with the victorious Japanese. Hampered by politics, diplomacy, ancient ships, untrained crews, and an insane mission, Admiral Zinovy Rozhestvensky kept his fleet together under nearly impossible conditions, only to be slaughtered by superior Japanese forces upon arriving in East Asia. It's the Odyssey of the Dour and Damned.

Only people who are already interested in military or perhaps nautical history will want to read this book, but it illuminates an important and really weird episode that is largely overlooked from the years before World War I and the Russian Revolution.

Daniel says

A story of the quixotic attack by the Russian navy in 1904 against the Japanese fleet, by sailing halfway around the world from The North Sea all the way around Africa to the coast of Korea and the Sea of Japan, where it was spectacularly destroyed by the Japanese fleet and Admiral Togo.

It started out as a rescue mission for the Russian Port Arthur on the western shores of Korea, then when that fell before they got there, a race to Vladivostok and ending at the Russian fleet's destruction at Tsushima Straits.

My problem with the book was 3/4 of it were about the herculean task of getting there and the last quarter was on the battle and the aftermath. It also tended to make excuse after excuse for why the Russian navy did so poorly. The author had access to the Russian and British archives on the subject but did not access the Japanese archives at all so half of the story was left untold.

This is however the only book I have been able to find on this particular subject and with that as it is, I would recommend it as an interesting read for anyone who likes naval history.

Greg Schroeder says

Constantine Pleshakov's book is subtitled "The Epic Voyage to the Battle of Tsushima" and is truly a book of the 18,000+ nautical mile journey of the main Russian fleet under Admiral Rozhdestvensky from the Baltic to its fateful meeting with Admiral Togo and the Japanese fleet.

Pleshakov concentrates on the personalities of Rozhdestvensky and his subordinates as well as the top members of the Russian government. He hints that if the leaders in St. Petersburg had allowed Rozhdestvensky to do what he wished the outcome may have been different.

Far from the classical story of ships who left Russia piled high with coal and sailing urgently around the world to plunge unprepared into a hopeless battle, Pleshakov tells of long delays and lost opportunities, of bungled intelligence, and of political weakness and indecision. He also seems to share Rozhdestvensky's view that the reinforcements he was forced to wait for actually weakened the squadron instead of strengthening it and that the level of talent in the upper naval officers of the Tsar's navy was minimal with very few competent leaders of rank captain or above.

There is also a fair handling of the wide class distinctions and the resulting political unrest in Russia as a whole, in the navy in general, and the "last armada" particularly. Pleshakov discusses this discrepancy in each situation the fleet found itself in, from forming to its ultimate destruction and the aftermath for the survivors. In the end even Rozhdestvensky comes off wanting.

I found the book interesting and found it debunked, as noted above, some long-held misconceptions. It pays scant attention to the battle itself; if you want a battle history you do need to go elsewhere. It is a good stand-alone historical story; one needs no previous knowledge of the Russo-Japanese War, Tsushima, or the period to get the full impact of the book.

It is also inexpensive. Copies are available on Biblio for as little as \$3.97 including shipping.

Jim Harstad says

A great piece of history; of course this from an old navy guy. I enjoyed this book immensely.

Steve says

This book purports to be a history of one of history's most tragic odysseys, the 18,000 mile voyage of the Russian Baltic Fleet from St. Petersburg to its near total destruction at the Battle of Tsushima on May 14, 1905. Tsushima was one of the most lopsided victories in naval history, and decisive in that it helped force the Russians to throw in the towel in their war against Japan although had the war gone on much longer, the Russians might have actually prevailed. But with Russia facing revolution at home and with Japan near the end of her resources, a quick peace was signed, and in consequence of which, the mediator, American

President Theodore Roosevelt won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Unfortunately, this book is at best highly uneven in terms of history and all too often flat out wrong. I am not sure who the editor was, but he or she completely fell down on the job. I am sure had the Naval Institute Press reviewed this book, they would have ironed out these mistakes. Let me focus on just two.

First of all, Pleshakov consistently mislabels the Russian destroyers as "torpedo boats". Russian Admiral Z. P. Rozhdestvensky possessed no "torpedo boats" in his squadron, although the Japanese had dozens. Torpedo boats then and later did not possess the range or endurance for long range operations such as the voyage from the Baltic to the Pacific. Where this error probably comes from is the fact that the term "destroyer" is itself a contraction of the original title for this ship class: "torpedo-boat destroyers". Destroyers came into being as vessels smaller than battleships or cruisers which were nonetheless (somewhat) larger than torpedo boats and which had the speed and stamina to accompany the battle fleet and protect the bigger ships from attacks by torpedo boats. Somewhat confusingly, destroyers also sported a torpedo armament and could themselves be used in torpedo boat fashion - threatening larger battleships and cruisers with torpedo attacks. This is a galling mistake that happens again and again and erodes confidence in Pleshakov's understanding of naval matters and the degree to which somebody checked this book for errors.

In another error, Pleshakov claims that Admiral Nebogatov, who surrendered three Russian battleships the day after Tsushima, died in 1934 when he in fact died a dozen years earlier in 1922.

Further, while Pleshakov tries hard to fill out the character of commanding admiral Zinovy Rozhdestvensky, in the end I find little in this book to contest other accounts of Rozhdestvensky being little more than a naval martinet who tried to rule with intimidation and terror and failed on all counts. Although it is undoubtedly true that Rozhdestvensky was ill served by his country on numerous counts, diplomacy, intelligence, and overall military command, Rozhdestvensky's methods did little to actually promote discipline or increase effectiveness. In this, his quite open affair with a woman nurse on the hospital ship OREL (if true) was not likely to improve discipline. Further, in the critical day of the battle, not unlike Japanese admiral Kurita 39 years later at the Battle of Samar, Rozhdestvensky made the critical error of being caught out in the wrong formation and unable to reform in time to fight the enemy.

What is most compelling about this book, and it has the ring of truth even though I am not sure if it is or not, is Pleshakov's claims regarding the shambolic nature of the Russian overseas spy network and the claim that provocateurs were planting stories for the Russians to hear about Japanese torpedo boats lying in wait to ambush the Baltic Fleet as soon as it passed Denmark and entered the North Sea, stories that, according to Pleshakov helped spark Russian paranoia which led to the tragic Dogger Bank incident, where Rozhdestvensky's ships fired on British fishing trawlers who they thought to be attacking Japanese torpedo boats. That Rozhdestvensky or anyone could seriously consider it feasible for the Japanese, on short notice, to have a squadron of torpedo boats ready 18,000 miles from Japan to attack the Russians is beyond ludicrous. That Rozhdestvensky gave the order to fire is to me further proof of his incompetence as a naval commander. Thus, no matter how hard Pleshakov tries to redeem Rozhdestvensky, and even Pleshakov seems to give up on this about halfway through the book, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Rozhdestvensky had much to do with the debacle of Tsushima, but he had plenty of help in the Russian high command.

What Pleshakov has done is to produce a book that reads extremely well, despite the fact that his first language is Russian, not English. In terms of non-native language use, Pleshakov's vocabulary contains numerous infelicities, I got extremely tired, for instance, of his aforementioned misuse of "torpedo boat" as well as the redundant and all too frequently used compound "artillery guns". Generally, the accepted terms are: just "guns", or maybe "naval guns", or very rarely, "naval artillery". Further, in many cases he is talking

not about the smaller close defense guns mounted on a ship but its "main battery" of "large-caliber guns".

Yet, despite these awkward labels, I found that the book flowed very well and that all too many writers whose native language is English could pay heed to Pleshakov's style which is very good. He kept the story moving the entire time and yet was never at any point overly rushed. I am not sure how much is true, but I plan to retain this book for its prose style alone. This makes this book rather unusual because usually books with dubious facts have execrable writing as well, and even a good many books with solid facts are horribly written. This book is excellently written but is also perhaps heavy on the blarney. All I can say is, enjoy but "caveat emptor"!

Robert says

In this well written and concise book, one the greatest voyages of all time and its fateful conclusion is told. In the battle of Tsushima, the heart of the Imperial Russian Navy's Baltic Fleet was destroyed by another great navy of the time, that of the Empire of Japan. This is no military history per se. While the battle is relayed, the book is focused on the extremely long voyage from the Baltic all the way around Africa, through the Indies, and finally to the straights between Korea and Japan where the battle took place. This is the central focus. What the sailors, officers, and people involved with the Russian fleet experienced.

Its a great book and read very well. I recommend it.

Gary Brecht says

Here we have an excellent follow-up for military history buffs who wish to delve deeper into aspects of the Russo-Japanese War. Pleshakov narrates the harrowing and frustrating journey of the Tsar's 3rd Pacific Fleet. Under the command of "Mad Dog" Zinovy Petrovitch Rozhdestvensky, the Russian armada sets out from the Baltic, circumnavigates the African continent, and waits for several excruciating weeks in Madagascar while his adversary, Admiral Togo repairs his fleet at home. Frustrated by his own admiralty for insisting that the fleet await the arrival of reinforcements (mostly older vessels and yachts of the Romanovs), and hounded by the British navy (allies of the Japanese), Rozhdestvensky demonstrates steadfast loyalty and determination. He knows the Japanese navy has superior strength and he's aware they have had far more combat experience than his own seamen, and yet he doggedly forges ahead. Finally the climactic battle occurs in May of 1905 in the Tsushima Strait in the Sea of Japan. It is an utter defeat for the brave and determined admiral of the Russian armada. Only three of thirty-eight Russian warships make it to Vladivostok. Rozhdestvenk's flagship, the Suvarov is sunk, but not before he is rescued by one of his torpedo boats.

This story is told in a straightforward and entertaining manner. Almost more interesting than the details of the battle are the personalities of the combatants, the spies and the Russian nobility. Afterward I wanted to read more by this author.

Kevin says

For the Russian military enthusiast. I can't stress this enough. Constantine Pleshakov's logistics-filled tome is great for facts and stats and a timeline stretched out in quasi-narrative form, but not so much for story. The Tsar's Last Armada: The Epic Journey to the Battle of Tsushima is the title of the book. However, it *really* is about Zinovy Petrovich Rozhestvensky, an admiral of the Imperial Russian Navy. This is his story and I had to grasp onto his thread throughout the 300+ pages to invest myself at all. I find the inclusion of "Tsar" in the title to be misleading/misplaced.

I do, however, see some sort of fiction rewrite contained within these pages... *Mad Dog and the Sea?*
Rozhestvensky's Revenge? Nothin' a Little Vodka & Meat Can't Solve!?

If you were so inspired by this book, please feel free to use any of the aforementioned titles free of charge.
Pozhalusta in advance.
