

Russian Roulette

On the eve of publishing a new book on Royal Navy and Russian Navy relations, former Naval Attaché and defence consultant **David Fields** talks to **Fergus Byrne** about why dialogue with Russia matters now more than ever.

In the 1995 film *Crimson Tide*, the late Gene Hackman gave one of his most powerful performances. He played the captain of a nuclear submarine who comes close to authorizing a nuclear strike on Russia. When challenged by his executive officer about taking the decision to instigate the launch of missiles, he points out that his job is to ‘preserve’ democracy, not to ‘practice’ it. At the end of the film, the closing text highlights the fact that the only person in the United States with the authority to launch a nuclear strike is its Commander in Chief—currently Donald Trump, the President who recently accused Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky of “gambling with a third world war.”

Whilst we can hope that Trump’s autocratic ambitions don’t lead the world to such a dangerous and potentially nuclear precipice, a new book by Bridport-based David Fields highlights another danger: that posed by not having people with a sophisticated understanding of Russia, its defence strategy, and national ambitions or meaningful dialogue with the Russians.

In a book, co-authored with Robert Avery, *The Royal and Russian Navies: Cooperation, Competition and Confrontation*, David, a retired Royal Naval Attaché to Moscow, pulls together the story of how the two navies of UK and Russia, currently confronting each other following the latter’s actions in Ukraine, built dialogue post-Cold War. An experience that could offer a blueprint toward avoiding further escalation of conflict and a re-engagement of military dialogue with Russia. ‘While rightly we are focusing on the threat that Russia presents and the need to defend against it, we also need to be mindful of the importance of dialogue,’ David says.

Illustrating the path to what he believes is a dangerous breakdown in communication, he tells me about a meeting he had with Captain First Rank

Konstantin Gulnev in St Petersburg. It was just after the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, and David had come to break the news that the UK would be cutting off all military-to-military cooperation and dialogue with Russia.

Describing him as a quiet man with a great sense of humour, David says Gulnev at first didn’t believe him and carried on discussing details of an upcoming Royal Navy ship visit. On learning that the news was not a joke, Gulnev’s reaction was bewilderment. This small piece of land, he said, ‘has always been Russian, don’t worry about it.’ From his perspective, this surely wasn’t a reason to break off a dialogue between the two countries that had been mutually beneficial for more than twenty years.

‘Eighteen months later,’ said David, ‘I met with a somewhat more depressed Gulnev again and explained that the Euro Atlantic alliance and Russia were now on opposite sides of the room, shouting at each other, but not listening. Misunderstandings, miscalculations and escalation of risk were getting higher and higher, and I told him that one day, if we’re not careful, Russians and the British are going to end up killing each other.’ They both agreed that they didn’t want that to happen. ‘But given the UK’s military support to Ukraine since 2022, this has, albeit indirectly, come true,’ says David.

Whatever way it’s presented, the UK and its allies, including—for the moment—the US, are in a proxy war with Russia over Ukraine, and for over ten years, vital dialogue between the UK and Russia has been non-existent.

David suggests that this is a ‘grave mistake’. The book details a period of time when cooperation and dialogue between the Royal Navy and, at first, the Soviet Navy, then the Russian Federation Navy, helped develop a bond that nurtured a growing understanding of how Russia viewed the world and,

more importantly, how it saw its position in a rapidly changing world structure. It was a period of time when shared challenges and mutual respect helped to create a strong link at a working level between the two countries.

Russia's culture, whether we like it or not, is born from a position of vulnerability, explained David. Whether it was Mongols, Napoleon, the (first) Crimean War, Hitler, or the Cold War, it has always felt the need to be on a defensive footing to protect itself and its natural resources over a vast area. It has also always had an inherent fear of NATO expansion. And while NATO states that "no treaty signed by NATO Allies and Russia ever included provisions that NATO cannot take on new members", the expansion of NATO is one element of the narrative that Vladimir Putin cites to defend the 'aggressive defensiveness' Russia has used to annex Crimea and later invade Ukraine.

David says this is part of the Russian psyche that has developed after years of defending their borders, along with their growing belief that they have always been ignored and not taken seriously on the world stage, especially after the end of the Cold War. 'This shaped the Russian mindset,' says David. 'It also shapes their foreign policy and their paranoia. If you go on feeding their paranoia, they will eventually lash out.' He likens the invasion of Ukraine to Russia feeling the need to throw the first punch as part of a defensive strategy.

He also suggests that coexistence with Russia is something we may all have to come to terms with when the war with Ukraine is eventually resolved, and that might entail working with an 'indicted war criminal.' He says we are firmly in Ukraine's corner supporting them against this vicious assault by Russia, but somehow, we've got to come back from this, or at the very least in a post Ukraine conflict world, we don't want the relationship to be worse than it needs to be. 'Russia is not going away.'

He knows that some of his observations will make for uncomfortable reading. 'Knowing and understanding your enemy or adversary, however, is not to defend how they behave. The word understanding is too often interpreted as being sympathetic to a country's particular strategic culture and views. In Russia's case, this is translated as being an apologist for Putin and his invasion of Ukraine. It is not. What it is, is having an understanding of how the leadership of an enemy views the world and how that influences its policy decisions and actions.'

A former Commanding Officer of the frigate HMS *Westminster*, David Fields describes his navy career as a 'normal trajectory' from gunnery officer, navigator, warfare officer, then second in command until commanding his own ship. He qualified as a Russian interpreter in 1990 and was posted to Moscow in 1997–1999 as the Assistant Naval Attaché. Following work on the Iraq team in 2003/4 and work with NATO, as well as working for the First Sea Lord, he returned to Russia as the Naval Attaché in 2013–2015, covering the start of the Ukraine crisis in 2014. From 2016, he worked in the Ministry of Defence (MoD), assisting in the development of the MoD's Russia policy before retiring in 2017. Throughout the period covered by the book, he and Robert Avery were heavily involved in the cooperation programme between the two navies through dozens of meetings, confidence-building discussions, exercises and reciprocal ship visits. *The Royal and Russian Navies: Cooperation, Competition and Confrontation* gives a detailed account of these interactions with fascinating glimpses that reveal the character of the Russian naval leadership.

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Russian formality was one of the first hurdles to overcome, explained David. 'However, once you've cracked through the granite composure, the Russian is actually a very warm, hospitable, generous person, who's very interested, actually, in you. They have a great sense of humour, very similar to that of the British, a bit self-deprecating, but smart.'

That particular 'granite composure' was often broken down with the help of vodka. 'We could have filled the book ten times over with relentless anecdotes about Olympic vodka bouts in ships, board rooms and meetings with the Russians, in practically everything that we did with them', he says. 'Vodka is the currency of business; it is how you get things done. They appreciate human contact. A Russian naval officer once said to us, "I never trust a man until I've got drunk with him."'

But David's experience over those years and his time as a defence consultant put him in good standing



to face some harsh realities. Realities that European leaders are struggling to deal with, especially when it appears that relying on help from the US is becoming less and less secure. ‘Total defeat of Russia is unlikely,’ he points out, ‘and focusing on Putin’s demise misses the point that we are a long way apart from Russia in our world view.’ A history of defending their borders has allowed Vladimir Putin to create acceptance of a militarised society. His ruthless suppression of any kind of competition, be it political opponents or others that challenge the State, has meant conscription and spending on defence are accepted without much opposition.

‘They have had 25 years of establishing a political system which can outlive Putin’

This is not like the end of the Cold War. ‘We’ll be effectively coming out of a hot war, so it’s going to be really difficult to get over this after Ukraine,’ David says. ‘Especially after we’ve seen Russian brutality and violence on a scale that is truly horrific. But we have to understand that sanctions are not going to bring Russia to its knees. And as distasteful and unpleasant as it is, we’re going to have to try and do business with them in the same way that we do business with China and Saudi Arabia and other nations with whom we don’t share common values.’

David explains that there is often an assumption that after Putin dies ‘everything will be hunky dory.’ But he’s not so convinced. ‘They have had 25 years of establishing a political system which can outlive Putin. And the people that are being groomed for future leadership have all come up through that system. The opposition is not unified, it’s not united. And the propaganda of “the West are out to get us, and everyone hates us” plays quite well into the Russian audience. So, he’s not as unpopular as some people would like to think.’

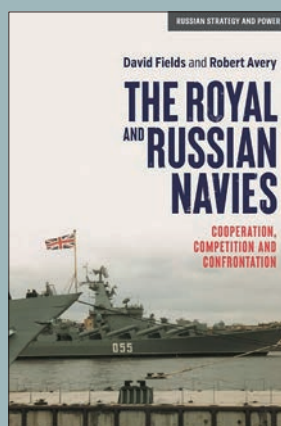
In determining a route back to dialogue, one immediate action could be to re-establish military Attache posts in London and Moscow, following diplomatic expulsions in May 2024. ‘This is the first time since 1941 that there has been no military representation in either capital—that can’t be right,’ David says. Whilst revitalizing communication between the two navies could be challenging, creating channels through retired but well-connected contacts may also be a way forward.

‘The relationship was deepest between the two navies, for all sorts of reasons, not least historical’ he says. ‘Admiral Samuel Greig from Scotland

commanded Catherine the Great’s Imperial Navy and over half of the officers serving in that navy were British.’ But all branches of the armed forces, including arms control teams and the UK-run Russian Officer Resettlement Programme, were involved in some sort of dialogue and cooperation with the Russian armed forces from 1990 to 2014. ‘There were huge numbers of people interacting with the Russian military in the post-Soviet era, and in March 2014 the UK was due to sign a Military Technical Cooperation Agreement with Russia. Instead Putin annexed Crimea.’

Unlike *Crimson Tide*, where a breakdown in communication was rectified and disaster averted, this isn’t Hollywood. Resolving this rupture in communication will require painstaking rebuilding of relationships that will be exceptionally challenging but not impossible.

Launch Event



David Fields will be at a launch event for *The Royal and Russian Navies: Cooperation, Competition and Confrontation* at Mercato Italiano, unit 3b, Dreadnought Trading Estate, Bridport DT6 5BU on Wednesday, June 4th at 6pm.

There will be a short presentation and a Q&A session.

Whilst the book gives a fascinating insight into past and potential methods of interaction and dialogue with Russia, David will be very open to other questions.

The event is free to attend but spaces are limited and booking is necessary at: <https://mercatoitaliano.uk/events> or telephone 01308 459274.