

# Aug. 12-23: World Was on Verge of War

by Edward Spannaus

**Saturday, August 12:** As part of Russian naval exercises being conducted by the Northern Fleet in the Barents Sea, the Russian nuclear submarine *Kursk* was to launch a cruise missile, and then to identify specific vessels and hit the main target with a torpedo. The commander reported having fulfilled the first task, and was expected to report having fulfilled the second task by 1800 hours (Moscow time). When he fails to do so, and does not respond to orders communicated from the North Fleet Command, the Fleet Command alerts, and then deploys, search and rescue forces.

Meanwhile, at least two explosions are detected by Western sources in the Barents Sea, and Russian hydroacoustical instruments detect three powerful explosions.

**Sunday, August 13:** At 0300 hours, Defense Minister Igor Sergeev gets his first report from the Central Command Post. Sergeev reports to President Vladimir Putin at 0700 hours that the *Kursk* had failed to establish communication.

At 1840 hours, the location of the *Kursk* is detected, with a second object at its side, which is comparable in size to the *Kursk*. Rescue efforts begin amidst high seas. Buoys are also sighted, of the type ejected in the case of a submarine accident.

For the first 48 hours after the sinking of the *Kursk*, the world is on the verge of nuclear war. Russian officials spend the first two days after the sinking of the *Kursk*, determining whether this is an act of war by the United States and/or NATO, or an accident. This involves top-level secret discussions in Russian and U.S. military channels, and then between Presidents Putin and Clinton. This is reported both by sources in Russia, as cited below, and confirmed by well-informed U.S. intelligence sources.

**Monday, August 14:** The first Russian announcement to the public of the loss of the *Kursk* is released. Russian Navy Commander Adm. Vladimir Kuroyedov says it is likely that the *Kursk* collided with another vessel, perhaps a foreign vessel spying on it.

The last knocking sounds by surviving crew members is heard from the *Kursk*.

U.S. National Security Adviser Sandy Berger speaks to his counterpart, Sergei Ivanov, asking if there is any assistance that the United States could provide, according to official U.S. statements.

**Tuesday, August 15:** The first official offers of assistance

are received, according to President Putin. NATO sources say that a group of Russian military officers went to NATO headquarters in Brussels to discuss assistance. Russian sources say that a Russian Navy delegation was also in the United States.

An official Pentagon spokesman says that there are no U.S. subs involved in the incident, and that the U.S. cannot say whether it was an explosion or a collision. U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen sends a note to Russian Defense Minister Sergeev offering U.S. assistance.

**Wednesday, August 16:** Putin meets with former Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov and other members of the Academy of Sciences, at his office in Sochi. Russian TV coverage of Putin's remarks on the Russian state's need for science and technology shows Primakov standing beside the President.

Clinton has 25-minute conversation with Putin. According to an official White House statement, Clinton renews the U.S. offer of assistance; they also discuss other matters, according to the White House.

**Thursday, August 17:** *Krasnaya Zvezda* (*Red Star*, the official Russian Defense Ministry daily) cites Defense Minister Sergeev's reference of "irrefutable evidence" of a collision with some foreign object, and presents various elaborations of such a scenario. It notes that the fact that the *Kursk*'s periscope was raised, making it likely that the *Kursk* struck the bottom during a crash dive from at or near the surface.

Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov, heading up an official investigatory commission, confirms that his team now believes that the *Kursk* had collided with a heavy unidentified object.

CIA Director George Tenet begins a visit to Moscow, described as pre-planned.

**Friday, August 18:** Putin says that a "collision with a large object remains the main version explaining the cause of the accident."

Secretary of Defense Cohen says he received a response from Sergeev on Thursday, asking that the United States work through NATO channels, which Cohen says the United States is happy to do.

Viktor Ilyukhin, member and former head of the State Duma (lower House of Parliament) Security Committee, says that a high-ranking delegation of the Russian Navy has gone to Washington, "which suggests that they are there to try to discuss the question of a collision of our submarine with a NATO submarine."

*Segodnya* reports that the *Kursk* collided with a U.S. submarine. *Segodnya* says that the U.S. submarine was overheard by the Russian military calling for permission to dock in a Norwegian port, where it proceeded at reduced speed; that Moscow and Washington could have agreed secretly not to reveal the incident; and that the United States admitted that two of its submarines had been in the same zone, although it firmly denied that any U.S. vessel had been in a collision.

**Saturday, August 19:** Russian Vice Adm. Mikhail Motsak says that a British submarine may have collided with the *Kursk*. “We do not exclude the possibility of a collision with a foreign submarine which was on an intelligence mission. . . . Three submarines were undertaking maneuvers and one could have been a British submarine, because the site of the accident is in an area where Britain usually carries out intelligence operations.”

The British Defense Ministry denies that the *Kursk* may have collided with a British submarine. “There were no British submarines in the area at the time of the accident,” a spokesman says. An Agence France Presse wire reports that the “claim by Russian Vice Adm. Mikhail Motsak that a British spying operation might have been to blame for the Barents Sea tragedy sparked a diplomatic row late Saturday, just as a British rescue team was arriving at the disaster scene.”

Northern Fleet spokesman Vladimir Navrotsky says that foreign subs are always present when Russia holds exercises in neutral waters, and they practice some of their own maneuvers.

Former Black Sea Fleet Commander Adm. Eduard Baltin reports on a computer simulation of a possible collision, based on the type of damage sustained by the *Kursk*, saying that it was most likely with a foreign vessel.

*Segodnya* now asks, “Did the *Kursk* collide with a British submarine?” Citing sources in the Northern Fleet command, the paper reports: “*Segodnya*’s version, that the *Kursk* was sunk as a result of colliding with a foreign submarine, received some confirmation on Friday. Our source in the Northern Fleet staff reports that the nationality of the culprit in the tragedy has also been established—it was a British submarine.” *Segodnya* also cites RTR television reports on the foreign distress buoys as indirect confirmation, asserting that green-striped buoys are the colors of Her Majesty’s Navy. “According to the information of our source in the Northern Fleet staff, the British sub lay on the seabed for a day after the collision,” made repairs, and made way for Norway.

*Segodnya* adds: “The Russian side also has information, that London (at least initially) was inclined to cover up what had happened and even to point the finger at Washington, the latter being already under suspicion for unlimited submarine expansion. Moreover, American subs were shadowing the Northern Fleet exercises, as the Americans themselves acknowledge. The British were the first to offer assistance to Russia. Indeed, their rescue equipment is built closer to Russian standards, than the equipment of others. At the same time, *Segodnya* has information that Russian special services presume that the British intended to use the presence of their specialists at the scene of the accident, to destroy the evidence, that there had been a collision with precisely a British submarine.” This evidence could have been fragments of plating from the damaged sub, as well as the emergency buoys.



Vice Adm. A. Pobozhy of Russia, at a meeting on Aug. 17 between NATO military officers and members of the Russian Naval Staff to discuss the recovery of the *Kursk* from the Barents Sea.

In an accompanying article about CIA Director Tenet’s presence in Moscow, *Segodnya* writes: “In light of the latest leaks, that the *Kursk* may have collided with a British vessel and London attempted to hide the evidence and blame Washington, Tenet now has a chance to get the situation under control.”

John Helmer, the Moscow correspondent for the *Journal of Commerce* and the Singapore *Straits Times* circulates an article, entitled “Russian Sub Drama Looked Like War at the Start,” in advance of publication, saying that for first 48 hours after the disappearance of the *Kursk*, Russia officials had “to decide whether to go to war with the United States and NATO,” or whether to cooperate in a peaceful rescue effort.

**Sunday, August 20:** Deputy Prime Minister Klebanov says that Russia has asked Washington and London to share their information on the *Kursk* accident.

**Monday, August 21:** Defense Minister Sergeyev provides the most complete official description of the events around the sinking of the *Kursk*, in an interview with Vremya ORT television. Sergeyev describes the sequence of events around the disappearance, and later discovery of the sunken *Kursk*, along with the discovery of a second object on the sea bottom about the same size as the *Kursk* (see events described for Aug. 12-13).

Interfax and Tass report that a section of railing from a British submarine conning tower was found 1,100 feet from the *Kursk*; the British Ministry of Defense denies that it came from a British sub.

Russian Northern Fleet Commander Adm. Vyacheslav Popov confirms that the *Kursk* is completely flooded, and all crew members are dead.

**Tuesday, August 22:** *Segodnya* publishes “The Dossier of the *Kursk* Murderer,” giving as “one of the possible versions” of the shipwreck, that the *Kursk* collided with a “foreign nuclear multi-purpose submarine” while it was at a depth of 25 meters, and was rising close to the surface to carry out

a torpedo attack. The force of the collision was registered by Norwegian seismologists. The *Kursk* lost power, and with the flooding of its forward compartments, fell rapidly to the bottom, causing catastrophic destruction and a second explosion.

John Helmer article on the near-outbreak of war between Russia, and the United States and NATO, cited above, is published in the Singapore *Straits Times*.

The Internet news-site Pravda.ru publishes an article, "World War III Could Have Begun on Saturday," reporting that the *Kursk* incident "nearly led to the outbreak of full-scale combat—a third world war." The dispatch says: "For several days, the world hung by a thread, and one false political move could have led to an exchange of nuclear strikes." *Pravda* says that an agreement was reached to resolve the matter peacefully, in discussions between President Putin and U.S. President Clinton.

**Wednesday, August 23:** President Putin addresses the Russian nation, taking personal responsibility for the tragedy, and saying that the tragedy will unite people, rather than divide them, and that he will *not* accept the letters of resignation that were offered by the Defense leadership. "Our country has survived a lot. Our country has surmounted other catastrophes. The events we are going through today are very painful, but I am absolutely convinced that events of this kind do not divide society, but unite it," he says.

"Those who are in the front ranks of the sailors' defenders, they have turned out to be those people who in their time promoted the breakdown of the army, navy, and the state," Putin says.

"I am with the army, the fleet, and the people, together we will restore the army, the fleet, and the state," he says. "I don't like talk that the dignity of the state sank with the *Kursk*. . . . Our country has lived through far more serious catastrophes. We have survived them."

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## Documentation

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### A 'Pearl Harbor' Reaction

#### **Putin: 'Rebuild The Army, Navy, and State'**

**Russian President Vladimir Putin** was interviewed by RTR-TV on Aug. 23 (translation from Russian website *Gazeta.ru*).

No words are enough, it's difficult to find them and I want to wail. At last night's meeting [with the families of the *Kursk*'s crew], one of those present said, "It was only recently that you took up the post, just over 100 days ago, but you took that cross upon yourself and now you must



*Russian President Vladimir Putin*

bear it." That person was right because, despite the fact that I've been at the post in the Kremlin for just over 100 days, I feel absolutely responsible and feel I am guilty for this tragedy.

I feel bitter that over the last few days some have been attempting to use this disaster, what's more in a very unscrupulous way, to puff up their political gills, in order to gain political capital or sort out the interests of some groups. It's exactly those people who are the first to say they are the defenders of the sailors, but it turns out that they are the ones who over a long period of time have caused the breakdown of the army and the state. Some of them have already raised a million. Better they should sell their villas on the Mediterranean in France and Spain. But then they would have to explain why all that property is registered in the names of commercial companies, and we would ask where that money came from. But God will judge them. . . .

The day before yesterday, the Minister of Defense Igor Sergeyev and yesterday the Chief Commander of the Navy [Vladimir Kuroyedov] and the Commander of the Northern Fleet [Vyacheslav Popov] offered their resignations. However, their resignations won't be accepted and will not be accepted until there is a full understanding of what happened, why it happened, and whether anybody is to blame—really to blame—or, if it was just a coincidence of tragic circumstances, a tragedy. There will be no hasty and unfounded punishments, under the influence of emotional outbursts. . . .

I shall stand with the Army, I shall stand with the Navy,