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Russian Klondikers in and out of the Cold War



In the Scottish Highlands during the 1980s, if you lived in a coastal area, you became used to the sight of these enormous Soviet rust buckets appearing in local ports to pilfer our fish. I was not from a fishing family, and I felt as if I had typhoid just by looking at them.

They were nicknamed Klondikers after the American gold rush, and every rust bucket contained a fully-functioning fish processing unit.

For the locals, the Klondikers were helpful because they didn't have enough equipment to process a full day's haul. For the boat owners in Russia, the conversion of raw fish to food in pre-sushi days meant the holy grail of hard currency.

Even in the early 1980s, Westerners could sense that the Soviet system had already collapsed. But there was a major backlash in the mid-1990s when a 10,000-tonne Klondiker vessel ran aground on the Shetland Islands, which provoked vociferous objections from the ecological lobby given the pollution it created.

The boat - The Kaliningrad - registered Pionersk - turned out to be riddled with defects, apart from the Scottish Coastguard having to rescue the crew, which was stranded in freezing gales near the Shetland coast.

As recently as 2023, frustrated Scandinavian oceanographers joined forces and compiled a thorough report presenting evidence of a fleet of Russian ships - sometimes disguised as research vessels rather than fishing boats - aiming at gathering information to disrupt Western activities in the North Sea.

The main objective is an early shoo-in in the event of another war.

Yes, comrade!

My father, who had learned Russian in the British Army and then taught it at a local school, spent a lot of time with the Klondikers, in tandem with the local police force.

He regularly had to pitch up at the boats to interpret for the police for a myriad of Klondiker transgressions, either due to violent fistfights in the streets or a fatal punch-up with a fellow Klondiker, which meant prison. There was an incidence of a sailor falling into fatally dangerous machinery on board.

Dad had no worries about sharing his stories of dealing with the Klondikers, regardless of the fact that any such encounters were technically subject to the UK Official Secrets Act.

He recounted how he once had to be winched onto a ship because there had been some Klondiker fisticuffs in the mean streets of Ullapool, which got ugly, and the police needed an interpreter.

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The Scottish policeman told the captain he needed to escort the accused Russian to Glasgow as it was a serious crime. The captain refused, and started to scream that he had no right to interfere. The police held them to a standoff; they were in Scottish waters and therefore under its jurisdiction. Lock jam.

The policeman started to contradict him, at which point the captain turned on the ship's engine and started driving this massive bulk of steel out of the harbour for as long as he needed to escape into international waters.

Satisfied, the captain persisted in refusing to bow to the demands of the policeman and instead told Dad to inform him he was going to call the Russian Embassy in London.

Dad said he was sitting some way across the table from the captain and his telephone, but the volume of the instructions the Embassy was delivering was fortissimo. It was framed along the lines of, yes, comrade, and as near a 3-point turn back to shore, you can make with

a giant floating fortress.

The most memorable incident from my Klondiker compendium was in the late 1980s, known as the Dogger Bank incident in the North Sea. It involved a part of the fleet of the Russian Navy that mistook some British travellers for a contingent of Japanese torpedo boats and started firing at them.

Unfortunately, 2 men were killed and many others injured. The Klondikers left port the next day and never returned.

Nothing has changed. Not even today. That's how the Russians do it. Since forever. And always.