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Roiling the Baltic Waters



By Owen Matthews and Anna Nemtsova, **Newsweek International**

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In June 1947, Capt.-Lt. Konstantin Tershkov of the Soviet Navy had a serious problem on his hands. He'd been ordered to dump 34,000 metric tons of captured Nazi chemical weapons into the deepest part of the Baltic Sea by the end of the summer.

Since most Soviet merchant and military ships in the Baltic were laden with loot from defeated Germany, Tershkov commanded only two small freighters rented from the British and two Soviet Navy trawlers, plus a crew of German civilians press-ganged into duty. "At this rate the job will take us 10 months," he wrote in his diary, frustrated by the distance to his appointed dumping ground in the Gotland Basin, between Sweden and Latvia.

Instead, the resourceful Tershkov suggested a closer alternative: a patch of 100-meter-deep water just off the tiny island of Kristanso, east of the Danish island of Bornholm. By December, Tershkov's task was completed.

Almost 60 years later, his choice of a dumping ground is turning out to be a fateful one. Last September, Russia and Germany signed a deal to build a \$5 billion gas pipeline running 1,200 kilometers under the Baltic from Vyborg near St. Petersburg to Greifswald on Germany's northeastern coast.

The pipeline's projected route passes close to two of Tershkov's dumps, in the Gotland and Bornholm basins. Environmentalists in Russia and the Baltic states fear that construction could disturb the submerged and rusting shells and poison the sea.

"It is very dangerous to build the pipeline in the Baltic," warns Alexei Yablokov of the Russian Center for Ecology Policy. "The sea bottom is entirely covered with bombs. We should, at the very least, first make a map of where they are."

The Baltic is a minefield in other ways, too. The question of getting energy supplies from east to west is becoming increasingly urgent and complex in Europe. Russia's Gazprom, which owns 51 percent of the Baltic pipeline, urgently wants a direct link to its biggest customer, Germany, to avoid having to pay transit fees to middleman countries like Ukraine.

In 2013, when the double Baltic pipeline is expected to reach its estimated capacity of 52 billion cubic meters, it will supply more than half of Germany's gas needs. Yet that's triggered old German fears of Moscow's domination, especially after the recent shutdown of the land pipeline from Russia over a pricing squabble with Ukraine. Are the Russians going to turn off our gas if we get out of line? demanded a recent headline in Berlin's B.Z. daily.

Members of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats have called for Germany to keep its nuclear power plants going, to avoid overdependence on Russia. That triggered a row with their Social Democratic coalition partners, whose former leader Gerhard Schroder recently accepted the chairmanship of the Northern European Pipeline consortium at a reported 1 million euros-a-year salary. (Ironically Ukraine, whose government lost a vote of no-confidence in Parliament last week after striking a compromise deal with Moscow over gas pricing, has also called for greater self-reliance through nuclear power.)

Schroder will have a tough PR job on his hands convincing Europeans not just that the pipeline makes geopolitical sense, but that it's safe. The Soviets, as Tershkov describes in his diaries, simply dumped thousands of chemical shells into the sea, which makes locating them a nightmare. Worse, aviation bombs had a habit of floating back to the surface. "We had to puncture them with machine gun fire from the trawlers," wrote Tershkov. Some buoyant shells continued to wash up on the shores of Sweden into the 1950s.

Even after more than half a century on the seabed the shells' contents--mostly mustard gas and lewisite (both blister agents), as well as the nerve gas tabun--may still be deadly. Mustard gas can damage DNA, causes cancer and survives for at least five years on the ocean floor before dissolving. If seawater seeps into the rusting shells, it can break down the nerve gas in six weeks, but in that time the deadly gas kills everything it touches. As a result, all fishing boats in the Baltic are required to carry decontamination equipment to counter nerve agents.

Twice, in 1969 and 1985, Danish fishing crews were hospitalized after mustard-gas shells turned up in fishing nets. The hazard of leaking shells probably will last "tens to hundreds of years," writes Czech scientist Jiri Matousek in a recent study of the Baltic.

Baltic states complain that their two giant neighbors to the east and west are ignoring their safety. "Nobody asked our opinion even once," complains Lithuanian Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas. "Everything was done behind our backs."

Last year the then Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski described the project as

"environmentally dangerous" and called for a second gas pipeline to be built overland, through Polish territory, instead.

Politicians in Estonia, including former Prime Minister Juhan Parts, have invoked a 1982 U.N. convention on sea rights and advocated extending the tiny nation's territorial waters to prevent the pipeline's progress. That's unlikely to happen because it would require the cooperation of neighboring Finland, which supports the pipeline--largely because it gets most of its gas from Russia.

Russia dismisses the objections of the Baltic states and Poland as Russophobia, and an attempt to get a piece of the action. "We are a Baltic nation, too--we have as much interest as anyone else in preserving its ecology," says Gazprom spokesman Sergei Kuprianov. He also insists that Gazprom and its pipeline consortium partners Eon and BASF will undertake all necessary tests before going ahead. The gas-price spat earlier this month "demonstrated to everybody why the pipeline is necessary," says pro-Kremlin political analyst Gleb Pavlovsky. "Lithuania and Poland hate the idea, but since they couldn't find any economic reasons to object, they made up a more exotic one: chemical poison in the Baltic."

Energy-hungry Europe probably doesn't have the luxury of refusing the Baltic pipeline--especially since by the time its first section comes online in 2010, North Sea oil and gas stocks will have dwindled away. Even Germany's Greens prefer gas to the prospect of nuclear power. Europe will just have to factor the prospect of disturbing Hitler's still-deadly poisons into the price of energy.

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