

The Somali Navy from 1965 to the 1980s

A research note¹

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Abstract:

Naval advising and assistance is an understudied field, in comparison to military advising and assistance on land. The author is only aware of three states whose navies have had to be rebuilt from nothing since 1999: East Timor, Iraq, and the varying efforts in Somalia. Advisory and assistance efforts of this type are helped by accurate data on the history that shapes and motivates new navies' personnel. Yet, as regards Somalia, there is virtually no authoritative discussion of the history of the Navy. The Navy had its origins as a civilian port management body in the 1950s; grew under Soviet tutelage after its first vessels were transferred in February 1965; and received considerable Soviet advice and support. But it was severed from its Soviet training and support after the Soviets had to choose sides during the Ogaden War between Ethiopia and Somalia. That split appears to have led to a severe decline in operational readiness during the 1980s. In 1987 U.S. intelligence reporting, now declassified, shows only two operational fighting vessels, of a total of 18 ships, only making short patrols from one of the Navy's three bases. After the collapse of the Somali state, some vessels fled to Aden, and possibly Mombasa. In the twenty-first century, international attention was roused by piracy off the Somali coast. Efforts to build new naval police forces, or a new Navy, in southern Somalia have faced constant challenges.

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Naval Advising and Assistance

Since the terrorist attacks of September 2001, interest in military advisory and assistance has grown exponentially. The U.S. necessity to rebuild armies in Afghanistan and Iraq, (Robinson, 2018) as well as elsewhere, including advisory activities in the Philippines, Syria, and Yemen, as well as other interventions under the UN banner in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, and South Sudan, have kept developed-world assistance to other armies under the spotlight. Whole sets of military jargon have been created and reshaped, (Robinson and Matissek, 2021) keeping pace with the wider evolution of what was ‘security sector reform,’ but then became ‘security and justice development’ (Denney and Domingo, 2014) and is now more commonly referred to as ‘security and justice programming’ or simply ‘security and justice.’ (Van Veen, 2016)

Due to their function of applying state-endorsed military force on land, armies have attracted the lion’s share of the renewed attention to military advising and assistance. (Stoker, 2010; Stoker and Westermann, 2018; Stoker and McMaster, 2017) They have much more political importance, generally, than navies or air forces. There have been fifteen to twenty armies almost totally rebuilt following peace agreements since 1972, (Licklider, 2014; Robinson, 2012; 2018) but barely two or three either of navies or air forces in the same rough set of circumstances. As regards air forces, Afghanistan’s air force and the revitalized Iraqi Air Force have received most of the attention. The necessity to rebuild navies from scratch has received little or no attention, barring several Iraq-related articles in specialist journals such as *Jane’s Navy International*, though periodic articles on Western assistance to developing-world navies do appear. (Koch, 2005, p. 17; Willett, 2017) The three states where substantial efforts have been made to rebuild naval forces almost from scratch since 2000 include Iraq, East Timor, after the Indonesians withdrew,³ and Somalia (Dodd, 2019).

Iraq, attracting great amounts of attention from major Western interveners like the U.S. and UK, was an outlier in terms of naval assistance. Most efforts have been focused on much smaller, poorer countries, such as in West Africa, where the Gulf of Guinea shades into Nigeria’s oil fields, and East Africa. The shipping lanes around the Horn of Africa flow through several choke points, and vessels passing Aden bound for southern Africa routinely travelled south off the Somali coast for hundreds of years. The disintegration of the Somali state in the late 1980s and up to January 1991 changed that. In the following decade, Somalis started to go to sea to hijack those vessels, and the presence or absence of a Somali Navy or Coast Guard quickly became an issue. When container shipping companies, such as Maersk Line, could not send ships safely down that coast, costs rose; the impact was quickly felt. (Ejdus, 2017, p. 472.)

While there is a growing literature on how, when, and under what circumstances Somali land forces might be recreated, there is vanishingly nothing on either air or naval forces. Exceptions include a brief reference in this author’s summary of the Somali Armed Forces in

³ From 2003 the Navy had an authorized strength of about 60, with two ex-Portuguese *Albatroz* class patrol boats, assisted by a post-patrol-boat command Portuguese Navy officer.



2016, and the *Somali Security and Public Expenditure Review* (SJPER), whose final version was made public in January 2017. But neither of these works went beyond a brief sketch on the history of the Navy. It is vitally necessary to have a good understanding of key historical points in order to know ‘where the bodies are buried,’ when attempting to assist or rebuild an armed force. Not to do so may curtail or cripple assistance programmes. In addition, the history of the Somali Navy is as worth recording and analysing as any other longstanding Somali institution or phenomenon.

Beginnings

So where does the Somali Navy’s story start? What are the key facets? Somalia gained independence on 1 July 1960 and the two trusteeships, British in the north and Italian in the south, merged five days later. The SJPER makes a confusing reference to the navy being active before independence in 1960. (UN-World Bank, 2017, p. 37) Some key early facts about how the Somali Navy actually evolved can be drawn from translating a ‘Goobjoog News’ article of 2018. (Gurbiye, 2018) It appears that after 1950, when Italy returned to administer the south after being granted a Trusteeship, some kind of civilian port management grouping was established. So the Navy does trace its history to before 1965, but it was not actually a *Navy* to begin with. A British military intelligence report of October 1962 mentions an air wing, but nothing about naval forces; the grouping was clearly under civilian administrative control at the time. (SRNA, 1962) Nevertheless, despite its civilian status, the grouping supported Somali forces during clashes with Ethiopia in 1964, being moved to Dolow to transport supplies.

Ahead of actual Soviet assistance, the Soviet Navy had begun to make port calls to Somalia as early as 1962. On September 14, 1962, the *Sverdlov*-class gun cruiser *Ordzhonikidze*, and the patrol ships *Grizon* and *Korsak* arrived off Somalia under the flag of Vice-Admiral V. Chaly, First Deputy Commander of the Black Sea Fleet. (Rozin, n.d.) The *Ordzhonikidze* was being sailed to Indonesia where it would be handed over the Indonesian Navy. They moored in the Bayer-Meraio anchorage, whose location is unclear from this perspective of 60 years later. Somali border guards arrived aboard the ships, ‘barefoot and with old rifles;’ they were fed and watered, ‘at the same time settling all formalities.’ Having been topped up with fuel, boiler water, and oil from the tanker *Maxim Gorkiy*, the ships sailed for the Indian Ocean the next day. Rozin writes that this visit was one of the first that the Soviet Navy had made to Somalia.

Warships need extensive port and support facilities. The port of Berbera (about 200 kilometres southwest of Djibouti city) was identified as a prime candidate for development early in the 1960s. It had been a key regional port for hundreds of years. Before the arrival of the Soviets, Berbera had only a single pier, with one five-ton crane. In 1962 the Soviets and Somalis mutually agreed on extensive expansion and rebuilding of the existing facilities, and by the end of that year a Soviet survey team had arrived. In 1963, during a visit to the Soviet Union by Prime Minister Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke and Brigadier General Daud Abdulle Hersi, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, an agreement was made to transfer naval vessels

to Somalia. In December 1964 the grouping was officially placed under the Ministry of Defence, alongside the other services of the Somali National Armed Forces. It was about 45 personnel strong at the time, including three officers. The first commander of the Navy appears to have been Lieutenant Colonel Khalif Maow Hassan. (Rozin, n.d.) The Goobjoog source recounts how Soviet-promised ships arrived at Berbera on February 10, 1965. There they were transferred to naval officers now part of the Ministry of Defence. In recognition, February 10 was chosen as Somali Navy Day, and has been marked that way ever since.

The exact types of craft handed over that day are not crystal clear. Russian and Russian-translated sources are clear that two Project P386, Type 9 patrol boats, 29 metres long, with a crew of 15 were transferred. (Rozin, n.d.; *Torpedo Retrievers, Project T368*, n.d.) The puzzle lies in when the first amphibious craft were handed over. Russian language sources speak of several different types of patrol boats delivered up until 1969, but date the first transfer of amphibious craft to 1968. However, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in its *Handbook for Special Operations – Somali Republic*, dated July 1966, said that the Navy had two patrol craft and two amphibious craft.⁴ At a distance of sixty years it is hard to make a precise judgement, but it seems more likely that the Soviet sources were correct. The CIA was making its assessments on much more partial information. Russian language sources say that from 1965-69 a total of 13 more patrol boats and torpedo boats were handed over, and in 1968-69 four small tank landing craft, in Soviet terms, 'landing boats,' of the Project 1785 type, 20 metres long, capable of carrying one main battle tank or 20 personnel. (Rozin, n. d.; Landing craft Project 1785 / Project 1785T, n. d.) The design of the four large, wooden-hulled torpedo boats of the Project 183 type dated back to the years immediately after the Second World War. They were armed with two 533 mm (21 in) torpedo tubes, and could mount up to four 25-mm guns. If properly crewed, maintained, and handled the Project 183s could "outrun and outmanoeuvre anything" in the newly independent African states' naval inventory. (Hale, 1972, p. 50) Three more of the small Project P386 patrol craft were delivered in 1966, and six more Project 123bis small torpedo boats followed.

Rozin records the memories of Alexander Pavlovich Golovnikov, an engineer from the Yaroslavl shipyard, who was sent to Kismayo with a four-man team to transfer Project 368P small patrol craft to the Somalis. (Rozin, n. d.) There had been a problem with a Somali 368P crew which had been trained beforehand in the Soviet Union. Once they arrived in Somalia, Golovnikov and his colleagues could not get aboard the vessel for a month, because the crew trained in the USSR went 'on strike.' This was seemingly because the Soviet-trained crew found itself replaced once it arrived back in Somalia, a new crew sent aboard, and the Soviet-trained crew deprived of ranks and positions. Arrival of the 368P craft was complicated because the vessels had been shipped to Somalia on Soviet dry cargo ships, with some parts of the equipment removed. With the strike, reassembly, and crew training required, the whole

⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, *Handbook for Special Operations – Somali Republic*, July 1966, 120. All declassified U.S. documents are searchable and accessible via foia.cia.gov (and at the comparable Defence Intelligence Agency site in some cases).



process took four months. Once that process had finished, Golovnikov and his colleagues were sent via Mogadishu up to Berbera, to repeat the process. In this case, the whole process was made much easier because, in Golovnikov's words, the new crew they were to train were 'ours.' What that appears to mean was that because this new Berbera crew's training had taken place in Baku, with the Soviet Caspian Sea Flotilla, it was closely affiliated with the team from the Yaroslavl shipyard. It appears that there was some sort of 'pairing' arrangement between Soviet shipyards and Soviet Navy training sites that is not fully explained.

The port in Kismayo, which was to become the Navy's main southern location, had actually been built by the United States, surveyed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Before the U.S.-backed construction work began in 1964, ships had to be loaded and unloaded offshore within the Kismayo roadstead (sheltered, safe anchorage). Survey works by the Army Corps of Engineers began in 1959; the major part of the construction finished in 1967; and then the military coup two years later led to the U.S. ceasing assistance. Rozin writes that some of the remaining U.S. steelwork was dumped offshore rather than handed over to the now-Soviet-aligned Somalis. The Soviet later built a torpedo boat base there.

Concepts and Opponents

The general concept for naval activities in these circumstances is based upon small craft, as fast as possible, to position themselves as best possible for an attack on larger warships, and then to escape afterwards. The heavier the punch they have, the better, to disable more powerful opponents quickly, to minimize their vulnerability and the time they are exposed to the enemy. They can be vulnerable to air attack; much later, during 'Operation Desert Storm' against Iraq in 1991, Iraqi Navy small craft were cut to pieces by the U.S.-led coalition's missile-firing helicopters. But in the mid-1960s, the helicopter threat was much less.

The prospective opponents for the growing Somali Navy were firstly Ethiopia, and later, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). The Ethiopian Navy had been established comparatively late, in 1955, and was generally comprised of the same type of small craft as the Somalis. Up until 1961, the Ethiopians had acquired two Yugoslav torpedo boats, five ex-U.S. patrol boats, plus the larger ex-U.S. training ship *Ethiopia*. (Lefever and Leiper, 1970, pp. 142-144) But by 1972 the Yugoslav torpedo boats had been scrapped, and the U.S. craft were 'too slow for even good anti-smuggling work'. (Blackman, 1972, p. 95) This author has not identified any reports of Ethio-Somali naval confrontations, before or since the early 1970s. The British only completed the evacuation of Aden, which was to become the capital of South Yemen, in November 1967. British Rear Admiral Edward Ashmore, Flag Officer, Second-in-Command, Far East Fleet, had supervised Task Force 318, the British task force assembled to cover their last withdrawal from the former Federation of South Arabia.⁵

⁵ Lapping (1985) gives the background on the withdrawal; the Task Force designation is from Harnden (2011); note that *The Independent* incorrectly lists Ashmore's appointment at the time.

So for several years afterwards, South Yemen was absorbed with organising its new government, and was often since that point preoccupied with political strife.

Richard Hall, a former State Department official assessing naval developments in the early 1970s, wrote that the Somali Navy was the “strongest indigenous naval power in East Africa,” with Ethiopia ranked only third. This was based on his assessment of what he reported as the 18 patrol boats in the Somali Navy in 1972, twelve of them being the potent Project 183 type craft already mentioned. (Hale, 1972, p. 50) However, maintenance problems, as well as lack of through written documentation and reporting, may have both created problems. Reporting for the President’s Daily Brief in February 1967 was scathing of Somali Army maintenance, and declassified U.S. reporting of 1987 indicated ‘few of the [Navy] vessels were combat effective,’ at that time, due to a variety of technical problems.⁶ From these two related reports it seems quite likely that maintenance was at the very least imperfect in the Navy in the early 1970s. In addition, the military government only standardized the Somali language on a Latin alphabet in 1972, and English, Italian, and Russian, as well as Somali, would all have been in the mix for discussion over naval issues.

Another issue that would have impeded naval capability was literacy rates. Somalia (and Ethiopia too) both acknowledged literacy rates before the beginning of the first literacy campaigns as about 5-6%. (Hoeben, 1988, p. 113) Thus [Siad Barre announced in October 1972] *a full scale literacy campaign for Somalia. This campaign was directed at the total population, educated and illiterate alike, for virtually no-one knew how to read and write Somali in the new official script.*

Somalis have a strong oral tradition, and are noted for their poetry. But the oral emphasis of the culture, literacy rates, and the mix of languages requiring translation and careful usage probably hampered the new Navy getting the best out of its vessels. It seems likely that due to all these issues, operational effectiveness could have been significantly lower than Hall estimated.

The Soviet Navy and the Somalis in the 1970s

Somalis interviewed in the last eighteen months emphasize how their forefathers were sent away for military technical training in the Soviet Union for years at a time. Rozin writes that at least 3,066 Somali personnel were trained: including 1169 personnel graduated from the training establishment of the Ground Forces (Soviet Army), 510 people from the Air Defence Force, 590 from the Air Force, and 450 from the Navy. There are no indications as yet that any women were sent to undertake military training in the Soviet Union.⁷ (Metz, 1993, p. 207) Some 3,900 Soviet personnel served in Somalia from 1964-77.

⁶ President’s Daily Brief, issued by the CIA for 2 February 1967 (USDIA 1987, p. 19).

⁷ A Women’s Auxiliary Corps was formed in 1961, but was confined to the roles of administration, personnel, and military welfare.



A total of at least 45 visits were made by Soviet naval forces to Somalia from 1969 to October 1972. (Rozin, n. d.) Starting with two visits in 1969, and seven in 1970, there were then 22 visits made in 1971 and 20 in 1972. During a visit in April 1972 under the leadership of Marshal of the Soviet Union A. A. Grechko, an agreement was reached allowing the establishment of the 527th Material-Technical Support Point (Russian: Пунктматериально-технического обеспечения, ПМТО) for the Soviet Navy at Berbera. Restricted to floating barges and similar, this installation was technically not a base, something that was to gain importance later when it attracted more and more Western attention.

The Soviet Union achieved another significant step in April 1972. In that month an agreement was made with Somalia to allow periodic basing of Tupolev Tu-95RT (NATO designation "Bear D") and Ilyushin Il-38 (NATO "May") long range maritime patrol aircraft at the Berbera airfield. Soviet Naval Aviation thus had a forward base to conduct maritime patrol sorties over the Indian Ocean and Middle East. Rozin wrote that 'to ensure the basing and maintenance of the airfield in an operational state, significant funds were spent, [and] huge reserves of fuel and lubricants were created.' The United States publicly identified the base in Senate hearings in June 1975, and a month later, a party of U.S. senators and their aides were allowed to visit the base.

As base access expanded, the Soviet Union made decisions to transfer more small warships to the Somalis. Rozin writes that combat vessels transferred by the Soviet Union to the Somali Navy in 1974-77 included:

*One Project 1400E Grif (NATO 'Zhuk-class') patrol boat in 1974

*Two Project 205U (NATO 'Osa-class') missile boats in December 1975. The Osa-class missile boat was a formidable vessel in its time, capable of a speed of over 40 knots (70 kilometres an hour) depending on which engine variant was installed, whose four P-15 Termit (NATO SS-N-2 "Styx") surface to surface missiles were capable of reaching 40-80 kilometres carrying a warhead of 454kg (1000 lbs) of high explosive. Three or four such vessels could ambush and destroy larger destroyers, given the right tactical situation.

*Four Project 205T and Project 205ET torpedo boats in 1976

*One Project 770 (NATO 'Polnocny-A') class medium landing ship in December 1976, capable of carrying five tanks and 120 soldiers.

Unfortunately, as yet, there is little detail available about the integration of these vessels in the 1970s. There are however declassified U.S. reports from the 1980s which will be addressed below.

The Somali dream of 'liberating' the Ogaden region, inhabited by Somali clansmen, from Ethiopia led to a rupture with the Soviet Union, the end of all Soviet assistance, and the hasty withdrawal of all Soviet forces in 1977. Siad Barre had decided to step up the efforts of the Somali Government-directed Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) guerrillas, an Ethiopian

armed resistance movement in the Ogaden region. The next step was to invade Ethiopia, and in June 1977 regular Somali forces became involved. (Metz, 1993, p. 184) A full-scale invasion involving virtually the entire Somali army was launched on July 12. (Ayele, 2014, p. 106) The Soviet Union found itself supplying both sides, and attempted to begin talks in Moscow about a peaceful settlement between Ethiopians and Somalis. Nothing resulted, and arms supplies to Somalia were halted. At the same time, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan began to consider supplying Somalia with weaponry.

Siad Barre then terminated the friendship treaty with the Soviet Union. The Soviets were ordered to leave. As the day of October 13, 1977, passed, the attitudes of the Somalis to the Soviets changed. (Rozin, n. d.) They became hostile and threatening; electricity and water were cut off, and their houses were surrounded by Somali armed personnel to protect the Soviets from angry Somali mobs. Siad Barre declared all remaining Soviet equipment and facilities Somali property. Within a week, only seven employees of the Soviet Embassy in Somalia were allowed to stay; the Cubans were also expelled. For the Soviets, the evacuation was a nightmare, especially for the families; there was considerable harassment and much personal property was taken. The Soviet 8th Operational Squadron in the Indian Ocean, under Vice Admiral Nikolai Yasakov, sent ships to Mogadishu to evacuate what could be withdrawn, and other ships from the Black Sea Fleet were sent south from the Mediterranean. A considerable amount of military facilities and equipment, including the vital naval communications centre, was salvaged and withdrawn from Berbera. The abrupt split would have long-term consequences for the Somali Navy; it was severed from its patron and supplier at a stroke.

After months of bitter fighting, Somali forces withdrew from Ethiopia in March 1978, defeated by a Soviet change of sides, deploying Cuban forces, and Ethiopia's unexpected levels of resistance. The Navy did little during the war; its principle effort was to provide logistical support to Somali forces in the northern part of the country. (Directorate for Intelligence, 1982, p. 7)

The Navy and Politics: Mohammed Gelle Yusuf and Mohamed Osman

The navy commander's rank started off as a lieutenant colonel, and then rose to colonel. The third commander of the navy, initially a lieutenant colonel, was perhaps the most notorious officer the Navy ever produced: Mohamud Gelle Yusuf. Lieutenant Colonel Yusuf was commanding the Navy by March 1973, when he went aboard the visiting Soviet Sverdlov-class gun cruiser *Admiral Senyavin* in Mogadishu. Yet Yusuf gained his reputation not through any naval activities but because he became one of Siad Barre's fervent loyalists. In 1970 a special tribunal, the National Security Court, was established as the judicial arm of the Supreme Revolutionary Council, outside the ordinary legal system, "as watchdogs against activities considered to be counterrevolutionary." (Metz, 1993, p. 38) Yusuf as head of the court was given special powers under a presidential decree in order to carry out his activities. (Ingiriis,



2016, p. 95) Ingiriis (2016, pp. 95-96) writes eloquently of the sheer fear instituted by the National Security Court and its activities, killing those Barre suspected of disloyalty.

Barre's co-revolutionary General Salad Gabeire Kediye fell out with him, urging a loosening of tight controls, possibly even asking for a return to democracy within a year of the coup. (Ingiriis, 2016, p. 101) Barre feared his influence, and ordered a court to be assembled, hand-picking the members, including Yusuf as one of his Darod/Marehan fellow-clansmen. (Ingiriis, 2016, p. 103) The verdict was preordained: Gabeire and his co-conspirators were executed. Yusuf, continuing his repressive activities, was later described as 'one of the worst in the regime' by the Amnesty International director for the country, long after the collapse. (Ingiriis, 2016, p. 103) It appears Yusuf was both heading the Navy and the National Security Court at the same time. After handing over the Navy to Mohamed Omar Osman, he served as Minister of Ports and Maritime Transport three times, before becoming Minister of Finance and Revenues just before the final collapse. (Mukhtar, 2011, p. 273, 279)

The following commander of the Navy was Mohamed Omar Osman (Darod/Ogadeni). After receiving his military education in Cairo (Interview: ONLF Leader, Admiral Mohamed Omar Osman' (n. d.) and in the Soviet Union, he was diverted somewhat on return to Somalia, eventually becoming chief of Siad Barre's ruling party Politbureau. By November 1987 he had become Commander of the Navy, holding the rank of rear admiral, as the Defence Intelligence Agency reported. (USDIA, 1987, p. 9) The same U.S. reporting wrote that he was among senior military officers dissatisfied with Ethio-Somali peace efforts, because tentative talks that had begun in 1986 between the two countries might lead to selling 'a portion of the country to the Ethiopians.' Well after the Somali collapse, in 1998, he became chairman of the Ogaden National Liberation Front.

United States reporting from the 1980s

The Ogaden War was a disaster for Somalia, especially for its irredentist territorial ambitions. Much of the army and air force were destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of refugees began to increasingly strain the ability of Somalia to absorb them. Rumbings against Siad Barre's direction of the war led to an attempted coup soon afterwards. (Ingiriis, 2016, pp. 157-163) Ethiopia re-established its military dominance along the border by 1981.

Because the Navy had been of so little help during the war, it became more and more neglected as the 1980s wore on. By this time the United States had become Somalia's patron and supplier, and as a result, U.S. intelligence reporting increased in scope and detail. CIA assessments in March 1982 gave a sorry picture. (Directorate for Intelligence, 1982, p. 7) The Navy could not effectively carry out its coastal defence and surveillance mission. Maintenance and engine problems were widespread. The two Osa-class missile boats, the Navy's most potent striking force, suffered continuing engine problems, frequent to the extent that they 'rarely' sailed from the base at Berbera. Before the expulsion of Soviet personnel, the Soviet technicians had carried out almost all maintenance, the CIA said. Probably this was partially

due to the challenges with translating and communicating regarding highly technical equipment, as the literacy discussion above emphasizes. After the Soviet withdrawal, spare parts and support facilities were inadequate, and limited Egyptian assistance ceased because of Somalia's 'inability to pay.' While Romania was training a small number of personnel, this could not make up for the largesse and range of assistance the Soviet Union had provided.

Several editions of the U.S. *Military Intelligence Summary* for the 1980s were released by the Defence Intelligence Agency after 2010. The November 1987 edition gives a detailed account of the Somali Navy. (USDIA 1987, pp. 18-20) The Navy was organised into three coastal areas located at Berbera, in the north where revolt was rising against Barre; in Mogadishu; and in Kismayo. In addition to the warships, there was a 100-mm coastal defence artillery battery at Berbera, six radar sites, four visual surveillance points, and twelve signals' stations. Of the 18 vessels the Navy had, three were operational; 13 non-operational, including two Mol-class torpedo boats, two Mol-class patrol boats, and four Project 183 torpedo boats; and the status of two ex-Soviet landing craft were unknown. The two operational fighting vessels were one of the Osa-class missile boats and a new acquisition, a 104-foot Swiftship which had defected from Ethiopia in the early 1980s. Also listed as operational was the single Project 770-class landing ship.

The crews of the two operational fighting vessels were highly qualified and well-capable of maintaining and operating their craft. (USDIA 1987, p. 18, p. 19) At the core of their crews were competent personnel who had been sailing the same platform for a decade. Procedures were passed on orally in some cases, rather than on paper. (USDIA 1987, p. 20) But they needed additional training and proper logistical support; facilities at Berbera were sparse and the radars aboard were non-operational for lack of spare parts. The Chinese had provided some spare parts in 1984, though, in return for samples of some Soviet weaponry. (USDIA 1987, p. 7) All the Navy's ships and vehicles bar the Ethiopian-defected Swiftship were of Soviet origin and were old and worn-out. Coastal patrols had been performed only on a 'very irregular basis' in the past, in 'specific areas such as Berbera, Mogadishu' and Kismayo. But since mid-1985 only the two operational vessels had gone to sea, remaining in the vicinity of their home base, Berbera. The DIA thus assessed that there were insufficient craft to patrol the coastline, and it can be seen from this description that the Horn of Africa itself, and the southern coastline down to Mogadishu had been left totally uncovered.

By this time, the authority of the Somali government had begun to disintegrate. In the north, beyond the Berbera base, the Issaq Somali National Movement was gaining strength. Within three to four years, Barre's remaining strongholds in Mogadishu would be under assault from the Hawiye United Somali Congress. Barre eventually fled Mogadishu for his clan lands in Gedo on January 27, 1991. Others who could, fled as well; it appears that one or both of the two operational fighting vessels, including the Osa-class missile boat, landed up in Aden, at that time the capital of South Yemen. (Gurbiye, 2018) The Goobjoog source says that 'the largest vessel was last reported in Mombasa,' which appears likely to have been the Project 770 landing craft, and other vessels were looted in Kismayo.



The Twenty-first Century Aftermath

Somalia has remained riven by strife since the early 1990s. While some areas have remained peaceful for long periods, such as Somaliland after the two civil wars there ended in 1994,⁸ the south has seen constant fighting. The two operational fighting craft had been making patrols in the Berbera area in the latter half of the 1980s, but since that time, Somalia's ability to maintain sovereign control over its territorial waters has dwindled enormously. Somaliland had a coast guard in operation by 2015, but efforts elsewhere have been patchy. The apparent situation in the new state of Puntland since 1998 has been confused by the hidden focus of the Puntland Maritime Police Force, some 660 strong in September 2014. Well-publicised activities and private security company support has ostensibly been focused on maritime activities. Yet the PMPF in 2017-18 remained, at its core, a regime security force, initially at the beck and call of former Puntland President Abdirahman Faroole.⁹

As the war and instability persisted, poverty in coastal communities grew. (Kerins, 2016) Somali fishermen grew increasingly angry at intrusions by illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) foreign fishing vessels. Infrequent and opportunistic pirate attacks began as early as 12 January 1991; 34 occurred between 1991 and 2004. (Westberg, 2015) But the attacks were not as organised and repetitive as those after 2005. Westberg (2015, p. 3) argues that it was principally the 'Indian Ocean tsunami on 26 December 2004, which wiped out the fishing sector in the South Mudug coastal villages of Hobyo and Harardhere' that led to the change in character and increase in number of pirate attacks from the southern of the two main pirate locations, the Galmudug coastline. The other main launch points have been further north, around Eyl and elsewhere, in what is now Puntland.

Whatever the extent of Somali piracy, the difference between outside and Somali reactions to such attacks reveals a great gulf in understanding. This lack of mutual understanding has already had significant detrimental effects, damaging efforts to rebuild a sovereign Somali maritime presence. Somalis are generally much more concerned by IUU fishing than piracy. (Kerins, 2016) They are also significantly concerned with arms smuggling and human trafficking. But for the maritime sphere, the dumping of illegal waste is possibly the most underappreciated aspect. Herring et al. (2020, pp. 5-7) point out that '...the illegal disposal of hazardous waste on a massive scale by an 'ecomafia' of Italian companies and criminal gangs is... long-established,' and that the existence of schemes to dump toxic, including nuclear waste, in Somalia has been proven. Between the scars of war and ongoing poverty, the destruction of livelihoods after the Indian Ocean tsunami, IUU fishing, and waste dumping, the justifications for Somali piracy can be better understood.

The efforts to re-establish a formal Somali Navy form an epilogue of sorts to this history. As international concerns about Somali piracy rose, the Djibouti Accords between two Somali warring factions, including the then Mogadishu Transitional Federal Government, were made

⁸ Discussions with well-informed observers in East Africa, 2017 and 2018.

⁹ Contacts with well-informed observers in East Africa, 2017, 2018, and 22 February 2021.

in August 2008. That led to the appointment by June 2009 of Admiral Farah Omar as Navy commander. He told the BBC that 500 recruits were under training, recruited through radio advertisements after being promised US \$60 per month. (Ross, 2009) Little had changed six months later, though the recruits were still in training. (Anderson, 2009) By 2017 the SJPER said the Navy had risen to 550 personnel, with 140 officers, and five boats. In June 2018 numbers were reported as 311, but both that and the 550 figure seem likely to be overestimates. Assessing exact Somali military personnel numbers is often challenging. (Robinson, 2019, p. 213) In any case, no real naval activity seemed to be taking place, and foreign assistance, notably via the European mission EUCAP Nestor, had begun to focus on civilian naval police forces.

Conclusions

The Somali Navy's first thirty years need to be assessed in the context of the Somali technical skills and infrastructure base that the British and Italian mandates left behind on independence in 1960. It was always going to be a difficult task to build a force dependent on high technology in a country that started with a 5-6% literacy rate, limited technical training arrangements, and limited facilities. The Navy also always seems to have been last in line, behind the Army, Air Force, and Air Defence Command.

The Navy to a great degree stood or fell with its Soviet supporters. Training, vessels, advice, and other support were significantly dependent on Soviet transfers. U.S. reporting from 1982 that Soviet advisors had carried out most maintenance up until 1977 emphasizes the level of dependence for navies in these circumstances which need working naval propulsion to carry out their activities. This left the Navy seemingly bereft when the Soviets left, with effective vessels reduced to reportedly to three out of a total of 18. The two fighting vessels remaining operational in 1987 had no capability to patrol much more than a limited area along the Somali coast.

Internal Somali politics was both a blessing and a curse. There was a strong will to push forward with the 'liberation' of the Ogaden region and other territories seen as Somali, but in the end, clan identity and feuding became Barre's tools to stay in power, and the country broke up. The civil war eroded skills, hardened attitudes and eventually spread collective trauma across Somali society. Thousands upon thousands went into exile; not good portents for any rebuilding of a Navy (or naval police) in the twenty-first century.

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Conflict of interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on contributor

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