

Russia's Flotilla Flop

Moscow wanted to impress the world, but mostly we just laughed

By [Kevin Rothrock](#)

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Pixabay

Russia's great flotilla of eight naval ships to the eastern Mediterranean hasn't been the public diplomacy coup Moscow hoped for.

NATO calls the flotilla "the largest surface deployment since the end of the Cold War," but most people in Russia or in the West who know anything about it have probably only seen the photos of the Admiral Kuznetsov — Russia's only aircraft carrier — billowing smoke on the open water.

You might be surprised to learn that the Kuznetsov hasn't broken down: the smoke is normal for the 30-year-old ship, which runs on diesel fuel. That ominous plume of black smoke rising up from the flight control tower? The Russian military expected you to see that.

What Moscow apparently failed to anticipate is the ridicule such ancient-seeming technology would invite in cyberspace, where the Kremlin's opponents and nervous foreign observers have seized the images as proof of Russian military decline, despite the ongoing intervention in Syria.

On Twitter some of Vladimir Putin's most popular critics have had a field day with the publicity backlash. With a touch of photoshop, for instance, Ilya Repin's classic painting "Barge Haulers on the Volga" was transformed into a joke about the Kuznetsov. The caption below reads, "Russia in one picture."

Embed:

Россия в одной картинке:

pic.twitter.com/aJ9Nrse3gT

— Муд Роисси (@Fake_MIDRF) [October 22, 2016](#)

Anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny, who nearly forced a runoff mayoral election in Moscow in 2013, pointed out that some Russian news media were sharing photographs of U.S. naval vessels, while tweeting stories about the Russian flotilla. "The Putin regime spends a third of the federal budget on defense," Navalny wrote, "but showing just a single photo of our own aircraft carrier is so embarrassing that we take photos from the U.S. Navy."

Embed:

Путинский режим - 1/3 бюджета уходит на оборону, но фото единственного своего авианосн.крейсера показывать так стыдно, что берем фото ВМФ США
pic.twitter.com/020QtWctmd

— Alexey Navalny (@navalny) [October 21, 2016](#)

The pro-Ukrainian political cartoonist "Night Separator" mixed the iconic image of Vladimir Putin's breaststroke with the Kuznetsov's plume of smoke. "The smoke is coming from right where you think it is," he clarified in a follow-up tweet.

Embed:

Про дымящий авианосец сделал вам свежак. Разбирайте, ретвиттьте
pic.twitter.com/mudKELV6X5

— Карикатурист (@nightseparator) [October 21, 2016](#)

Rhetoric about the Admiral Kuznetsov's trail of smoke has taken on such epic proportions that some of the most popular jokes about the ship compare its engine exhaust to the stuff of natural disasters. "The Admiral Kuznetsov pictured off the coast of Iceland in 1987," claims one spoof tweet, accompanied by a photograph of Iceland's Katla volcano.

Embed:

Адмирал Кузнецов (организация запрещена в общественных местах) у берегов Исландии. 1987 г. д.н.р pic.twitter.com/wPphYHgdkO

— ВП (@sranysovok) [October 24, 2016](#)

Other Twitter accounts left followers wondering if the image before them was real or edited. "Photo-fact!" wrote one popular anti-Kremlin parody account. "The Admiral Kuznetsov depicted from a passing passenger plane. It's sailing to Syria completely unnoticed!" In fact, the image is actually a modified photo of the Deepwater Horizon cleanup effort in the Gulf of Mexico.

Embed:

ФОТОФАКТ! "Адмирал Кузнецов" из пролетающего мимо пассажирского самолёта. Плывёт в Сирию совершенно незаметно!
pic.twitter.com/6lmrokpsHd

— Муд Роисси (@Fake_MIDRF) [October 24, 2016](#)

Another popular joke, recycled dozens of times by different Twitter users, claimed that NASA had published a photo from an orbiting satellite, showing the smoke trail of the Kuznetsov as it crossed the English Channel. (In reality, the edited photo below was taken originally in 2002 from the International Space Station over Italy's Mount Etna, one of the most active volcanoes in the world.)

Embed:

НАСА опубликовали снимок со спутника где виден путь российского корабля "Адмирал Кузнецов" в проливе Ла Манш. pic.twitter.com/AA4csYcvdP

— Pizdatie Novosti (@Pizdata_Novost) [October 23, 2016](#)

Others are already looking ahead to Syria, which Russia's flotilla will reach eventually. “Seeing signs that the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov approaches, militants abandon their positions in terror,” jokes the tweet below.

Embed:

Сирия. Завидев признаки приближения авианосца "Адмирал Кузнецов", боевики в ужасе покидают позиции. pic.twitter.com/CByQhQPhMh

— село Дураково (NEWS) (@willi_rusland) [October 22, 2016](#)

The mockery of Russia's flagship naval vessel has apparently become so irksome to some in Moscow that the Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper even commissioned blogger Sergei Leleka to pen a column titled “Why the Admiral Kuznetsov Blackens Europe's Sky.” In the text, Leleka claims that the ship only produces black smoke “as a tradition,” arguing that there's nothing wrong or outdated about the engine exhaust. “This is a signal,” he says, “as if to tell everyone, ‘I've arrived, hello!’ or ‘I am leaving, goodbye!’ or ‘I'm on my way!’”

Leleka says the smoke can be used as a friendly signal to allies, communicating that help is on the way, or as a menacing gesture to foes, warning that Russia's naval might is en route.

In his column, before the newspaper quickly redacted the text, Leleka also unleashed a savage anti-Semitic attack against prominent Russian liberal intellectuals Anton Nossik and Sergei Parkhomenko, who have publicly ridiculed the Admiral Kuznetsov. In an awkward and angry reference to the Holocaust, Leleka wrote that Nossik and Parkhomenko could only be cured of their sudden military expertise “in the gas chamber.”

The remark resembles a similar anti-Semitic comment published in the same newspaper in 2013, when another columnist lamented that the Nazis failed to “make lampshades” of the grandfathers of today's anti-Kremlin oppositionists.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/10/25/flotilla-kuznetsov-syria-russia-smoke-a55855>