BATTLE FOR THE BLACK SEA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

On June 29, 1788, imperial Russian troops laid siege to Ozi, an Ottoman fortress on the northern Black Sea coast. On the same day, a Russian naval squadron, commanded by Admiral M.I. Voinovich, left Sevastopol in Crimea for Ozi. Their mission was to prevent any Turkish attack on the Crimean shores and also to offer support to the Russian ground troops at Ozi. But in the Black Sea waters, the Russians were encountered by a far superior Turkish squadron. After days of manoeuvring in the open sea, on July 14, near a small island in the north-west of the Black Sea, fighting broke out. After hours-long battle, the Russians inflicted deadly damage on the Turkish fleet and forced them to retreat.

The Battle of Fidonisi, named after the island which was called Fidonisi by the Greeks, was the first naval battle of the 1787-1792 Russo-Turkish War. While the Russian victory in the waters near Fidonisi did not have an immediate impact on the war, the defeat of the superior Ottoman Navy was a morale booster for the Russian troops. Five months later, Russian troops stormed Ozi, captured the town and renamed it as Ochakov, which is now home to Ukraine Navy's operational control centre.

Fidonisi is now called the Snake Island. On the first day of President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Russia's Navy seized the island, which lies just 35 km off Ukraine's southwestern coast. For over four months, the Russians held the island under their control, while they made battlefield gains in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region. But on Thursday, faced with relentless Ukrainian attacks, Russia announced that it was exiting the island. For the Ukrainian troops which suffered back-to-back defeats in the Donbas and took heavy casualties in recent weeks, the ouster of the invading forces from the Snake Island (also called Zmiinyi Island) is a rare battlefield victory.

Outsize role

The island covering just 0.17 square km (roughly the size of 20 football fields) has played an outsize role in most of the wars Russia fought in the Black Sea since the Battle of Fidonisi. It came under the control of Romania in 1877. In the First World War, Russia, in an alliance with Romania, had operated a wireless station on the island, which was destroyed by Ottoman warships. During the Second World War, Romania, which had joined the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, allowed the Axis powers to establish a radio station on the island.

The Nazis and the Romanians had mined the waters around the island during the war to stop the Soviet submarines and vessels from getting closer. But in 1944, as the momentum of the war had clearly shifted in favour of the Soviet Union, Romanian troops were forced to exit the island. Four years later, as part of a frontier delimitation protocol signed between Romania and the Soviet Union, the Snake Island came under the rule of Moscow. It would stay so until Ukraine became an independent country in 1991, along with several other republics, as the Soviet Union collapsed.

There was a maritime border dispute between Ukraine and Romania in the waters around the Snake Island, which was resolved in 2009. At that time, Ukraine had said the island was home to some 100 people, including military personnel, scientists, their families and keepers of the lighthouse, which was built in 1842 by Russia's Black Sea Fleet and rebuilt several times thereafter. The largely rocky outcrop has only one village, Bile, which was founded in 2007.

Ukraine wanted to build a settlement on the island, but it, once again, turned out to be the focus of Russia's battle to control the Black Sea.

The capture of the island on February 24 allowed Russia to tighten its naval blockade on Ukraine. But the defence of the island, which was in Ukraine's artillery range, became increasingly difficult after Russia lost its flagship *Moskva* on April 14. Ever since, Ukraine has stepped up attacks not just on the Russian forces defending the island, but also the supply ships. When the defence became increasingly costly, Russia finally decided to make a pull-back.

This doesn't mean that Ukrainian troops can take direct control of the island, because they might also come under fire from Russian warships. But Ukraine has clearly pushed the enemy farther away from Odessa, its 'pearl of the Black Sea', and taken a tactical victory, for now.

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