

## **We Now Know Why Russia Never Got Around to Building a Ton of Aircraft Carriers**

by Robert Farley

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Surprising?

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Historically a land power, the Soviet Union grappled with the idea of a large naval aviation arm for most of its history, eventually settling on a series of hybrid aircraft carriers. Big plans for additional ships died with the Soviet collapse, but Russia inherited one large aircraft carrier at the end of the Cold War—that remains in service today. Although many of the problems that wracked the naval aviation projects of the Soviet Union remain today, the Russian navy nevertheless sports one of the more active aircraft carriers in the world.

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### **History of Russian Naval Aviation**

The Soviet Union made several efforts at developing aircraft carriers early in its history, but a lack of resources, combined with a geography that emphasized the importance of land power, made serious investment impossible. During the Cold War, the first naval aviation success were *Moskva* and *Leningrad*, a pair of helicopter carriers designed primarily for antisubmarine warfare. These ships, ungainly in appearance, displaced 17,000 tons, could make about thirty knots, and each carried eighteen helicopters. *Moskva* entered service in 1967, *Leningrad* in 1969. The *Moskvas* were succeeded by the Kiev class, much closer to true aircraft carriers. Displacing 45,000 tons, the four *Kievs* (each built to a slightly different design) could make thirty-two knots and carry a combination of about thirty helicopters and Yak-38 VSTOL fighters.

*(This first appeared in 2018.)*

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All of these ships left service at the end of the Cold War; the Moskvas and one of the Kievs were scrapped, two Kievs ended up as museums in China, and one was eventually reconstructed and sold to India as INS *Vikramaditya*. In the 1980s, the Soviet Union laid down its first two true carriers, although only one was completed before the collapse of the country.

### **Current State of Russia's Carrier Force**

At the moment, Russia's only aircraft carrier is the troubled *Admiral Kuznetsov*. A ski jump carrier, the *Kuznetsov* displaces some 60,000 tons, can theoretically make thirty knots, and carry a combination of forty-or-so helicopters and jet fighters. *Kuznetsov* was commissioned in 1990; a sister remained an incomplete hulk for many years until it was purchased by China and eventually finished as *Liaoning*. In addition to helicopters, *Kuznetsov* operates MiG-29K and Su-33 fighter bombers. Like previous Russian carriers, *Kuznetsov* sports a heavier missile armament than most Western ships.

Unfortunately, hiccups with *Kuznetsov* have also made it difficult for Russia's naval aviators to remain practiced and effective. The ship has suffered multiple breakdowns over its career, including significant issues with its engines and recovering aircraft. Many of these difficulties came as consequence of the dramatic decline of maintenance funding at the end of the Cold War, but some was the inevitable result of inexperience with the platform type. *Admiral Kuznetsov* has engaged in several prestige cruises, but its most notable service came in 2016 off of Syria. After a much publicized journey to the Mediterranean, *Kuznetsov* conducted combat operations for two months. The operations had more of a publicity impact than a real military effect, and *Kuznetsov* lost two aircraft (one MiG-29K and one Su-33) to accidents. The carrier is currently in refit.

To support *Kuznetsov*, Russia attempted to purchase a pair of French assault carriers, but the conquest and annexation of Crimea forced France to cancel the sale. These ships would have served as amphibious platforms with antisubmarine (ASW) capabilities, but also would have given the Russian navy experience with relatively large, technologically advanced vessels. Indeed, part of the deal would have allowed Russia to construct two Mistral-class ships to French specifications in its own yards, which would have provided a major boon to Russian shipbuilding.

### **Strategic Rationale**

Russia has a unique maritime geography, with four fleets operating from four coasts practically incapable of offering mutual support. During the Soviet period, carriers supported the fleet of nuclear ballistic missile submarines, offering air and ASW protection for the bastions in which these subs patrolled. This mission allowed the carriers to de-emphasize strike capabilities in favor of more defensive weaponry. More recently, the Russian navy has used *Admiral Kuznetsov* primarily as a vehicle for influence and prestige. Along with the nuclear battlecruiser *Pyotr Velikiy* and a few other ships, *Kuznetsov* is a visible manifestation of Russian naval power, forcing other nations to take note of Russian interests. As the Syria mission suggests, in the future Russia may focus more on developing strike capabilities in order to project power further.

## The Future

Russia has cancelled more carriers than most countries have contemplated. In the 1970s the Soviet Union considered the 72,000-ton Orel-class nuclear aircraft carrier, but opted instead for the *Kiev*s and the ships that would eventually become *Kuznetsov* and *Liaoning*. The Soviets laid down an 80,000-ton carrier named *Ulyanovsk* in 1988, but scrapped the incomplete ship when the Cold War ended.

Russian defense planners often announce projects as a means of gaining resources and prestige, rather than as part of a plan to build anything in particular. At one point, President Dmitri Medvedev suggested that Russia would build and operate six aircraft carriers by 2025; obviously, that's not going to happen. But there is an existing plan for the [Project 23000E Shtorm carrier](#), a 100,000-ton nuclear-powered supercarrier employing EMALS catapults and a variety of other modern technologies. The carrier would presumably fly MiG-29K fighters, although the age of that aircraft would suggest the need for a replacement. The ability of Russia to build this ship under current circumstances is in deep question, however.

## Conclusion

The aviation capability of the Russian navy is dangling by a thread. *Kuznetsov* is old and in poor condition, and no carrier is even close to be laid down. The Russian surface fleet has not received a great deal of attention in the latest military modernization plans, and the Russian shipbuilding industry has not constructed a warship the size and sophistication of *Kuznetsov* since... well, *Kuznetsov*.

That said, the Kremlin seems to view aircraft carriers as an important contributor to national prestige. The Russian navy took great pains to get *Kuznetsov* into position to support operations in Syria, and despite the embarrassment associated with that, has now [pushed the carrier into a major refit](#). If the Kremlin determines that it needs a carrier to keep pace with France, Britain, China and India, it will need to begin seriously considering how to build or acquire such a ship. It is not inconceivable that Moscow may consider ordering a carrier from Chinese yards in the future, however

profound a reversal that might seem. Otherwise, Russia needs to start solidifying its construction timelines soon.

*Robert Farley*, a frequent contributor to the National Interest, is author of [The Battleship Book](#).

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