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Putin's fleet just learns how history can choke back

Even the sea keeps its memory

4 min read · 23 hours ago



Edward Harrington

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Since February 2022, not a single Russian warship has passed through the Bosphorus.

The Black Sea, once Moscow's southern highway to power, has turned into a closed lake.

And the one who locked the door was not NATO. It was Turkey.

Using a treaty signed nearly a century ago, Ankara quietly froze one of the world's most powerful navies in place.

What began as a diplomatic formality has become one of the most effective and least discussed strategic maneuvers of the entire war.

In 1936, nations gathered in the Swiss town of Montreux to decide who would control the narrow straits connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. The result was the **Montreux Convention**, a document that handed Turkey control of the **Bosphorus and Dardanelles**, the two maritime chokepoints every Black Sea warship must pass through.

The treaty came with strict rules.

During peacetime, foreign warships can pass with limits on tonnage and time.

But in wartime, Turkey has the right to **close the straits to all belligerent navies**, even if it remains neutral.

For decades, the clause gathered dust, relevant only to historians and naval lawyers.

Then, in February 2022, the clause woke up.

Days after Russia invaded Ukraine, Turkey invoked **Article 19** of the Montreux Convention.

The decision was careful, calculated, and technically neutral: the straits were closed to all warring nations.

But the effect was one-sided.

Ukraine had no major navy to move. Russia did, and it suddenly found its entire **Black Sea Fleet** trapped behind Turkey's legal gates.

Without firing a shot, Ankara had turned the Black Sea into a sealed arena.

At the war's start, Russia's Black Sea Fleet boasted around **80 ships**, including frigates, submarines, and amphibious landing vessels.

Two years later, open-source intelligence confirms that at least **25 have been destroyed or heavily damaged**, a staggering **30 percent attrition rate**.

The fleet's flagship, the *Moskva*, sank in 2022 after a Ukrainian missile strike.

Since then, Sevastopol, once the beating heart of Russian naval power, has become a graveyard of twisted steel and scorched decks.

But the real damage is not just what Ukraine destroys. It is what **Russia cannot replace**.

Because of Montreux, no new warships can enter the Black Sea from other Russian fleets, and no damaged ones can leave for repairs in Kaliningrad or Vladivostok.

Crimean shipyards can handle small patrol boats and minor fixes, but not major overhauls.

Every hit the fleet takes is permanent.

The Black Sea Fleet is still active, but it is sailing in circles, slowly sinking in time.

This is the brilliance of the “Montreux Squeeze.”

It is not an act of war or a sanction. It is a **legal checkmate**, a diplomatic move that quietly reshaped the battlefield without firing a missile.

For **Ukraine**, it is a godsend.

Every drone strike or missile launch now bites deeper because there is no replacement waiting beyond the horizon.

For **NATO**, it is containment by proxy.

The alliance did not need to send ships or risk escalation. Turkey’s enforcement did the job.

And for **Turkey**, it is pure leverage.

By following the treaty to the letter, Ankara stays neutral while still shaping the outcome of the conflict and reminding everyone that control of the straits means control of the sea.

The Montreux Convention was never meant as a weapon, but history has a habit of repurposing old tools.

As the war drags on, Russia’s fleet continues to degrade, not from battles lost but from **isolation enforced by international law**.

At this pace, analysts estimate the BSF could lose half its effective strength by 2026. Ships rust in dock. Morale erodes. Training suffers. Even victory at sea would change little if the fleet itself cannot evolve.

It is a strange kind of warfare, one fought with **clauses instead of cannons**.

In the shadow of the Bosphorus bridges, civilian ferries glide past every day, unaware that their route has become one of the most strategically important waterways on earth.

The world’s attention remains fixed on the trenches in Donetsk and the skies over Kharkiv.

But hundreds of miles to the south, an invisible blockade has already reshaped the war’s future.

The Montreux Convention, written when battleships ruled the waves, has outlived them all,
and in doing so, quietly decided the fate of a modern fleet.

“Empires fall fast in battle. But sometimes, they simply run out of sea.”

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For decades, the clause gathered dust, relevant only to historians and naval lawyers.

Then, in February 2022, the clause woke up.

The clause has been invoked many times in various forms, but the most dramatic was Turkey's closure of the straits to belligerent warships of any nation for almost the entire duration of World War II.

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