

HISTORY This Week EP 326: Mutiny on the Black Sea EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. June 27, 1905. I'm Sally Helm.

It's the last morning of Ippolit Gilyarovsky's life.

He wakes up in a battleship on the Black Sea. The Potemkin. It's sunny. Hot. Hotter than June is supposed to be in this part of the world. Gilyarovsky probably notices the unusual weather as he steps out onto the deck. He's spent many days on the ocean as an ordinary sailor in the Russian Navy. He's now a strict executive officer. A harsh enforcer of the rules. And, in the eyes of those he commands, the most despised officer on the ship.

By afternoon, the air is still, the sun beating down on the Potemkin, and Gilyarovsky has heard rumors of a problem. He has spies among the sailors on the ship. He makes it his business to know what's going on—and to put down any insubordination. He decides to put in a surprise appearance on the mess deck. Where the sailors are sitting down to a lunch of borscht. A classic Russian soup—sour, red, usually made of beets and beef and cabbage.

Except, when he gets there, he finds that the sailors are not eating their borscht at all. In fact, they are refusing to eat anything except bread. Because, they say, the meat in the borscht has gone bad. It was stinking outside on the spar deck earlier. They smelled it. And they won't have it. They're shouting. Beating their bowls on the tables. Telling the cooks to throw the disgusting borscht overboard.

Gilyarovsky can see: these men aren't just disgruntled. They're possessed by something like a revolutionary fervor. He tries to stamp it out then and there. *Silence*, he calls. *Why don't you eat your Borscht?* The sailors answer with a roar of anger. *We're not doing it. Eat the Borscht yourself.*

Gilyarovsky hurries off to take refuge in the wood-paneled room where his fellow officers are eating their lunch – not the same borscht. On his way there, Gilyarovsky must glimpse the sparkling deep blue waters around him. Within hours, his body will be thrown overboard, into that very sea.

Today: mutiny. What led sailors on the battleship Potemkin to turn on their officers? And how did that uprising help take down the Czar of Russia?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: In 1905, The Russian Navy is organized like the rest of society. In a strict hierarchy. In Russia as a whole, power and wealth are concentrated in the hands of the Czar and his nobles. On a battleship, the captain rules by decree, supported by his twenty officers.

Mark Steinberg: **One of the things that's really striking about the Navy, even more than the army, is that just about every high-level officer we're talking about, the captains on the ship, uh, and the top officers, are members of the aristocracy.**

Sally Helm: Professor Mark Steinberg is a historian of Russian History and the author of a book about the Russian Revolution. He told us the captain of the Battleship Potemkin was Yvegny Golikov. And that, of course...

Mark Steinberg: **Golikov was an aristocrat. He was a nobleman.**

Sally Helm: A 51-year-old nobleman with what one account describes as “a cone-shaped beard and the short, thick neck of a bulldog.” Captain Golikov’s attitudes are typical of his time, and of his position in the Russian military. He looks down on anyone below him in rank and in class – meaning, every sailor on the Potemkin. Many of them come from peasant stock. Off the ship, they’d been forced to work the land as serfs.

Mark Steinberg: **They weren't owned as human beings. The land was owned, and they weren't allowed to leave it.**

Sally Helm: On the ship, things felt much the same. The sailors would be conscripted, sometimes for years, taken from their families, forced to toil away with little reward.

Mark Steinberg: **There is this sort of repetition of class inequality and class brutality on Navy ships.**

Sally Helm: After their mini-rebellion in the mess hall, the sailors hear the beating of the drums – their order to assemble on the ship’s deck. They now stand before Captain Golikov. They’re hungry. And they know that any moment, they could be beaten ... or worse.

But many of the sailors feel that they’re approaching some kind of limit on the abuses they endure: sleeping quarters more suited to cattle, bans on leaving the ship while in port—all while facing the threat of death in battle. And now they’re supposed to eat a lunch of maggot-infested slop?

Mark Steinberg: **They believed that their human dignity is what was at stake here, that they had been humiliated, not just about the meat. The meat was the catalyst, but that long history of humiliation and degradation and insults to their humanity. They believed they were human beings and deserved to be treated as such.**

Sally Helm: Journalist Neal Bascomb is the author of “Red Mutiny,” a book about the Potemkin. He brings us back to that doomed officer who entered the mess hall to find the beginnings of a revolt. That officer now stands on the deck of the battleship, alongside his captain.

Neal Bascomb: **The second in command of the battleship Potemkin was this martinet named Gilyarovsky.**

Sally Helm: A martinet is someone who likes manipulating people, a sort of cruel puppet master. That pretty much sums up Second Officer Gilyarovsky.

Neal Bascomb: **He would, you know, run up to sailors and start yelling in their face for absolutely no reason. Would strike them. they could be flogged. They could be punished on an absolute whim. And so, they felt trapped, and they were ruled by these absolutely miserable officers.**

Sally Helm: Officers who tended to be the dregs of the Russian Navy. Because many of the best had already been sent off to fight in a war. Japan and Russia were fighting the Russo-Japanese war in the Yellow Sea—half a world away from the Black Sea, where the Potemkin is.

Neal Bascomb: **And so, you have these inexperienced officers. The worst of the lot. Being charged with the Black Sea Fleet.**

Sally Helm: Now it’s noon. Most of the Potemkin's 763-man crew stand stiffly on deck beneath the burning sun, jammed against the rails from stem to stern. Captain Golikov reminds them that there is a remedy for those who “forget discipline” by refusing to eat their food: “You will be hanged.” He says there’s enough rope aboard for everyone. And then, he orders the sailors to honor military discipline by choking down the borscht. Golikov tells them:

Neal Bascomb: **The doctor is here. He tells you to eat it. You're going to eat. And that just stirs up the sailors even more. And they begin to hold the line and say, "No, we won't, we won't eat that." And Gilyarovsky says, “if you don't there will be consequences.”**

Sally Helm: Captain Golikov gives the crew one last chance to obey him. He says, "Whoever wants to eat the Borscht, step forward." For emphasis, Second Officer Gilyarovsky screams, “Hurry up!”

Twelve men follow the order, but the rest stay put. One of the rebels cries out, “Eat it yourself, you dragon! This is the devil's ashes!”

Neal Bascomb: **And they say, “down with the officers, we will not eat this.”**

Sally Helm: At this, Captain Golikov shouts, “Call out the guard!” Two columns of ten men storm onto the deck, each carrying a rifle fixed with a bayonet.

The sailors start pushing and shoving—some stepping forward, others taking a fallback position near the ship’s gun turret.

And now Second Officer Gilyarovsky makes a fateful decision.

Neal Bascomb: Gilyarovsky, who could have quieted things down at this point who could’ve found some kind of middle ground, he went the other way. He decides this is a challenge to my authority. This will not stand, and he calls for the tarpaulin.

Sally Helm: The men know what this means: someone is going to die.

Neal Bascomb: If you're looking for that moment, when the dynamite was lit, it was when Gilyarovsky calls for the tarpaulin.

Sally Helm: The sailors understand what is supposed to happen next.

Neal Bascomb: They are going to bring a sail and lay it down onto the deck. He is going to command any number of sailors to stand on top of that tarpaulin.

Sally Helm: A firing squad will line up

Neal Bascomb: And if they continue to refuse the order to eat their Borscht, they will be shot.

Sally Helm: Their bodies will fall onto the tarpaulin. No sense bloodying the deck.

A group of 30 sailors is now pinned against the railing on the deck of the Potemkin. They’ve been slow to move, or simply confused. Several sob, “Sir, don’t shoot. We aren’t mutineers.” But Second Officer Gilyarovsky is determined to make an example of them. He feels like he can do it. After all, he’s the noble, high-born officer. And they’re just lowly sailors.

But Gilyarovsky is about to find out that he doesn’t hold all the cards. A group of sailors on The Battleship Potemkin has for months been preparing for a moment just like this.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: On the deck of the Potemkin: pandemonium. The captain has called out the guard. Second Officer Gilyarovsky has called for the tarpaulin. And two men on the deck are thinking: this is our moment.

For months, a pair of gifted leaders has been organizing fellow sailors to fight back. The first is Grigory Valkulenchuk. Neal Bascomb writes that he has “a distinguished black handlebar

mustache...and preternatural calm.” He’s known to frequent the gatherings of would-be Russian revolutionaries.

Neal Bascomb: Valkulenchuk was a natural leader. People sort of instantly looked up to him. And so, he was very much the leader of sailors aboard the Potemkin.

Sally Helm: His partner in that is Afanasy Matyushenko.

Neal Bascomb: Matyushenko was a bit of a firebrand. I mean, he was a bit of a loose cannon. He had a temper. He sort of went with his gut instead of thinking things through.

Sally Helm: Afanasy Matyushenko had been born in a clay hut to a peasant family in a small Ukrainian village. At 15, he left home to work six days a week in a factory and started reading about the French Revolution.

Neal Bascomb: Matyushenko was a voracious reader. And so, he was very well-schooled on the theory behind the revolution.

Sally Helm: At 17, he began saying dangerous things to his fellow workers. “Do you know there are other countries that are not governed by a Czar,” he’d ask them. “And that the people in those countries live better than we do?”

At 21, the Russian Navy informed Matyushenko that he’d been conscripted. A typical fate for peasants like him and like Valkulenchuk.

Neal Bascomb: They both found themselves on this track in life that they didn't want.

Sally Helm: They see men with money evade military service by paying bribes. But they have no money. So, the navy owns the next seven years of their lives.

But when they get conscripted into the military, Valkulenchuk and Matyushenko don’t leave their revolutionary politics behind. They start organizing, secretly. Along with other revolutionaries, spread out on other nearby battleships, they hatch a plan.

Neal Bascomb: They are going to stage a fleet-wide mutiny across the Black Sea.

Sally Helm: A show of strength against all those power-crazed, aristocratic officers. It was supposed to happen in about two weeks. But looking out across the deck of the Potemkin, Valkulenchuk and Matyushenko see that, clearly...their moment has come early.

Matyushenko, the firebrand, gestures toward the sailors who are to be shot and cries out, “Brothers! What are they doing to our comrades?” Then he points at the captain. “Enough of Golikov drinking our blood!”

Neal Bascomb: This can't stand. We won't make, we won't let this happen any longer. We need to take command in the ship.

Sally Helm: And the mutiny truly begins.

Matyushenko and Valkulenchuk dash below-decks to grab rifles and ammunition that they've stashed behind a religious shrine. Several of their fellow sailors follow.

Neal Bascomb: One of the key marching orders is to seize the armory to seize rifles.

Sally Helm: These sailors are revolutionaries now, part of a wave of discontent sweeping through the country in the form of labor strikes and protests in the major cities. The sailors are armed, they're back on deck, and ...

Neal Bascomb: Directly confronting the officers.

Sally Helm: Matyushenko is ordered to lower his rifle. He replies, "I'll put down this rifle when I don't have to live like a corpse."

Neal Bascomb: Gilyarovsky says, "fire on these soldiers." He fires his rifle and hits Valkulenchuk.

Sally Helm: Grigory Valkulenchuk, the preternaturally calm leader with the black handlebar mustache. A man who understood the risks of mutiny ... and of revolution. Anticipating this moment, he once told a friend, "If I'm to suffer, I know it's for the people."

Blood streams from Valkulenchuk's chest. But he rushes towards Gilyarovsky and grabs the muzzle of his rifle. Another shot rings out ... Valkulenchuk stumbles. A petty officer has shot him in the back. The fiery Matyushenko rounds the corner. He sees his dead friend with the hated Second Officer Gilyarovsky standing over him. Gilyarovsky shoots at Matyushenko ... but misses.

Neal Bascomb: And then he is just overtaken. By Matyushenko and other sailors and quite quickly killed.

Sally Helm: This when the sailors toss Gilyarovsky overboard.

Neal Bascomb: Gunfire is now erupting across the ship. This mob mentality sort of takes over that Matyushenko and Valkulenchuk planned on and have caused, but there's a certain point it becomes this mob of men who are deeply unhappy about their lives and deeply, unhappy about their officers. And it becomes a bit of a bloodbath. A number of officers are thrown overboard, shot. The captain Golikov is hiding, out in the ship and he's

found and is dragged by his feet onto the deck. I mean, it is a brutal mutiny, there's no way around it.

Sally Helm: Captain Golikov meets the same fate as his second officer ... at the bottom of the sea. On board the ship, the revolutionaries seize control of the engine room. They take over the wireless telegraph to stop word of the uprising getting out to the military higher-ups. All of this had been planned out beforehand by the sailor's slain hero, Grigory Valkulenchuk. Now, says Mark Steinberg, the question is, what to do with his body?

Mark Steinberg: **Oddly, they don't want to bury him at sea. They want to bury him in the ground, but they also know there's a revolution going on in Odessa.**

Sally Helm: Odessa is the largest city in the Russian Empire. And the workers there are on strike. The Potemkin heads to this nearby city bearing the body of Grigory Valkulenchuk. It's a message. They want to inflame resentment against a rigid social order that keeps people in their place, as if the whole country were a naval ship run by ruthless officers.

Mark Steinberg: **Let's go and show the people what happens. And they're making a political point, they're part of a revolution. This is not random. They were still hoping to get the entire black sea fleet to join them.**

Sally Helm: Remember, the rotten borscht has kicked things off early...but other revolutionaries are already seeding mutinies on the rest of the ships in the Black Sea Fleet. Soon, the sailors of the Potemkin, led by Matyushenko, arrive in Odessa. They lay Valkulenchuk against the great symbol of the city – a grand stairway that faces the Black Sea like arms spread out in greeting. It's called the Richelieu Steps. After this day, the name will change. Russians will call it, The Potemkin Steps.

The sailors place a lit candle in Valkulenchuk's hands and leave a written message on his chest.

Mark Steinberg: **It says, for a spoonful of soup --borscht, they even tell you what type soup it was and part of that statement was "enough of the vampires who are ruling Russia," because vampires was a sort of symbol they're using of: what are the ruling class? "They're the ones who suck our blood and they represent absolute evil. They're vampires. And we're going to fight for our freedom.**

Neal Bascomb: **The setup of this funeral stirs the population of Odessa even further. So, you have thousands of people congregating to see Valkulenchuk's body, to see this massive battleship on the water. To realize that revolutionaries now control those battleship.**

Sally Helm: A thousand miles to the north, a telegram arrives in Saint Petersburg. Czar Nicholas II reads it ... and is horrified.

Neal Bascomb: There's nothing that scares a dictator more than open rebellion in their military. If you have mutiny in that, you are on the precipice of losing your power.

Sally Helm: Czar Nicholas II is a member of the Romanovs – the aristocratic family that has been ruling Russia since 1613. He just can't understand why these people are complaining about their lot.

Mark Steinberg: The world that Nicholas inhabited in his head was a world of a traditional monarchy. In which by definition, he was a good person, a moral person, because every Monarch is anointed by God. God would not anoint somebody who was not good.

Sally Helm: He believes the Russian people would be lost if they weren't bossed around by someone like ... well, like him. The Czar puts it this way:

Mark Steinberg: Russians love a strong hand. Russians don't like democracy and freedom. They want to be taken care of. And I'm the father. He was living in a world in which he thought the Russian people loved him.

Sally Helm: ...which is an odd thing to think. Six months earlier, protestors arrived at the gates of the Czar's winter palace with a petition calling for reform.

Mark Steinberg: What does Nicholas do? He says, "this is not allowed. Send troops against them and shoot." Which they did. And that led to a revolution in which actually a lot of people who marched said, "we don't have a Czar anymore."

Sally Helm: When Nicholas learns that revolutionaries have seized the Battleship Potemkin, his reaction is similar.

Neal: He calls his Naval minister to St. Petersburg to see him. He calls the head of the Black Sea Fleet. And says, you have to go down there, and you have to fix this you need to put this down. Because this cannot stand.

Sally Helm: A detachment of Cossack soldiers is sent into Odessa.

Mark Steinberg: When you say the Cossacks are coming, that's far worse than any other form of military or police repression. The Cossacks are the most brutal part of the Russian army. That's how they're seen. They are the enforcers; they are the riot police. They are, they're terrible. They would run into a crowd with horses, with their sabers out.

Sally Helm: That's what happens in Odessa. That, and worse. Matyushenko and his men look on in despair from the deck of Potemkin. They could try to drive the Cossacks away by training the ship's big guns on the city ... but they hold back.

Neal Bascomb: They're worried about killing civilians. And so, the Potemkin ultimately leaves Odessa and begins sailing away.

Sally Helm: Czar Nicholas II orders his elite Black Sea Squadron to hunt them down.

Neal Bascomb: We're talking half a dozen other battleships. Torpedo destroyers.

Sally Helm: A few days later, at dawn, the Potemkin finds itself facing those ships, lined up in battle formation.

Neal Bascomb: The guns are ready on both sides. Both sides are ready to sink the other. you have the Battleship Potemkin alone, sailing straight at the Black Sea Fleet.

Sally Helm: It looks like one ship against a huge state-backed military. But Matyushenko knows that scattered throughout those other ships are revolutionaries who might rise up and overthrow their officers. So, he takes a gamble. He orders the Potemkin to advance.

Neal Bascomb: And the Potemkin sails straight through these ships and nobody fires.

Sally Helm: The battleship circles back and charges at the squadron a second time.

Neal Bascomb: You have this extraordinary moment called the Silent Battle.

Sally Helm: Silent, because it isn't a battle at all. The sailors of the squadron hold their fire. They refuse to attack these revolutionaries. And this one act of rebellion pushes some of the sailors even further.

Neal Bascomb: This causes several of the ships to mutiny. One in particular, the St. George, overthrows all their officers and joins the Potemkin as well as another ship. Now you have a fleet of mutinied ships on the Black Sea.

Sally Helm: Grigory Valkulenchuk's vision of a fleetwide rebellion is coming to pass ... but it doesn't last. When the fleet returns to Odessa, sailors loyal to the Czar reassert themselves.

Neal Bascomb: Betrayed from the inside, the St. George returns to the Black Sea Fleet. The Potemkin is once again alone.

Sally Helm: The fleetwide mutiny has collapsed. Matyushenko and his men now have just one last task: to escape with their lives. They sail south to the Romanian port of Costanza.

Neal Bascomb: They are given safe harbor by the government there and they leave the ship, essentially as heroes.

Sally Helm: In a final act of rebellion, the men flood the Potemkin, sending it to the bottom of the Black Sea.

Czar Nicholas II does not emerge from the tumult unscathed. For one thing, he's forced to rethink his war with Japan.

Neal Bascomb: The mutiny was one of the reasons that he pushed for peace to end the Russo Japanese war. And secondly, it instigated a number of reforms. To give the people of Russia more power.

Sally Helm: Reforms known as the October Manifesto. They call for:

Mark Steinberg: A real legislature and guaranteed civil rights, the right to assemble free speech.

Sally Helm: The October Manifesto also calls for the creation of an elected legislature called the Duma, which theoretically has the power to approve or reject the Czar's laws. And, under pressure:

Mark Steinberg: Nicholas said, okay, Nicholas agreed and signed an October manifesto, regretted it for the rest of his life said it was a big mistake. Tried to take a lot of it back.

Sally Helm: In April of 1906, the Duma convenes its first session and calls for the Czar to treat the revolutionaries with leniency, and to enact political and land reforms. Czar Nicholas II refuses. In signing the manifesto, he'd taken a real step towards a constitutional monarchy, and guaranteed civil rights.

Mark Steinberg: Things could have been different. He could have kept his promise.

Sally Helm: But he doesn't. He dissolves the Duma and largely thwarts the reforms. And yet, something has been revealed about the Czar and his grip on power.

Neal Bascomb: This was just enough weakness, just enough fuel, to show the people of Russia that if we rebel, if we say enough is enough, Nicholas II, will fold.

Sally Helm: Many have described the events on the Potemkin in the summer of 1905 as a kind of "dress rehearsal" for the revolution that eventually comes, in 1917, to topple the Russian monarchy. Like the uprising on the Potemkin, it's planned and organized. Informed by a larger sense of politics and history. And...it's also people responding in immediate desperation to a system that considers them disposable. Serfs without dignity. *We've had enough*, they think. *Better risk death than live another day like this.*

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to HISTORY This Week. And for more listening, check out our brand-new show, *Sports HISTORY This Week*. Very exciting!! Hear from sports' legends like Billy Jean King and discover the story behind some of the biggest sports moments in history. And for other moments throughout history that are worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the history channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please send us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410. We are reading and listening, and we'd really love to hear from you, so please reach out.

Special thanks to our guests Neal Bascomb, author of *Red Mutiny: Eleven Fateful Days on the Battleship Potemkin* and Russian Revolution historian Dr. Mark Steinberg of University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. His most recent book is *Russian Utopia: A Century of Revolutionary Possibilities*.

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