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DID A SOVIET MERCHANT SHIP ENCOUNTER THE PEARL HARBOR STRIKE FORCE?

Marty Bollinger

Over the past two decades several authors have advanced the proposition that a Soviet freighter, traveling from the west coast of North America to Vladivostok in Russia's Far East, encountered the Japanese carrier attack force bearing down on Hawaii in the days before 7 December 1941. There is further speculation that this merchantman reported its contact to Soviet authorities, or that the circumstances surrounding its voyage indicate that the Soviets knew of the impending attack on Pearl Harbor. In any case, such warning was either not passed on to American authorities or was delivered but not acted upon. Therefore, it is argued, this incident is further evidence of duplicity in the events surrounding America's entry into World War II, though views differ as to whether that charge is most appropriately leveled against the U.S. or Soviet government.

This scenario has become fodder for observers ranging from serious academics to conspiracy theorists.¹ But did it happen? A careful review of the data, including detailed shipping records in late 1941 from both Russian and American sources, suggests this encounter was highly improbable and that much of the controversy is based on confusion and misunderstanding about the ships involved and the routes they would have taken.

EVOLUTION OF THE CONTACT SCENARIO

Authors have advanced several variations of a scenario involving the interception of the Japanese carrier force by a Soviet merchant ship, and the story has evolved over time, as have the identities of the Soviet ships in question. One of the earliest accounts, and the only one to describe a specific encounter, was published in 1979 in *The Reluctant Admiral*, a biography of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto by Hiroiyuki Agawa.² Though Agawa does not suggest that the encounter is part

of a broader conspiracy and does not even say the ship involved was Soviet, his book is nonetheless the “patient zero” of this controversy. Agawa describes an encounter that took place on 6 December, Tokyo time, which was still 5 December in Hawaii:

In fact, on December 6 the [Admiral Chuichi] Nagumo force did catch sight of one passing vessel of a third nation. Those in command of the task force watched the progress of the ship in question, a merchantman, with an extraordinary degree of tension. Had it shown any signs of radioing a report on the movements of the task force to anyone else, it would probably have found itself at the bottom of the sea within a few minutes. The vessel, however, must have thought that the Nagumo force was a fleet engaged in exercises—or possibly it made a correct guess as to its purpose and was too scared to signal its find—for it soon disappeared from sight without anything happening.³

If true, this scenario puts the intercept at a location about 950 nautical miles north of Hawaii in the vicinity of latitude 37° north, 161° west, just two days before the infamous attack. Unfortunately for those wishing to track down the original sources, Agawa does not provide a reference for this story or even a bibliography, and the ship and its nationality remain unspecified.

In 1985 a retired American rear admiral, Edwin T. Layton, citing Agawa’s version of an encounter, contributed an additional scenario in his *“And I Was There”: Pearl Harbor and Midway—Breaking the Secrets*.⁴ Layton labors to advance several possible explanations for mysterious radio signals detected by a radio operator aboard *Lurline*, a Matson liner operating in the Pacific in early December 1941. It is often reported that these signals, picked up between 1 and 3 December, and in a form not intelligible to *Lurline*’s radio operator, must have been from the Japanese strike force.⁵ These signals, and the circumstances surrounding the subsequent loss of the *Lurline*’s radio logbook, have long served as substantiation for conspiracy theorists regarding American foreknowledge of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Layton puts forward the hypothesis that the Soviet steamship *Uritskii* could have been the source of these radio transmissions.⁶ He notes that the Japanese admirals at sea had been warned by their counterparts ashore to be on the lookout for two Soviet ships operating in the North Pacific and postulates that one of them had to have been *Uritskii*, since it left San Francisco on its way to Vladivostok about the same time as the Japanese fleet left the Kuril Islands for its attack on Pearl Harbor. Layton also repeats Agawa’s story of an encounter at sea on 5 December (Hawaii time) and concludes that “the timing and location of the contact reveal that the vessel sighted by the *Kido Butai* [special attack force, i.e., the carrier strike force] could have been only *Uritskii*.”⁷

Independently of any encounter at sea, the voyage of *Uritskii* also plays a vital role in Layton's complex theory that the Soviets knew of the Japanese plans in advance.⁸ This theory is based on his observation that the United States never intercepted any warning sent by Japanese spies in San Francisco back to Japan regarding the sailing of *Uritskii* on a possible converging course with the attack fleet. In a bit of tortured and incomplete logic, Layton argues this lack of a warning suggests collusion between the Soviets and Japanese and that therefore the Soviets had to have known of the plans in advance. Layton further suggests that at least some of this information may have made its way to President Franklin D. Roosevelt by 26 November, either intercepted by U.S. intelligence or provided by the Soviet premier, Iosif Stalin, to the United States.

In 1990, Michael Slackman went farther, claiming without reservation that the ship "of a third nation" encountered on 5 December (Hawaii time) was in fact *Uritskii*, citing Agawa and Layton as his sources. Slackman further argues, in the spirit of Sherlock Holmes, that the absence of a radio transmission from *Uritskii* following this encounter raises the possibility of collusion, as put forward by Layton, though it "by no means prove[s] that the Soviets knew of the Japanese plans."⁹

Another author, though he actually refuted the role of *Uritskii* as a candidate for an encounter, is relevant because he introduced a new ship into the scenario, the tanker *Azerbaidzhan*. Robert D. Stinnett, in *Day of Deceit: The Truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor* (published in 2000), reports that the Japanese had been warned to be on the lookout for two Soviet ships, Layton's *Uritskii* as well as the tanker *Azerbaidzhan*, but that an actual encounter "didn't happen."¹⁰ Stinnett convincingly dismisses Layton's scenario around *Uritskii*, noting that the Soviet ship, shortly after sailing from San Francisco for Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka, proceeded instead to Astoria, Oregon, and remained there until 5 December.¹¹ Stinnett also reports that *Azerbaidzhan*, which left the United States around the same time, was "diverted south," though without explaining what that means or presenting compelling evidence that such a diversion ruled out a potential encounter at sea with the Japanese.¹²

This controversy continued in 2001 with the publication of Michael Gannon's *Pearl Harbor Betrayed: The True Story of a Man and a Nation under Attack*. Building upon Agawa's original report, published in English in 1979, about an encounter on 5 December (Hawaii time), Gannon contends that the most likely candidates for an interception were the Soviet tanker *Azerbaidzhan*, as suggested by Stinnett, as well as the freighter *Uzbekistan*, a newcomer to the controversy.¹³ He does not mention *Uritskii*, though he cites Layton as a source. Gannon refers his readers to Layton's argument that the failure of the Japanese to sink this Russian ship indicates the possibility of collusion between the Soviet and Japanese

governments, but he is very clear that such collusion is only conjecture and “has never been proved.”

That is where we stand today. Three Soviet ships have been suggested for a potential encounter with the Japanese: *Uritskii*, *Uzbekistan*, and *Azerbaidzhan*. The date of the encounter ranges from 1 December to 5 December. If the former, the encounter would have been about 1,750 nautical miles to the northwest of Pearl Harbor, in the vicinity of 43° north, 178° east. If the latter, the encounter would have taken place about 950 nautical miles to the north of Pearl Harbor, in around 37° north, 161° west.

UNRAVELING THE STORY

Hiroiyuki Agawa was the first author who published an account wherein the Japanese fleet actually intercepted a merchant ship, and no such account has surfaced since. Certainly there has been ample opportunity. In 1993, Donald J. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon presented *The Pearl Harbor Papers: Inside the Japanese Plans*, a compilation of firsthand material from those involved in the planning and execution of the mission.¹⁴ This includes an affidavit from Commander Minoru Genda, the chief planner of the attack, and the diaries of Captain Shigeshi Uchida and Commander Sadamu Sanagi, both of whom served in the Operations Section of the Naval General Staff in December 1941. The book also presents entries from the war diaries of the Combined Fleet, the destroyer *Akigumo*, the 5th Carrier Division, 1st Destroyer Squadron, and 3rd Battleship Division. None of these accounts mentions anything about an encounter with a merchant ship, though the diaries of those involved indicate that great care was taken to avoid detection and refer to reports from Japanese fleets in other parts of the Pacific about encounters with Allied or other ships.¹⁵

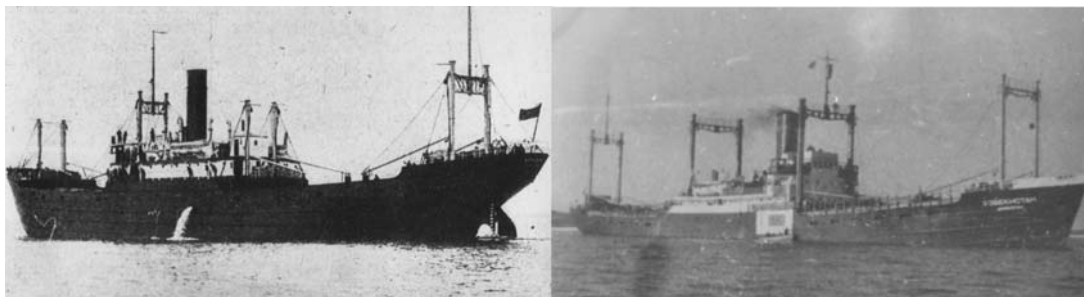
In his *Reluctant Admiral*, Agawa fails, as we have seen, to provide a source for his story of the encounter. In correspondence with the present author, Agawa confirms that he has never come across a written account of this encounter and that none exists in his personal records or in the official records maintained by the Military History Division of the Japanese Defense Agency.¹⁶ By his own account, his depiction is based on a comment made to him decades ago by an individual in the Military History Division. It is conceivable that this comment arose from warnings received by the carrier strike force of a Soviet ship sailing along its route rather than an actual encounter. It could also relate to an encounter between a Soviet merchant ship and a Japanese warship far from the carrier strike force.¹⁷

It is known that the Japanese were on the lookout for Soviet ships, as was documented in 1994 in *Pearl Harbor Revisited: United States Navy Communications Intelligence 1924–1941*.¹⁸ Prepared by Frederick D. Parker, of the Center for

Cryptological History of the U.S. National Security Agency, this publication presents intercepts of Japanese wartime naval communications, decoded by the United States after the war's end. One transmission, logged as SRN-116667, was sent on 27 November from the imperial headquarters to the striking force: "Although there are indications of several ships operating in the Aleutian area, the ships in the Northern Pacific appear chiefly to be Russian ships. . . . They are *Uzbekistan* (about 3,000 tons . . . 12 knots) and *Azerbaidzhan* (6,114 tons[,] less than 10 knots). Both are westbound from San Francisco."

Other accounts of this warning indicate that it identified the most likely time of an encounter as 27–29 November.¹⁹ It is clear now that Layton and Slackman, in advancing the case for *Uritskii* intercepting the Japanese, and that Stinnett, in refuting that contention, were in fact chasing a red herring—it was not *Uritskii* but *Uzbekistan*, along with *Azerbaidzhan*, that the Japanese were worried about. Layton's original conspiracy argument, which hinges on the absence of intercepted warnings regarding *Uritskii*, now falls apart: we now know, as Layton did not in 1985, that the reason the United States never intercepted such a specific warning is that none was ever sent.

FIGURE 1



Layton, Slackman, and Stinnett mistook *Uritskii* (left) as the subject of a warning sent to the Japanese fleet. In fact, the warning concerned the *Uzbekistan* (right).

Author's personal collection

Certainly the Japanese had reason to be concerned about the possibility of an encounter with a Soviet merchant fleet. In late 1941, ships moving across the North Pacific were given considerable attention by the Japanese, since the Imperial Japanese Navy was at the same time assembling its Hawaiian attack force in Hitokappu Bay on Etorofu (now Iturup) Island in the southern Kuril Islands. The degree of concern is illustrated in the extent to which the attack plan attended to the threat of accidental discovery by merchant shipping. Vice Admiral Ryunosuke Kusaka, chief of staff of the First Air Fleet in 1941, described the planning methodology: "After making an extensive study of all passages of ships all over the Pacific for the past ten years or more, the course was selected to pass through the line near 40 degrees North Latitude that any ships had never passed

before [*sic*], aiming to reach the point about 800 miles due north of the Hawaiian Islands.”²⁰

Alas, the ten years of historical shipping data missed a major change in trading patterns that began after 22 June 1941: an unprecedented flood of aid from the United States to the Soviet Union across the Pacific, part of a greatly expanded volume of merchant shipping between the Soviet Union and its trading partners in the Pacific. After Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Soviets “surged” the ships of their Far East State Sea Shipping Company for the purpose of obtaining vital materials. Some ships were dispatched to the South Pacific and Indian oceans to collect emergency supplies of tin, rubber, and food.²¹ Others were dispatched to the United States to secure emergency aid. Even though Washington did not formally extend the Lend-Lease program to the Soviet Union until 28 October, the Americans agreed on 2 August to provide the Soviets with emergency supplies, especially of aviation gasoline. The United States quickly put together an ad hoc fleet of American tankers to this end.²² Simultaneously, the first wave of four Soviet ships departed the United States for Vladivostok with emergency cargoes of fuel;²³ a second caravan of ships from the Soviet Far East merchant fleet left shortly thereafter.²⁴ At the same time, a third wave of ships headed the opposite way, to the United States.²⁵ It seems the route between San Francisco and Los Angeles and Vladivostok was crisscrossed with wakes, far in excess of historical trading patterns.

Japanese agents, already in place in West Coast ports to monitor commercial as well as naval ship movements, reported the departure of tankers from Los Angeles to the Soviet Union. Rear Admiral Giichi Nakahara, head of the navy’s Personnel Bureau, recorded the following in his diary on 22 August: “The U.S. is carrying on a propaganda actively [*sic*] that she is supporting Russia by supplying the latter with gasoline. Rumors run that oil tankers are headed for Vladivostok. But I wonder if it’s true or not. . . . It would be better for us to warn the U.S. that the American support of Russia is quite troublesome.”²⁶ The rumors were true, which caused concern for Japanese officials. Nakahara further wrote in his diary on 29 August: “Transportation route of the U.S. to supply Russia with materials for aid—it should be contrived that the route will not be made through the Japan Sea.”²⁷

Fortunately for Japan, the frantic burst of activity between the United States and the Soviet Far East began to slow as summer transitioned into autumn, in part due to growing tensions with Japan over the matter. After all, Japan was allied with Germany, with whom the Soviet Union was engaged in mortal combat. Moreover, Japan suffered under an oil embargo by the United States at the very time the Americans were dispatching tankers, bursting with gasoline, to Vladivostok, passing within sight of the Japanese home islands. Japan informed

the Soviet Union in late August that it would object to and potentially prevent shipments of aid to Russia via Vladivostok.²⁸ Less than a week later it was reported that the United States would shift the destination of Soviet aid from Vladivostok to points in the Persian Gulf, which would offer a more direct route to the Soviet war front and had recently opened up as a result of the joint Soviet-British occupation of Iran.²⁹

By mid-October worsening relations between the United States and Japan had led to a warning issued by the Navy Department for all U.S.-flagged ships in Asiatic waters to avoid areas where they might be attacked. These ships were advised to put into friendly ports to await instructions, suggesting to contemporary observers the likely termination of planned voyages to the USSR by fourteen American freighters.³⁰ Within a week the United States announced its plan to terminate *all* shipments of war materiel to Vladivostok, in favor of routes across the Atlantic to Arkhangel'sk.³¹ Contemporary reports refer to rumored threats by the new Hideki Tojo government in Japan, formed on 15 October. But the reason could have been more prosaic: it was being said that the docks at Vladivostok were overwhelmed with aid and that the long thin line of the Trans-Siberian Railway could not accommodate the accumulating stockpile. As was reported at the time: "Vladivostok has been temporarily abandoned as a port of entry for U.S. goods, not only because of the danger of friction with Japan. Vladivostok, though much farther south, has more ice than Archangel. Besides, the long Trans-Siberian Railway is far too busy carrying troops to the front and machinery from it."³²

This planned termination was apparent to Japan in late October. Rear Admiral Nakahara's diary for 24 October noted, "The United States made it clear that to transport materials for aiding the USSR through Vladivostok would be stopped." His diary for 26 October followed up: "The United States Navy Department made a showdown [*sic*] that the transportation route of sending material for the aid of the Soviet was changed to Boston–Archangel course."³³ By late October it was being reported in the American press that all U.S.-flagged ships voyaging to the Soviet Far East had been recalled to friendly ports.³⁴ But what of the few remaining *Soviet* ships already planning a voyage back home? How likely is it that one of these ships might have encountered the Japanese?

SOVIET SHIP MOVEMENTS IN NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER 1941

Fifty-five Soviet freighters and tankers operated outside Soviet waters in the Pacific region in 1941.³⁵ One, *Vatslav Vorovskii*, had been written off as a total loss after running aground on the Columbia Bar on 3 April. After the German invasion, eight others were sent to the South Pacific or Indian Ocean, and another fourteen transited from the Pacific to the Atlantic via the Panama Canal.³⁶ None

of these twenty-three ships is a candidate for an encounter with the Japanese carriers. Of the remaining thirty-two ships—that is, those operating in the North Pacific—some were held up in U.S. ports pending emergency repairs after having been declared unseaworthy by the Coast Guard. Others were unloading in Vladivostok in late November and early December 1941, and still others at that time were loading in American ports.

Of the fifty-five ships in total, only four sailed from the United States from West Coast ports to the Soviet Far East between 7 November and 30 November, which is the critical interval for a possible Soviet-Japanese encounter at sea. Any ship departing before 7 November would have in all likelihood been passing westward through the northern Kuril Islands when the Japanese fleet sailed eastward, over five hundred nautical miles to the south. Ships departing after 30 November could not have reached the Japanese fleet even had they sailed at high speed straight for the launch point north of Hawaii.³⁷

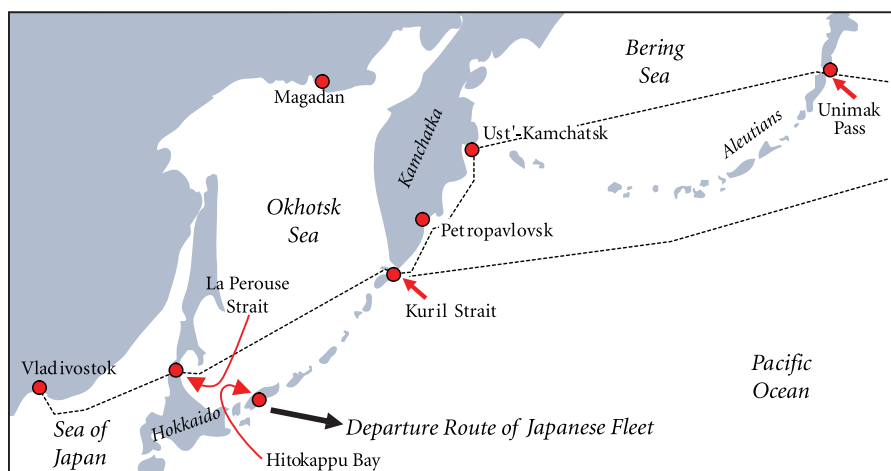
The four ships that sailed in this interval were *Uritskii*, *Azerbaidzhan*, *Uzbekistan*—all mentioned previously—and the timber carrier *Clara Zetkin*. *Uritskii* and *Clara Zetkin* can be ruled out quite easily. The former left San Francisco on 28 November heading to Portland, Oregon, on the Columbia River, and thence to Vladivostok. The latter departed the following day, also with Portland as its destination. Neither ship proceeded directly to Portland, both stopping instead on 1 December at Astoria, near the mouth of the Columbia. *Uritskii* remained there until 5 December. *Clara Zetkin* stayed a day longer, departing Astoria on 6 December. Neither could have intercepted the Japanese fleet.³⁸

This leaves *Uzbekistan* and *Azerbaidzhan*, the two ships put forward as candidates for an encounter by Gannon and the subjects of the original fleet warning sent by Tokyo in 1941. The former sailed from San Francisco on 12 November, heading to Vladivostok, and *Azerbaidzhan* followed two days later for the same destination.³⁹ Based only on the timing and intended destination, it is reasonable to suppose they might in fact have approached the Japanese fleet in late November—hence the warning sent to the Japanese task force.

This warning may have been unnecessary. The United States and the USSR had recently opened up a new route for Lend-Lease ships traveling to Vladivostok that greatly reduced the probability of an encounter. Up to the middle of 1941, Soviet ships would have followed a route that took them south of the Aleutians—and into the teeth of the prevailing westerly winds and along a rock-strewn and fog-covered coast. The new track led through Unimak Pass in the Aleutians into the Bering Sea, passing *north* of the Aleutian chain and reaching the Soviet Union near Ust'-Kamchatsk. This new route, about the same distance and somewhat safer, had been developed after a major hydrographic expedition launched in 1939 and continued in 1940;⁴⁰ up until then it had

been considered too dangerous, due to the lack of reliable charts. After August 1941 this northerly route became standard for Soviet ships on Lend-Lease missions and is known to have been in use in November 1941.⁴¹ Ice does not seem to have been an impediment; Russian ships were seen traveling through Unimak Pass as late in that winter as February.⁴²

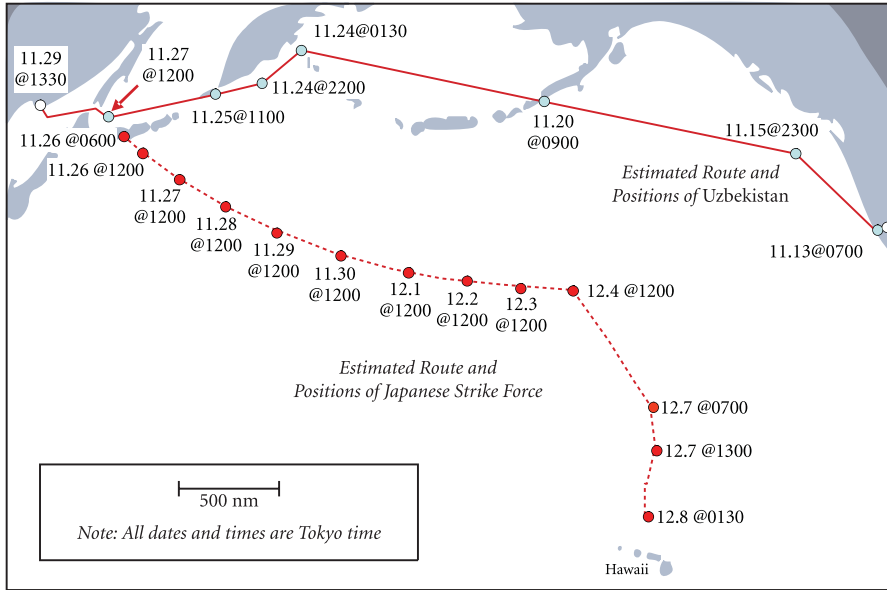
MAP 1
MAJOR SHIPPING ROUTES TO VLADIVOSTOK FROM U.S. WEST COAST



While the exact position of these ships at any particular time remains unknown, it is possible to develop reasonable estimates given the probable courses steered during the 4,700-nautical-mile trip to Vladivostok, known times of departure, and the ships' known speeds. For example, we know that *Uzbekistan* departed San Francisco on 12 November and that its estimated speed was twelve knots. Map 2 illustrates the probable track and positions of *Uzbekistan* along the route, as well as positions of the Japanese carrier strike force.

Given the assumptions reflected in map 2, *Uzbekistan* would have left San Francisco on a northerly heading, skirting the Gulf of Alaska until reaching Unimak Pass, then heading across the Bering Sea and making a landfall off Ust'-Kamchatsk around 24 November, then proceeding south to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka. If *Uzbekistan* did not stop at Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka, it would have passed through the Sea of Okhotsk and entered the Sea of Japan via the La Perouse Strait, heading thence to Vladivostok and arriving there around 29 November (Tokyo time). The Japanese fleet's closest point of approach would have been midday on 26 November (Tokyo time), shortly after it sailed from Hitokappu Bay, when *Uzbekistan* was about four hundred nautical miles north in the Sea of Okhotsk, on the other side of the Kuril Islands. As the Japanese fleet encountered periods of driving snow and dense fog during the first few days at

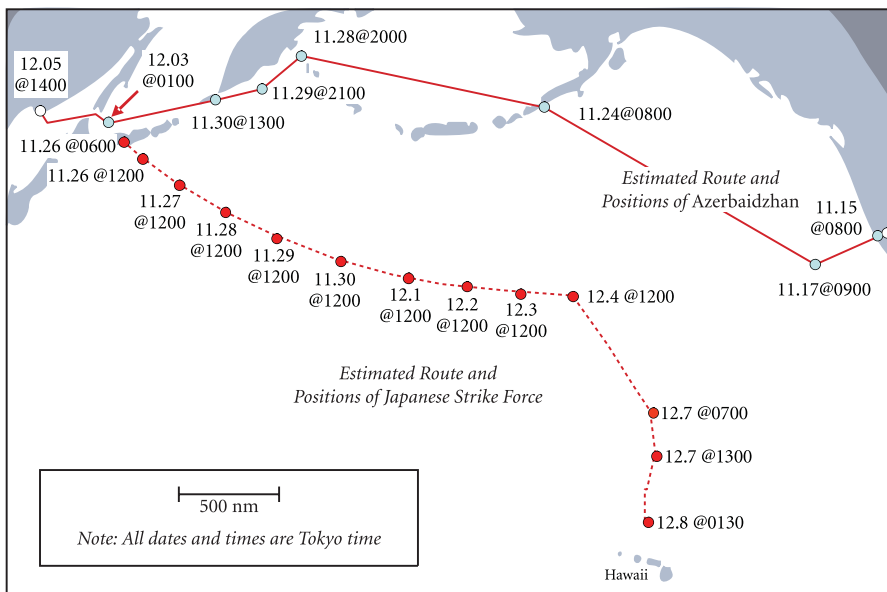
MAP 2 PROBABLE POSITIONS OF *UZBEKISTAN* AND JAPANESE STRIKE FORCE



sea, visual contact would have been uncertain even had the ships been much closer.⁴³

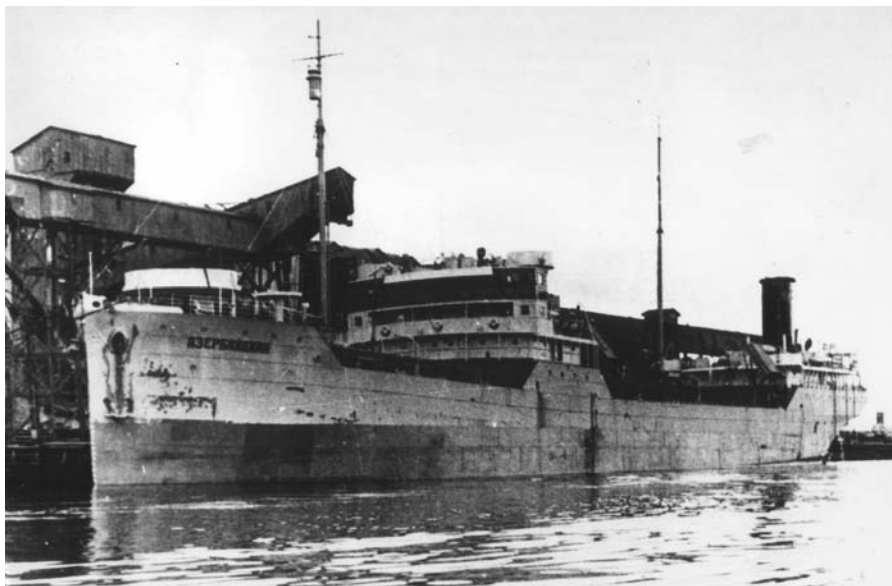
Azerbaidzhan was originally scheduled to depart San Francisco on 10 November, but that sailing was canceled, and it did not actually get under way until 14 November.⁴⁴ It would have followed the same route as *Uzbekistan*. Somewhat

MAP 3 PROBABLE POSITIONS OF *AZERBAIDZHAN* AND JAPANESE STRIKE FORCE



slower than *Uzbekistan*, it would have still been in the Bering Sea north of the Aleutians when the Japanese fleet departed for Hawaii, and the nearest point of approach would have occurred on 28 or 29 November (Tokyo time), on which dates *Azerbaidzhan* was about a thousand miles to the north. There is, however, one element of uncertainty surrounding *Azerbaidzhan*. The San Francisco Maritime Exchange log card for *Azerbaidzhan* recording the ship's departure from San Francisco at 10 AM adds the parenthetical comment "diverted south." It is unclear exactly what this means, and no precise records of this ship's movements in late 1941 have surfaced.⁴⁵ It is possible that the turn to the south was a function of the weather, for two days later, shortly after *Uzbekistan* sailed on 12 November, a major gale hit the Pacific Northwest, wreaking havoc with local shipping.⁴⁶ Perhaps *Azerbaidzhan* was aware of the approach of the storm and deviated slightly to the south to avoid it before heading toward the Alaskan coast, thence resuming the normal route to the Soviet Union.⁴⁷

FIGURE 2



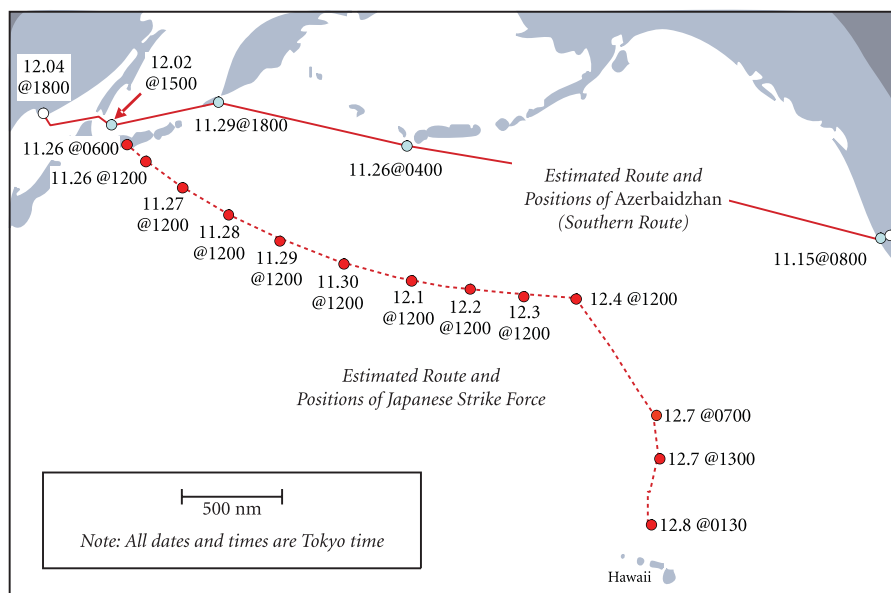
The Japanese strike force was also warned to be on the lookout for the Soviet tanker *Azerbaidzhan*.

Author's personal collection

But what if *Azerbaidzhan* did not follow the new northerly route to Vladivostok at all? What if the reference to "diverted south" indicates that the ship took the more traditional southerly route to Vladivostok? Or, what if its captain decided to take the shortest great-circle route home after maneuvering around the storm, then slashing the Pacific Northwest? In the former case, *Azerbaidzhan* would have reached the Aleutian Islands on 26 November, just about the time the Japanese fleet sailed from Hitokappu Bay. The closest point of

approach would have been around 28 November, when *Azerbaidzhan* would have been about five hundred nautical miles north of the Japanese fleet and heading in the opposite direction.

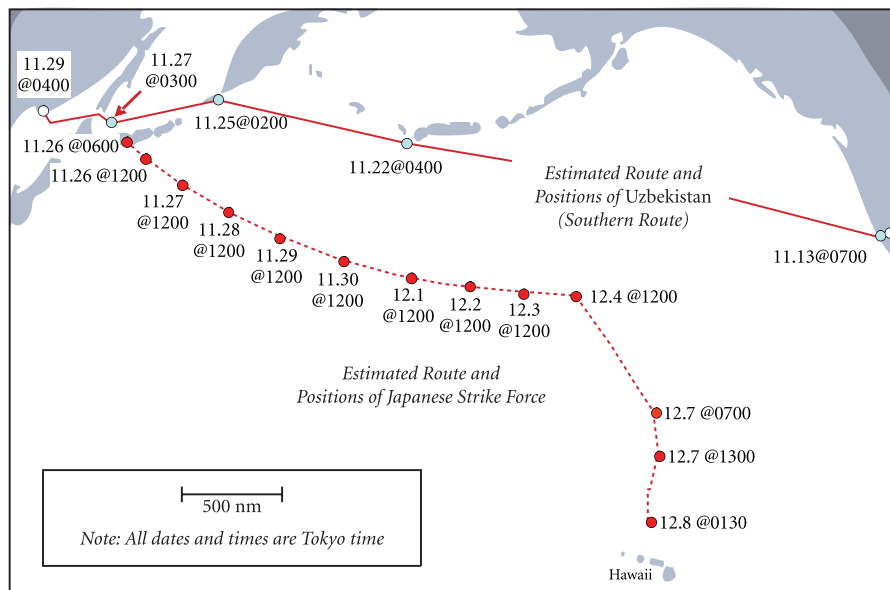
**MAP 4
PROBABLE POSITIONS OF AZERBAIDZHAN AND JAPANESE STRIKE FORCE,
ASSUMING A SOUTHERLY ROUTING**



Similarly, if *Uzbekistan* after avoiding the storm took a great-circle route, thereby passing well south of the Aleutian Islands, it still would have passed into the Sea of Okhotsk before the Japanese strike force sailed from the Kuril Islands and thus not have been in a position to encounter it. Moreover, even had such a meeting taken place near the Kuril Islands, it would have occurred within a few hundred miles of Japanese territory, reducing the significance of any sighting of a large Japanese fleet. After all, sighting a large number of Japanese warships exercising near home waters would have been less notable than finding that same fleet thousands of miles from home, near America's largest naval base in the Pacific.

There is, then, no evidence to support the view affirmed by Gannon and Slackman, and suggested by Layton, that the Japanese strike force heading for Hawaii encountered a Soviet merchant ship on 5 December 1941 (Hawaii time). On that day *Uritskii* and *Clara Zetkin* were in Astoria, *Uzbekistan* was most likely in Vladivostok or Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka, and *Azerbaidzhan* was entering the Sea of Okhotsk over a thousand miles from the Japanese fleet and moving in the opposite direction. Likewise, no evidence places a Soviet merchant ship in the vicinity of the Japanese fleet in the period 1–3 December, another scenario

MAP 5
PROBABLE POSITIONS OF *UZBEKISTAN* AND JAPANESE STRIKE FORCE,
ASSUMING A SOUTHERLY ROUTING



considered by Layton. The related hypothesis—that the failure to report such an encounter by the Soviets indicates that the Soviets knew of the impending attack in advance—can also be rejected based on the available data, inasmuch as it establishes that there *was* no encounter.

It is harder to refute out of hand the hypothesis that the Japanese force might have stumbled upon a Soviet ship much earlier in its journey, around 27 or 28 November. Surely the Japanese had been warned of this potential, and of *Uzbekistan* and *Azerbaidzhan* specifically. Interestingly, this is not the scenario advanced by Agawa, Layton, Slackman, or Gannon, all of whom place the encounter between three and eight days later. The evidence, however, suggests that neither ship was a candidate for such an encounter even during this earlier period, as their courses took them far from the Japanese fleet, with the closest point of approach hundreds of miles away, in fog and rain, and within or close to Japanese home waters. Therefore, it seems probable the Japanese did manage to maintain operational security during the tense voyage to Hawaii.

What became of the Soviet ships that played roles in this mystery? *Uritskii* left the Pacific in summer 1942 and became a world traveler, transiting the hazardous Northern Sea Route across the roof of the Soviet Union from Vladivostok to Arkhangel'sk, returning the following year to Vladivostok via the Panama Canal, thereafter continuing in operation in the Far East until removed from service in 1957. *Azerbaidzhan* eventually made its way to New York, where it joined the

Atlantic convoys on the infamous Kola Run. It was hit by an air-launched torpedo in convoy PQ-17 but managed to carry on, one of the few survivors of that ill-fated convoy. After the war it returned to civilian service in the Far East until it was removed from the shipping roster in 1975. *Clara Zetkin* operated for another three decades in the Pacific, ending its years in the Soviet fishing fleet until it was broken up in 1975.

FIGURE 3



Uzbekistan, the ship most likely to have encountered the Japanese, was lost on 1 April 1943 after running aground in Darling Creek, Vancouver Island.

Library and Archives Canada/Canada. Dept. of National Defence/PA-116031/PA-116032

Uzbekistan's career was not as long. The ship operated between the American West Coast and Russian Far East only until 1 April 1943, when it ran aground off Vancouver Island. Parts of the wreckage are still visible today, a sad and quiet reminder of a global conflict many decades ago—and of the intriguing questions that continue to arise even sixty-six years afterward.

NOTES

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1. The first book to advance this possibility is Edwin T. Layton's *And I Was There: Pearl Harbor and Midway—Breaking the Secrets* (New York: William Morrow, 1985). This book was reprinted in 2006 by Bluejacket Books, without change to the relevant material covered here. Other works advancing this theory include Michael Slackman, *Target: Pearl Harbor* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990); Peter B. Niblo, *Influence: The Soviet "Task" Leading to Pearl Harbor, the Iron Curtain, and the Cold War* (Oakland, Ore.: Elderberry, 2001); and Michael Gannon, *Pearl Harbor Betrayed: The True Story of a Man and a Nation under Attack* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002). (Gannon's book was initially published in 2001.)
2. Hiroyuki Agawa, *The Reluctant Admiral*, trans. John Bester (New York: Kodansha International, 1979). The Japanese-language original version of this book was published by the same author in 1969 as 山本五十六 [Yamamoto Isoroku] and describes the encounter in the same manner as in the English-language 1979 variant.
3. Agawa, *Reluctant Admiral*, p. 251.
4. Layton, *And I Was There*.
5. The story of *Lurline* and how its radio operator intercepted signals that appeared to indicate the Japanese fleet was advancing on Hawaii was introduced initially in published form by Ladislav Farago in the paperback version of *The Broken Seal* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), pp. 379–402. This was an updated version of the hardback book published by Random House in 1967. This story was also advanced by John Toland in *Infamy: Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982). Over time it has become clear that the *Lurline* radio intercepts provided no useful information as far as the movements of the Japanese fleet were concerned. See Philip H. Jacobsen's definitive paper, "Pearl Harbor: Radio Officer Leslie Grogan of the *SS Lurline* and his Misidentified Signals," *Cryptologia* 29, no. 2 (April 2005), pp. 97–120.
6. Layton, *And I Was There*, pp. 261–62.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 260–61. Layton cites two sources: Agawa's *Reluctant Admiral* and an "enlisted man's wartime account" titled *The Southern Cross* but otherwise unspecified. The latter is apparently the wartime account of *Akagi* crewman Iki Kuramoti (or Kuramoto), presented in U.S. Congress, *Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), p. 517. While Kuromoti confirms that warnings were issued about Russian ships, he reports that no such encounter took place.
8. Layton, *And I Was There*, pp. 220–21.
9. Slackman, *Target*, p. 71. Slackman cites both Layton and Agawa as sources for his statements. In fact neither Layton nor Agawa actually states that *Uritskii* definitely intercepted the Japanese fleet. Agawa does not name the ship in question, and while Layton strongly suggests that the ship in question was *Uritskii*, he does not state this as a fact.
10. Robert D. Stinnett, *Day of Deceit: The Truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor* (London: Constable, 2000), p. 160. Stinnett writes that both *Uritskii* and *Azerbaijdzhan* were mentioned in a warning sent from Japan to the attack fleet. He is incorrect in this, as the message actually mentions *Uzbekistan* and *Azerbaijdzhan*.
11. Stinnett is not the only author to have dismissed the potential involvement of *Uritskii*. More than a decade earlier, Russian author Nikolai Nikolaevich Yakovlev also ruled it out as a candidate, arguing in Пёрл-Харбор, 7 Декабря 1941 года: Быль и небыль [Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941: Reality and Fantasy] (Moscow: Politizdat, 1988), that it was preposterous to assume that *Uritskii*, a timber carrier designed for service in the Arctic, would have been involved in transport operations between the United States and the USSR in 1941. Of course, we now know for certain that it was.
12. Stinnett, *Day of Deceit*, pp. 160–61.
13. Gannon, *Pearl Harbor Betrayed*, p. 210.

14. Donald J. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *The Pearl Harbor Papers: Inside the Japanese Plans* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1993).
15. While Goldstein and Dillon focus their book on Pearl Harbor, their diaries and notes describe Japanese ship movements in other parts of the Pacific as well, including the Philippines.
16. E-mail correspondence in August 2005 between the author and Hiroyuki Agawa, as graciously relayed and translated by his son, Naoyuki Agawa.
17. This scenario is certainly plausible. A similar encounter occurred between a U.S. merchant ship returning from the Soviet Union and a Japanese warship patrolling the Kuril Islands. Capt. Henry M. Glick, who in late 1941 was a crew member aboard the U.S.-flag tanker *J. C. Fitzsimmons*, reports in a narrative in the author's collection that *Fitzsimmons* encountered a Japanese destroyer near the Kurils just ten hours before the attack on Pearl Harbor. As the United States and Japan were then not at war, the tanker was allowed to proceed without incident.
18. Frederick D. Parker, *Pearl Harbor Revisited: United States Navy Communications Intelligence, 1924–1941*, SuDoc D 1.2:P 32/3 (Washington, D.C.: National Security Agency Center for Cryptologic History, 1994).
19. Goldstein and Dillon, *Pearl Harbor Papers*, p. 184.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 140–41.
21. These ships included *Igarka*, *Arktikii*, *Mikoyan*, *Maxim Gorkii*, *Uelen*, *Perekop*, *Maikop*, *V. Mayakovskii*, and *Nevastroi*. See Victor Puzyurev, "Торговый Флот во Второй Мировой: Ленд-лиз через Тихий Океан" [Merchant Marine Fleet in World War II: Lend-Lease via the Pacific Ocean], *Морские вести России* [Sea Stories of Russia], no. 9-10 (2004). This article uses the Library of Congress transliteration protocol for Soviet ship names, except for ships named after a famous non-Russian person (e.g., Friedrich Engels, Clara Zetkin). Other transliteration protocols generate slightly different spellings.
22. First to arrive was the new tanker *LP St. Clair*, crossing the Pacific from Los Angeles and arriving in Vladivostok on 2 September. It was followed over the next few days by *Associated*, *J. C. Fitzsimmons*, *Montebello*, *Mojave* (carrying motor gasoline), *Huguenot*, and *Paul M. Gregg*. See "Shipping News," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 September 1941, p. 22; "Fourth American Tanker Sails for Russian Port," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 September 1941, p. 23; "Hitler Missed the Tanker," *Time*, 15 September 1941; "Oil Shipments to Russia Showing Gain in Volume," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 September 1941, p. A11; and "Shipping News," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 November 1941, p. 13.
23. The first wave included *Batumi*, *Minsk*, *Belomorkanal*, and *Komiles*. See: Puzyurev, "Merchant Marine Fleet in World War II"; "Russian Tanker Sails with Gas," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 August 1941, p. 1; and "Reds Help Solve Tanker Problem," *Washington Post*, 15 September 1941, p. 3.
24. These ships included *Angastroi*, *Menzhinskii*, *Uzbekistan*, *Uralmash*, *Urdarnik*, *Bolshoi Shantar*, *Sakhalin*, *Khabarovsk*, *Sergei Kirov*, *Kuznets Lesov*, and *Dzhurma*. See J. I. Ostrovskii, ed., *Дальневосточное Морское Пароходство: 1880–1980* [The Far East Sea Shipping Company: 1880–1980] (Vladivostok: Far East Book Publishing House, 1980), p. 192. The last ship, *Dzhurma*, was temporarily detached from its infamous duties as a Gulag transport ship for slave laborers. See Martin J. Bollinger, *Stalin's Slave Ships: Kolyma, the Gulag Fleet, and the Role of the West* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003).
25. These ships included *Felix Dzerzhinsky* (flagship of the Gulag fleet), *Komsomolsk*, and *Uritskii*. See Timothy Wilford, "Watching the North Pacific: British and Commonwealth Intelligence before Pearl Harbor," *Intelligence and National Security* 17, no. 4 (Winter 2002), pp. 152–53.
26. Goldstein and Dillon, *Pearl Harbor Papers*, p. 49.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
28. Bertram D. Hulens, "Tokyo Threat Reported," *New York Times*, 27 August 1941, p. 1. See also Otto D. Tolischus, "Japan Cautions U.S. on Gas for Reds," *Washington Post*, 28 August 1941, p. 3.
29. "Goods for Soviets to Be Rerouted," *New York Times*, 31 August 1941, p. F1.
30. Bertram D. Hulens, "Our Craft Warned: Navy Says Ships Were Called from Voyages for

- Instructions," *New York Times*, 18 October 1941, p. 1.
31. See, for example, William V. Nessly, "Archangel Chosen as Best Route: Officials Discount Japanese Threat," *Washington Post*, 23 October 1941, p. 1; and "Blunder Bares Our Plan for Russian Shipments," *New York Times*, 26 October 1941, p. E3.
 32. "Aid on the Wharves," *Time*, 17 November 1941. The Japanese had issued a warning on 27 August.
 33. Goldstein and Dillon, *Pearl Harbor Papers*, p. 63.
 34. "Non-Pacific Pacific," *Time*, 27 October 1941. *Time* reported that fifty-odd merchantmen had all returned to friendly ports, further speculating that ten or fifteen ships destined for the Soviet Union would do likewise. This was in response to U.S. Navy orders issued in mid-October.
 35. There is no single authoritative source of Soviet ship movements in the Pacific at this time. The author, however, has over the years compiled such a list from dozens of Russian and Western sources. Sources in English include the *New York Maritime Register* in late 1941 (esp. vol. 74, nos. 1–23); *Marine Digest* in late 1941 (esp. vol. 19, no. 47, and vol. 20, nos. 4–11); Coast Guard records; harbor pilot logs; Department of Commerce ship clearance files for West Coast ports; *San Francisco Shipping Guide*; and "Shipping News" in the *Los Angeles Times*. Russian-language sources include Ostrovskii, *Far East Sea Shipping Company*, and Ministry of the Marine Sea Fleet, *Мирный Флот Дальневосточных Морей Дальневосточное Морское Пароходство* [Peace Fleet of the Far East Seas: Far East Sea Shipping Company] (Moscow: Far East Sea Shipping Company) (Moscow: 1980). This database reflects an integration of these sources; though reasonably comprehensive, it could be in error in specific cases.
 36. Ships operating in the South Pacific or Indian Ocean appear to have included *Arktika*, *Kovda*, *Maksim Gorkii*, *Mikoyan*, *Perekop*, *Smolnyi*, *Turksib* (probably), and *Uelen*. Ships being redeployed via the Panama Canal to the Atlantic included *Ashkhabad*, *Belomorkanal*, *Dekabrist*, *Dneprostroi*, *Dvinoles*, *Friedrich Engels*, *Kiev*, *Kolkhosnik*, *Komiles*, *Michurin*, *Nevastroi*, *Petrovskii*, *Shchors*, and *Tblisi*.
 37. This interval reflects the expected transit times from American West Coast ports to the point 3,600 nautical miles later at which a ship transits the northern Kuril Islands, about 1,100 miles short of Vladivostok. This trip would take thirteen or fourteen days for a relatively new and fast ship, such as *Uzbekistan*; a slow ship, such as *Uritskii*, powered by a coal-fired, three-cylinder steam engine, required seventeen steaming days at nine knots to cover this distance. Performance data for these ships is from the Soviet official ship register: *Регистр морских судов: 1938–39* [Register of Sea Ships: 1938–39] (Leningrad: Vodnii Transport, 1938). The *Uritskii*, probably the slowest ship along this route, was a timber carrier constructed in 1927 in the Soviet Union, one of four in the third series of this class. Its power plant was rated at 950 indicated horsepower, which translates into about 203 net horsepower. For detailed information on *Uritskii* see Igor D. Spasskii, ed., *История отечественного судостроения: В пяти томах* [History of Domestic Shipbuilding: In Five Volumes] (St. Petersburg: Shipbuilding, 1996), vol. 4, pp. 54, 57.
 38. The movements of these two ships are clearly established by Columbia River Bar Pilots logs for the period, as well as by bar pilothouse logbooks for the region. *Uritskii* arrived in Astoria at 10:05 AM on 1 December and departed at 7:05 AM on 5 December. *Clara Zetkin* arrived at 2:20 PM on 1 December and departed at 3:40 PM on 6 December.
 39. See U.S. Customs Service, *Record of Vessels Engaged in Foreign Trade—Cleared or Granted Permit to Proceed, for San Francisco Harbor for November 1941*. Copies are available in the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Pacific Region—San Francisco, Records of the U.S. Customs Service (Record Group [RG] 36).
 40. "New Sea Route to Asia Sought," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 March 1939, p. 28.
 41. The route used by Soviet ships on Lend-Lease missions is depicted by Alla Paperno, *Тайны и История: Ленд-лиз Тихий Океан* [Secrets and History: Lend-Lease Pacific Ocean] (Moscow: Terra-Book Club, 1998), p. 18. The route was formally opened in August 1941; see "New Route to Russia Proposed for Ships," *New York Times*, 20 August 1941, p. 7. The route was in use in November; see

- “Soviet Ice Ship in Seattle,” *San Francisco Call Bulletin*, 17 November 1941, p. 14.
42. *Journal of Light Station USCG Cape Sarichef 1938–1943*, Department of Commerce Lighthouse Service Form 306. The Cape Sarichef lighthouse marks the entrance to Unimak Pass. The logbook of the lighthouse keeper indicates that Russian ships passed through the pass as late as 25 February 1942. Records are available from the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the United States Coast Guard (RG 26), Records of the Lighthouse Service, Lighthouse Station Logs for Cape Sarichef, 1934–1943 (box 74).
43. See the diary of Lt. Cdr. Sadao Chigusa of the Akigumo, a destroyer escorting the carrier fleet, as presented in Goldstein and Dillon, *Pearl Harbor Papers*, pp. 184–85.
44. U.S. Commerce Dept., *Record of Vessels Engaged in Foreign Trade*, November and December 1941.
45. *Azerbaijan* next surfaces in the records in Los Angeles on 18 February 1942. It subsequently sailed through the Panama Canal to New York, arriving in April 1942. See “Soviet Vessels—Lend Lease Repairs, Etc.,” a table compiled by W. L. Martignoni, director of the Division of Maintenance and Repair, Pacific of the War Shipping Administration. The table, prepared late in the war, details the locations, dates, and costs of repairs to Soviet merchant ships in U.S. ports during World War II. Available in the records of the War Shipping Administration, Office of the Russian Shipping Area, 1942–46, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, RG 248.3.3.
46. “Storm: Three Are Dead, but Gale in the Northwest Is Dying Down,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 November 1941, p. 9.
47. This scenario has been advanced by others, including William Kooiman, reference librarian of San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park, in e-mail correspondence with the author, 14 February 2006.