In any examination of the Soviet navy and its efforts to evaluate the situation in the Baltic Sea in the period of 1938–41, certain background factors must be made clear. This was a period when the Soviet navy went through a rapid organisational expansion, following Stalin’s decision in late 1935, or early 1936, to start constructing an ocean-going navy during the coming five-year plan. Between the summer of 1936 and the winter of 1938, the number of officers and sailors in the navy tripled from 9,640 to 28,450—at least on paper. In reality, the navy’s expansion meant that the demands for the already scarce trained professional cadres grew at all levels. In early 1938 about a third of the navy’s commanding positions were vacant.1

The naval construction programme presented in February 1938 outlined that the Soviet Union would have a sailing fleet close to 2.3 million tons within ten years. This was more than any other power in the world. The naval force assigned to the Baltic Sea included six Type B battleships (48,000 tons), two Type M battleships (ex-tsarist battleships of the GANGUT class—23,000 tons) and two heavy cruisers (also 23,000 tons). Little attention was paid to the practical problems of operating warships of that size in a narrow inland sea like the Baltic. Later, when the construction programme had been revised, and somewhat reduced, the future Baltic Fleet would still include two Type A battleships (SOVETSKIY SOYUZ class—59,000 tons), two Type M battleships and six heavy cruisers (of 23,000 tons like the M).2 Although the Soviet navy was to be expanded as planned, it was far from certain that these reinforcements would actually improve the fleet’s fighting capacity in a geographical setting like the Baltic Sea.

The basic strategic dilemma in the theatre had already emerged after the First World War, when Russia was left with a coastal zone in the inner

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2 Kuznetsov to Stalin, Molotov, Zhdanov and Voroshilov, October 1939, Russian State Archive of the Navy [RGAVMF], f.r–1877, o. 1, d. 97, list 38–39.
part of the Gulf of Finland that amounted to a mere 170 miles. The risk of being bottled up in the initial stage of a war made an offensive naval strategy with the aim of breaking out westwards attractive. At the same time, difficult navigation in the Soviet coastal waters, with its many narrow straits and shallow archipelagos, would make the Gulf of Finland a difficult environment for a big ship fleet from an attacking Western power. Thus, there were also strong arguments for the Soviets to choose the defence instead, like the Tsarist navy had done so successfully against the Germans during the First World War. The so-called “Young School”, which came to dominate Soviet naval thinking from the late 1920s until the mid-1930s, embodied this view. The Young School envisioned a mobile, defensive coastal navy consisting of submarines, fast destroyers, torpedo boats, shore-based aircraft, coastal artillery and minefields. This joint approach to naval warfare remained influential even after the demise of the Young School—as can be seen from the 1937 Naval Fighting Regulation (BU-37). It seemed rational not only in view of geographical conditions in the Baltic but also as a response to the rise of airpower during the interwar period, which made the distinctions between land, sea and air operations increasingly difficult to maintain. However, in view of the navy’s tradition only low standing in the Russian service hierarchy, it was unlikely that the Baltic Fleet would be allowed to coordinate the planning of a joint campaign in the theatre.³ When issuing statements on the strategic conditions in the Baltic during 1938–41, the Soviet navy therefore also sought to defend its position against the army in a struggle over resources and influence.

In addition to the service rivalry between the Baltic Fleet headquarters in Kronstadt and the Leningrad Military District, after 1937 there was also a growing competition within the navy between the regional and central levels of command. More than a decade after the navy had been abolished as an independent service in the Soviet armed forces, in 1937 Stalin suddenly re-established both a main Naval Staff and a People’s Commissariat for the Navy in Moscow. This meant that much of the fleet’s operational planning was moved away from the fleet headquarters in Kronstadt to the Soviet capital. In April 1938 the Baltic Fleet commander Gordey Ivanovich Levchenko complained that he knew nothing about the general campaign plan in the Baltic, as the main Naval Staff did not supply him any information.⁴ Thus, the changed structure of the naval command system possibly

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⁴ Ibid., p. 176; Levchenko to Smirnov, 26 April 1938, f. r–1877, o. 1, d. 39, list 3–4.