

A large whale carcass is shown on the deck of a ship, with a red overlay. The whale's head and tail are visible, and the ship's structure is partially seen in the background.

THE VANISHING

Fifty years ago
180,000 whales
disappeared
from the oceans
without a trace,
and researchers are
still trying to make
sense of why. Inside
the most irrational
environmental crime
of the century.

By Charles Homans



THE CATCH

In one season alone, from 1959 to 1960, Soviet ships killed nearly 13,000 humpback whales.

IN THE FALL OF 1946, a 508-foot ship steamed out of the port of Odessa, Ukraine. In a previous life she was called the *Wikinger* (“Viking”) and sailed under the German flag, but she had been appropriated by the Soviet Union after the war and renamed the *Slava* (“Glory”). The *Slava* was a factory ship, crewed and equipped to separate one whale every 30 minutes into its useful elements, destined for oil, canned meat and liver, and bone meal. Sailing with her was a retinue of smaller, nimbler catcher vessels, their purpose betrayed by the harpoon guns mounted atop each clipper bow. They were bound for the whaling grounds off the coast of Antarctica. It was the first time Soviet whalers had ventured so far south.

The work began inauspiciously. In her first season, the *Slava* caught just 386 whales. But by the fifth—before which the fleet’s crew wrote a letter to Stalin pledging to bring home more than 500 tons of whale oil—the *Slava*’s annual catch was approaching 2,000. The next year it was 3,000. Then, in 1957, the ship’s crew discovered dense conglomerations of humpback whales to the north, off the coasts of Australia and New Zealand. There were so many of them, packed so close together, the *Slava*’s helicopter pilots joked that they could make an emergency landing on the animals’ backs.

In November 1959, the *Slava* was joined by a new fleet led by the *Sovetskaya Ukraina*, the largest whaling factory ship the world had ever seen. By now the harpooners—talented marksmen whose work demanded the dead-eyed calm of a sniper—were killing whales faster than the factory ships could process them. Sometimes the carcasses would drift alongside the ships until the meat spoiled, and the flensers would simply strip them of the blubber—a whaler on another fleet likened the process to peeling a banana—and heave the rest back into the sea.

The Soviet fleets killed almost 13,000 humpback whales in the 1959–60 season and nearly as many the next, when the *Slava* and *Sovetskaya Ukraina* were joined by a third factory ship, the *Yuriy*

Dolgorukiy. It was grueling work: One former whaler, writing years later in a Moscow newspaper, claimed that five or six Soviet crewmen died on the Southern Hemisphere expeditions each year, and that a comparable number went mad. A scientist working aboard a factory ship in the Antarctic on a later voyage described seeing a deckhand lose his footing on a blubber-slicked deck and catch his legs in a coil of whale intestine as it slid overboard. By the time his mates were able to retrieve him from the water he had succumbed to hypothermia. He was buried at sea, lowered into the water with a pair of harpoons to weight down his body.

Still, whaling jobs were well-paying and glamorous by Soviet standards. Whalers got to see the world and stock up on foreign products that were prized on the black market back home, and were welcomed with parades when they returned. When a fourth factory ship, the *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, prepared for her maiden voyage from the remote eastern naval port of Vladivostok in 1961, the men and women who found positions onboard would have considered themselves lucky.

When the *Sovetskaya Rossiya* reached the western coast of Australia late that year, however, the whalers found themselves in a desert ocean. By the end of the season the ship had managed to

round up only a few hundred animals, many of them calves—what the whalers called “small-sized gloves.” Harpooners on the other fleets’ catcher ships, too, accustomed to the miraculous abundance of years past, now looked upon a blank horizon. Alfred Berzin, a scientist aboard the *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, offered an alarmed and unequivocal summary in his seasonal report to the state fisheries ministry. “In five years of intensive whaling by first one, then two, three, and finally four fleets,” he wrote, the populations of humpback whales off the coasts of Australia and New Zealand “were so reduced in abundance that we can now say that they are completely destroyed!”

It was one of the fastest decimations of an animal population in world history—and it had happened almost entirely in secret. The Soviet Union was a party to the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling, a 1946 treaty that limited countries to a set quota of whales each year. By the time a ban on commercial whaling went into effect, in 1986, the Soviets had reported killing a total of 2,710 humpback whales in the Southern Hemisphere. In fact, the country’s fleets had killed nearly 18 times that many, along with thousands of unreported whales of other species. It had been an elaborate and audacious deception: Soviet captains had disguised ships, tampered with scientific data, and misled international authorities for decades. In the estimation of the marine biologists Yulia Ivashchenko, Phillip Clapham, and Robert Brownell, it was “arguably one of the greatest environmental crimes of the 20th century.”

It was also a perplexing one. Environmental crimes are, generally speaking, the most rational of crimes. The upsides are obvious: Fortunes have been made selling contraband rhino horns and mahogany or helping toxic waste disappear, and the risks are minimal—poaching, illegal logging, and dumping are penalized only weakly in most countries, when they’re penalized at all.



OCEAN DESERT The *Aleut*, the Soviet Union's oldest factory ship, works off the coast of Kamchatka in 1958. Alfred Berzin, a scientist who sailed with the North Pacific fleets in the 1950s and '60s, recalled a ship's officer saying, "We should leave a desert behind us." He later wrote that the whalers "went like a red-hot iron" through the region. Captains who failed to hit production targets would be demoted, and crew fired. (At right, crew members with a fin whale.)

The Soviet whale slaughter followed no such logic. Unlike Norway and Japan, the other major whaling nations of the era, the Soviet Union had little real demand for whale products. Once the blubber was cut away for conversion into oil, the rest of the animal, as often as not, was left in the sea to rot or was thrown into a furnace and reduced to bone meal—a low-value material used for agricultural fertilizer, made from the few animal byproducts that slaughterhouses and fish canneries can't put to more profitable use. "It was a good product," Dmitri Tormosov,

a scientist who worked on the Soviet fleets, wryly recalls, "but maybe not so important as to support a whole whaling industry."

This was the riddle the Soviet ships left in their wake: Why did a country with so little use for whales kill so many of them?

ONE AFTERNOON LAST APRIL, I visited Clapham and Ivashchenko at their home in Seattle, a century-old Craftsman overlooking the city's Beacon Hill neighborhood. When I rapped the mermaid-

shaped knocker, the two scientists, who are married, appeared in the doorway together, a study in opposites. Ivashchenko is a 38-year-old willowy blonde of almost translucent complexion; Clapham, a 57-year-old Englishman with the build of a bouncer and arms sleeved in Maori tattoos, looks less like a man who studies whales than one who might have harpooned them 150 years ago.

At their feet was a lanky, elderly dog named Cleo, assembled from various shepherds and wolfhounds, whose fur Ivashchenko had shaved into a Mohawk

earlier that day. “We’re going to dye it red,” she said matter-of-factly, as she went into the kitchen to put on a pot of Russian caravan tea. We settled into the book-crammed dining room (on one shelf I noticed a first edition of the 1930 Rockwell Kent-illustrated *Moby-Dick*). At the head of the table was a mannequin, dressed in a bustier and a Carnival mask.

Ivashchenko’s and Clapham’s research, when I’d first stumbled across it, had struck me as similarly eccentric. The papers they had published over the previous decade, as coauthors and with a handful of colleagues, nearly all concerned a single, obscure historical episode: the voyages the Soviet Union’s whaling fleets made in the middle years of the 20th century. On the most basic level, it was an accounting exercise, an attempt to correct the false records the Soviets had released to the world at the time.

But it was in this space, between the false numbers and the real ones, that the researchers’ work became engrossing in ways that had little to do with marine biology. In gathering the figures, the researchers had also gathered stories that explained how the figures had come to be—the scientist who had stashed heaps of documents in his potato cellar; the whaling ship captain accused of espionage; elaborate acts of high-seas tactical misdirection and disguise usually reserved for navies in battle. The authors, I realized, were assembling not just a scientific record but also a human history, an account of a remarkable collision between political ideology and the natural world—and a lesson for anyone seeking to protect the fragile ecosystems that exist in the world’s least governed spaces.

The first time I called him, Clapham explained that the work had begun around the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse, when an earlier generation of Russian scientists and their foreign colleagues began gathering the fragmented documentary records of the program. The Soviet Union had kept the records

secret for years, and many had been lost; the scientists were reconstructing the numbers from files that had been left behind in obscure provincial repositories, or quietly preserved by the scientists themselves.

This was not quite what Ivashchenko had envisioned doing with her life. Growing up in Yaroslavl, a landlocked city northeast of Moscow, she pursued a career in marine biology in part because she imagined it would offer everything Yaroslavl did not: “tropics, dolphins, bikinis.” Instead, she told me, laughing, “I ended up with dusty reports.” On her laptop, she pulled up images of thousands of pages’ worth of files she had found the month before in a municipal archive in Vladivostok, the largest new cache of Soviet whaling documents anyone had discovered since the early 1990s. “We thought that all of this stuff had been shredded,” Clapham said. “There’s still some sensitivity—some of the people who did this are still around.” Instead, it turned out to be a matter of knowing where to look.

COMMERCIAL WHALING was banned just 27 years ago, but it is difficult to think of the industry as anything other than an exotic holdover from a long-receded age—to imagine anyone sailing a small armada of ships to the end of the earth to kill an animal the size of a school bus whose flesh, to the uninitiated, would seem too gamey to eat. And yet as recently as the mid-20th century, the waters surrounding Antarctica—the most populous whale habitat on Earth, what the polar explorer Ernest Shackleton half a century earlier called “a veritable playground for these monsters”—were crowded with whaling ships not just from Norway and Japan but also Britain and the Netherlands. Farther north, Australian and New Zealander whalers, operating from shore-based stations, plied their own coastlines. There were so many of them that even in an era when marine ecosystems were poorly un-

derstood, the need for some sort of regulations became impossible to ignore.

In December 1946, representatives of the whaling nations gathered in Washington to draw up the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling. “[T]he history of whaling has seen overfishing of one area after another and of one species of whale after another,” the treaty read, “to such a degree that it is essential to protect all species of whales from further overfishing.” The countries that were party to the treaty were limited to an annual quota set by the newly formed International Whaling Commission. But the science guiding the quotas was rudimentary at best, and it was only in 1960 that the IWC enlisted the help of three respected fisheries scientists to take the measure of the hunt’s impact.

One of the three scientists—the only one still living—was Sidney Holt, then working for the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization. Reviewing the data from the British and Norwegian fleets, Holt saw quickly that the quotas the IWC had set were vastly too high; both countries’ figures showed that whalers were traveling farther and farther in search of whales whose numbers were shrinking at an ominous pace. When the researchers turned their attention to the Soviet ships’ data, however, they were surprised to find that they looked nothing like the others. “We couldn’t make sense of it at all,” Holt told me recently. “It had no pattern. We didn’t know what the hell was wrong.”

In the following years, observers noticed other differences, too. The Soviet Union had many more ships in the Antarctic than any other country, sometimes twice as many catchers for each factory ship. And they worked differently, sweeping the sea in a line like a naval blockade. Holt had met Alexei Solyanik, the captain of the *Slava* fleet, on several occasions, and had dined with Soviet scientists onboard the country’s research vessels. (Friends of Holt’s who were well-versed in the Soviet crews’ liberality with their ships’

vodka supplies had instructed him to fortify himself with butter before coming aboard.) But, he recalls, “It never occurred to us in the 1960s that the USSR was falsifying the submitted catch statistics.” And even though later scientists had their suspicions, they were impossible to confirm without access to the Soviets’ own records—which would remain classified until 1993, when a Russian scientist named Alexey Yablokov made a remarkable confession.

Twenty-six years earlier, Yablokov, then a prominent Soviet whale researcher, had met a young American scientist named Robert Brownell at the Moscow airport. The two men had been corresponding for years, and Yablokov urged Brownell to stop by on his way back from a research trip to Japan. For the next three days, Brownell recalls, “Yablokov took me all over, showed me the museums. I asked if I could take photos; he said, ‘Go ahead. If you’re taking pictures of something you’re not supposed to, I’ll stop you.’”

Years later, in late 1990, Brownell’s colleague Peter Best was trying to track down data on right whale fetuses. Right whales were the first whale species to come under international protection, in 1935, and Best had been able to locate records of just 13 fetus specimens. On a hunch, he thought to ask Yablokov. Replying months later, Yablokov reported that he had records of about 150 fetuses. At first, Best recalls, he thought he had misunderstood: 150 fetuses would mean that the Soviets had killed at least one or two thousand members of the most protected whale species in the world.

In fact, it turned out to be more than three thousand. Brownell arranged for Yablokov—now the science adviser to the new Russian president, Boris Yeltsin—to make his confession public, in a short speech before a marine mammalogy conference in Galveston, Texas, in 1993. The catch records the Soviets had given the IWC for decades, Yablokov told the scientists in Galveston, had been almost entirely fictitious. Exactly how wrong

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they were Yablokov didn’t yet know. The Soviet fisheries ministry had classified its whaling data—even doctoral dissertations based on the numbers—couldn’t be made public—and as a matter of protocol had destroyed most of the original records.

Yablokov and Brownell both began piecing together the real figures with the assistance of several scientists who had worked aboard the whaling fleets. (Brownell cheekily dubbed them the Gang of Four.) In some cases, they had preserved clandestine troves of documents for decades in hopes of eventually correcting the historical record. The false figures, they knew, had informed years of thinking about whale conservation and population science. It was possible that much of what scientists outside of Russia believed they understood was wrong.

The most valuable set of records came from the scientist Dmitri Tormosov, who had been stationed aboard the factory ship *Yuriy Dolgorukiy* beginning in the late 1950s. Tormosov had quietly instructed his colleagues to save their individual catch records—what they called “whale passports”—instead of burning them after the record of the season had been filed, as required by the fisheries ministry. When the collection grew into the tens of thousands of pages, Tormosov moved it into his potato cellar. The records covered 15 whaling seasons, and they allowed the non-Russian scientists to grasp, for the first time, the scale of the killing. Even scientists who for years had harbored suspicions of the Soviets were stunned by the true numbers. “We had no idea it was a systematic taking of everything that was available,” Best told me. “It was amazing they got away with it for so long.”

IN NOVEMBER 1994, a letter arrived at Brownell’s office in La Jolla, California. It was addressed from Alfred Berzin, the scientist who had chronicled the disappearance of the Antarctic’s humpbacks

from the deck of the *Sovetskaya Rossiya*. Berzin had spent his entire career at a government laboratory in Vladivostok, and sailed with several Soviet whaling fleets; he and Brownell had known each other since the 1970s. Brownell remembers that Berzin, more than the other Soviet researchers, seemed burdened by what he had seen, and what he had failed to stop. “Nobody paid any attention to him,” Brownell told me. “I think that affected him.”

Berzin had not kept the volume of records that Tormosov had, but he did seem to have an unusually vivid recollection of the day-to-day details of whaling, and Brownell had once suggested that he write down what he remembered. But they hadn’t discussed the matter further, and Brownell was surprised to find in the envelope a short summary of a memoir Berzin was preparing.

Seven months later, a package arrived from Vladivostok, containing a manuscript written in Russian and bound in a hand-drawn cover. Berzin died the next year, and Brownell, who couldn’t read Russian and didn’t have the funding to have the manuscript translated, filed it away in his desk. It was only a decade later that he thought to give it to Yulia Ivashchenko, who had worked for him in the late 1990s on a research trip in the Russian Far East.

Ivashchenko’s translation—the work remains unpublished in Russian—appeared in the Spring 2008 issue of *Marine Fisheries Review*, a small research journal published by the U.S. Department of Commerce, under the title “The Truth About Soviet Whaling: A Memoir.” It is an uncommonly urgent document, animated by Berzin’s understanding that he had witnessed something much stranger than a simple act of industrialized killing.

The Soviet whalers, Berzin wrote, had been sent forth to kill whales for little reason other than to say they had killed them. They were motivated by an obligation to satisfy obscure line items in the five-year plans that drove the Soviet

economy, which had been set with little regard for the Soviet Union’s actual demand for whale products. “Whalers knew that no matter what, the plan must be met!” Berzin wrote. The *Sovetskaya Rossiya* seemed to contain in microcosm everything Berzin believed to be wrong about the Soviet system: its irrationality, its brutality, its inclination toward crime.

Berzin contrasted the Soviet whalers with the Japanese, who are similarly thought to have caught whales off the books in the Antarctic (though in numbers, scientists believe, far short of the Soviets). The Japanese, motivated as they were by domestic demand for whale meat, were “at least understandable” in their actions, he wrote. “I should not say that as a scientist, but it is possible to understand the difference between a motivated and unmotivated crime.” Japanese whalers made use of 90 percent of the whales they hauled up the spillway; the Soviets, according to Berzin, used barely 30 percent. Crews would routinely return with whales that had been left to rot, “which could not be used for food. This was not regarded as a problem by anybody.”

This absurdity stemmed from an oversight deep in the bowels of the Soviet bureaucracy. Whaling, like every other industry in the Soviet Union, was governed by the dictates of the State Planning Committee of the Council of Ministers, a government organ tasked with meeting out production targets. In the grand calculus of the country’s planned economy, whaling was considered a satellite of the fishing industry. This meant that the progress of the whaling fleets was measured by the same metric as the fishing fleets: gross product, principally the sheer mass of whales killed.

Whaling fleets that met or exceeded targets were rewarded handsomely, their triumphs celebrated in the Soviet press and the crews given large bonuses. But failure to meet targets came with harsh consequences. Captains would be demoted and crew members fired; reports to

Berzin recalled seeing so many spouting humpbacks that their blows reminded him of a forest. Years later, he saw only blubber-stripped carcasses bobbing on the waves.



PLAYGROUND FOR MONSTERS A catcher vessel harpoons a minke whale in the Bellingshausen Sea off Antarctica. Once so full of whales that Ernest Shackleton called it a “veritable playground for these monsters,” the Antarctic was badly depleted by legal whaling in the 1940s and '50s. The Soviets wiped out most of what was left in the early 1960s.

the fisheries ministry would sometimes identify responsible parties by name.

Soviet ships’ officers would have been familiar with the story of Aleksandr Dudnik, the captain of the *Aleut*, the only factory ship the Soviets owned before World War II. Dudnik was a celebrated pioneer in the Soviet whaling industry, and had received the Order of Lenin—the Communist Party’s highest honor—in 1936. The following year, however, his fleet failed to meet its production targets. When the *Aleut* fleet docked in Vladivostok in 1938, Dudnik was arrested by the secret police and thrown in jail, where he was interrogated on charges of being a Japanese agent. If his downfall was of a piece with the unique paranoia of the Stalin years, it was also an indelible reminder to captains in the decades that followed. As Berzin wrote, “The plan—at any price!”

AS THE PLAN TARGETS ROSE year after year, they inevitably exceeded what was allowed under the IWC quotas. This meant that the Soviet captains faced a choice: They could be persona non grata at home, or criminals abroad. The scientific report for the *Sovetskaya Rossiya* fleet’s 1970–71 season noted that the ship captains and harpooners who most frequently violated international whaling regulations also received the most Communist Party honors. “Lies became an inalienable part

and perhaps even a foundation of Soviet whaling,” Berzin wrote.

By the mid-1960s, the situation was sufficiently dire that several scientists took the unusual risk of complaining directly to Aleksandr Ishkov, the powerful minister of fisheries resources. When one of them was called in front of Ishkov, he warned the minister that if the whaling practices didn’t change, their grandchildren would live in a world with no whales at all. “Your grandchildren?” Ishkov scoffed. “Your grandchildren aren’t the ones who can remove me from my job.”

By then, there were too few humpbacks left in the Southern Hemisphere to bother hunting, and the Soviet fleets had turned their attention northward, to other species and other oceans—in particular the North Pacific. From 1961 to 1964, Soviet catches in the North Pacific jumped from less than 4,000 whales a year to nearly 13,000. In 1965, a Soviet scientist noted that the blue whale was “commercially extinct” in the North Pacific and would soon be gone entirely. “After one more year of such intensive catches,” another researcher warned of the region’s humpbacks, “whale stocks will be so depleted that it will be impossible to continue any whaling.” Berzin, who had sailed along the Aleutian Islands to the Gulf of Alaska and back aboard the *Aleut* in the late 1950s, recalled seeing so many spouting humpbacks that their

blows reminded him of a forest. Scanning the same horizon from the deck of the *Sovetskaya Rossiya* years later, he saw only blubber-stripped carcasses bobbing on the waves.

On a 1971 voyage north of Hawaii, Berzin watched a catcher vessel systematically run down a mother sperm whale and her calf, betrayed by their telltale blows—two of them, huddled close together, one large and one small. The *Sovetskaya Rossiya*’s crew, it seemed to him, had become ghastly parodies of the Yankee whalers of the 19th century. “Even now,” he wrote in his memoir, “I can recall seeing the bow of a catcher moving through warm blue tropical waters, and a harpooner behind the gun, dressed only in bathing trunks and with a red bandana on his head, chasing, obviously, a female with a calf ... What dignity this was” The last was a biting reference to a passage from *Moby-Dick*: “The dignity of our calling,” Melville wrote, “the very heavens attest.”

In 1972, the IWC finally passed a rule that conservationists had sought for years, requiring that international observers accompany all commercial whaling vessels to independently monitor their catches. The new system proved easy enough to circumvent—the Soviets arranged to have their fleets staffed with Japanese observers who were willing to look the other way as necessary. But by that point, Berzin later recalled, the country’s illegal whaling program had reached its inevitable conclusion anyway. It ended, he wrote, “simply because we killed all the whales.”

Clapham and Ivashchenko now think that Soviet whalers killed at least 180,000 more whales than they reported between 1948 and 1973. It’s a testament to the enormous scale of legal commercial whaling that this figure constitutes only a small percentage—in some oceans, about 5 percent—of the total killed by whalers in the 20th century. The Soviets, Dmitri Tormosov told me, were well aware of all that had come

before them, and were driven by a kind of fatalistic nationalism. “The point,” he says, “was to catch up and get their portion of whale resources before they were all gone. It wasn’t intended to be a long industry.”

But if other countries had already badly pillaged the oceans before the *Slava* ever sailed from Odessa, scientists now believe that the timing and frenetic pace of Soviet whaling lent it an outsized impact. The Soviets did not lead the world’s whales to the precipice—but they likely pushed the most vulnerable of them over it. Bowhead whales in the Sea of Okhotsk, which were severely depleted by 19th-century whaling, are believed to be endangered today as a result of Soviet whaling. The IWC now charges the Soviets with delaying the recovery of right whale populations in the Southern Hemisphere by 20 years. Blue whales in the North Pacific, whose population had been reduced to an estimated 1,400 by the mid-1970s, now number only between 2,000 and 3,000. The condition of the populations of sperm whales in the Pacific, of which the Soviets killed more than any other species, is still uncertain.

Grimmest is the case of the North Pacific right whale, which appears to have been all but killed off by Soviet whalers over the course of three years in the mid-1960s. “The species is now so rarely sighted in the region,” Clapham and Ivashchenko wrote in 2009, “that single observations have been publishable in scientific journals. We cannot be sure, but it is entirely possible that when the few remaining right whales in the eastern North Pacific live out their lives and die, the species will be gone forever from these waters.”

STILL, THE OCEAN is a confounding place. In 2004, scientists from ten countries set out in research vessels across the same North Pacific latitudes the Soviets had once hunted. It was the first comprehensive effort to measure

the region’s humpback whale population, which had dwindled to just 1,400 animals by the mid-1960s. The findings, published five years ago, suggested that there were just under 20,000 humpback whales alive and well in the North Pacific—more than twice the previous estimate. The Antarctic humpback population, too, is believed to have rebounded to upwards of 42,000 animals—a steady recovery, if not a complete one.

The need to save the whales has been assumed for so long now, with such urgency, that the idea of some of them actually having been saved is oddly difficult to grapple with. And it’s true that many species soon may be as threatened by the vast changes imposed upon their habitat—the overfishing and climatic transformations that stand to upend entire ocean ecosystems—as they once were by the harpoon. Still, the cloud of existential peril has lifted enough that in 2010, the IWC began considering a possibility that not long before would have been unthinkable: ending the moratorium on commercial whaling.

The whaling nations lobbying for the change have been joined, improbably, by several countries that generally oppose commercial whaling, including the United States. These supporters point to the increasing number of whales that are being killed, in spite of the moratorium, by Norway, Iceland, and Japan. (Japan categorizes its hunting of minke and endangered fin whales in the Antarctic as “scientific.” Its whaling fleet is operated by the government-funded Institute of Cetacean Research, a research institution in little more than name that also supplies whale meat to the country’s seafood markets.)

Legitimizing whaling again under a carefully supervised quota system, the thinking goes, would be preferable to the uncontrolled status quo, allowing the IWC to once again exert some influence over where and how whales are hunted. “We think the moratorium isn’t working,” Monica Medina, the U.S.

representative to the IWC, told *Time* in 2010. “Many whales are being killed, and we want to save as many whales as possible.” In other words, better to have the whalers inside a permissive system than outside a tougher one.

History is always studied with one eye on the present, and Ivashchenko brought up this argument when we spoke about her work. The lesson of the Soviet experience, she told me in Seattle, is that “you cannot trust an individual country to control its own industry. There’s always a temptation to violate the rules, to close your eyes [to] some problems.” (And although its catches today are a fraction of those of years past, the Japanese whaling fleet has come to echo the Soviets’ in its lack of connection to the marketplace; demand for whale meat in Japan is declining, and the government loses about \$10 million a year on whaling subsidies.)

It’s difficult to look at the Soviet story and see anything other than a remarkable anomaly, one that seems wildly unlikely to occur again. But in a way, this is the point: If the same international regime that exists today allowed 180,000 whales to vanish without a trace, how can anyone reasonably expect it to notice two or three thousand missing whales tomorrow?

In the last pages of his memoir, Alfred Berzin wrestled with the relevance of his story—with the question of what purpose was served, exactly, by an unsparing account of something that had happened four decades earlier. “When I started to work on this memoir,” he wrote, “some serious people asked me: ‘Do you really need it?’” In answering them, he offered a quote from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. “There can be no acceptable future,” Solzhenitsyn said, “without an honest analysis of the past.” ★

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