

A friendly chat at Malta: propaganda or realism?¹

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Abstract

Year 1989 was the *annus mirabilis* in the modern history of Eastern Europeans. Who or what was it that was turning the steering wheel of this historical year? Was it the people of Eastern Europe? Was it Mikhail Gorbachev and his unprecedented reform attempts inside and outside the Soviet Union? Was it the government of the US that mastered the events? Or perhaps there was nobody who could actually foresee and thus control the landslide developments?

Key words: year 1989, Eastern Europe, Bush-Gorbachev meeting, Malta, political changes, Czechoslovakia.

I. Commencing from 1985, there were very significant differences in Eastern European countries regarding the extent of their *freedom of press*. While in Hungary or Poland it was already quite normal to speak and write freely in wide public by that time, in other countries such as Czechoslovakia or Romania, ordinary people hardly sensed the true nature of changes that took place in their wider region. Not as if they were stupid or neglect. This happened because their communist leaders orthodoxly stuck to their old reflections, and were cautious to let out a minimum of relevant political information. One must not forget that the Cold War was not only tossing nuclear warheads here and there, but it was also a very serious war of mass media and propaganda in order to 'win the hearts and minds of people'. *Media-isolation* was one of the major tools of the control in the communist countries in general. And thus the majority of the Czechoslovak population in 1989 could only know what was released (portioned, dripped) by the highly centralized and strictly censored Czechoslovak television and printed press – and even that was wrapped in a hardly understandable post-Stalinist language.

When dealing with 1989 in Eastern Europe, historiography traditionally focuses on the reactions of the United States, the Soviet Union, and of course of Eastern Europe, in order to understand Eastern Europe's role in the process. In this paper I intend to look inside Czechoslovakia. This time, however, I look around not at the top of political life, but into contemporary printed press, i.e. central political newspapers.

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The present paper researches two things: (i) it surveys the set of events of 1988/1989 from the perspective of Eastern Europe, and (ii) it outlines some details of the very low level of information in the contemporary Czechoslovak printed press which people of Czechoslovakia were exposed to during the years of 1988/1989. I am asking what ordinary Czechoslovak newspaper readers actually could know about the events. I assume the level of information among ordinary Czechs and Slovaks as a key question, since after 1968 this was the first time in a generation when the *vox populi* counted. 1989 was a time when Czechoslovak communist politicians were forced to look into the face of the crowds, and they had to realize that public opinion as such existed, and they were horrified that it was not on their side. Needless to say that the Czechoslovak public opinion had been mostly (even if not entirely) shaped by the central television and central printed press up until late 1989.

II. 1989 was a year of sweet self-delude, when many Eastern Europeans thought that their region was once again in the centre of world history (like in the good old times of the early containment). To check upon this selfish Eastern European perspective, however, it is necessary to ask to what extent Eastern European 'reform forces' were indeed masters of their own fate.

To some extent, they were. This can be proved, among others, if one looks at the unprecedented personal changes *within* the very top of the communist elites in *all* Eastern European countries. It was typical for these personal changes that they not only took place within a relatively short time-span, but they were orchestrated from inside the local regimes, by communist insiders, mostly without foreign interference.

In Hungary, president Pál Losonczi and prime minister György Lázár both 'retired' on June 25, 1987. Then within a year János Kádár was removed as Communist Party Secretary, and was replaced by Károly Grósz on May 22, 1988. The Hungarian (and also the Polish) changes took place much *earlier* than elsewhere in Eastern Europe. To the west from Hungary, and especially to the south from it, events started to unfold later. In the communist GDR, Erich Honecker was forced to resign only on October 17, 1989, and the East German Prime Minister Willi Stoph along with his cabinet resigned only a month later on November 7, 1989, and the Bulgarian Todor Zhivkov was deposed by Petar Mladenov only on November 9, 1989. (See Savranskaya–Blanton–Zubok 2010, xxxi, xxxii, x1, x1i, x1ii)

In comparison with other Eastern European countries, *Czechoslovakia* belonged to those where changes took place late, perhaps very late. Gustáv Husák, the best local man of the Soviets after 1968, was suddenly replaced by Milouš Jakeš as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. In ten months' time, Ľubomír Štrougal, Husák's long serving prime minister left his office on October 10, 1988. And as if this had not been enough, Milouš Jakeš, who had hardly been in charge of the Czechoslovak Communist Party for two years,

resigned too on November 24, 1989. In addition, both Jakeš and Husák were *expelled* from the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia; the first one on December 17, 1989, the latter in February of 1990. Their fate was echoed in Zhivkov's fate as he and many other East European communists were either immediately or very soon expelled from their respective communist parties.

It is clear that these were changes of the political landscape of *such an extent* which had never been seen since the end of the Second World War. *Now* we are inclined to think that the course of events was pretty straightforward and that everything must have been clear. For the vast majority of people then, however, the scale of the changes was absolutely not clear, not even (or especially not!) for those who regularly read Czech or Slovak political newspapers. For those who used to buy and read western newspapers (available only in one particular newsagents, at *Zahraničná tlač* in Bratislava), it was slightly different – but they surely were a small friction of readers.

Just to give one personal example about the way how news spread in those times, and also about the discrepancy between official news and unofficial gossips: the Husák–Jakeš change happened during a dramatic party meeting in Prague on December 17, 1987. Typically enough, *lip service* carried this news that very evening. I heard it at my graduation ball in Bratislava from a class-mate of mine whose father was a member of the parliament in Prague. And yet, the next day newspapers described the outstation of the No. 1 political leader of the country as if it had been a steadfast change.

III. Historians can ponder about the way how the end of the bipolar world affected Eastern Europeans. One must, however, bear in mind that the communist press was a tricky one. Thus the contemporary 1989 Czechoslovak press differed a lot from the Hungarian or the Polish ones, and could be compared only to the Romanian one – it was so tightly controlled almost to the last days of 1989.

Just around 1989, communist Czechoslovakia was a land of slow reforms or of no reforms at all. It was a hesitant country where president Gustáv Husák reluctantly announced 'a reform programme' à la Gorbachev in August 1987. And it was the central political newspapers that without any critical comment announced that the reforms would start only in 1991!

Regarding Malta, it is extremely important to note that ordinary Czechs and Slovaks were practically not informed about the events that took place around them. Of course, the news on television and articles in the printed press did make many references to the rapid progresses in the world as well as in Eastern Europe – in a typical way where watchers and readers were deliberately confused what meant what. This all went down to the monopoly of the Czechoslovak communist party over the press, and many witnesses can agree that this censorship was a very strict one in Czechoslovakia.

Perhaps the most transparent example was the visit of Gorbachev to Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1989, when the orthodox leadership of the country stubbornly asked Gorbachev not to raise *publicly* the question of the Soviet invasion (and its political consequences) back in 1968. Despite Gorbachev was warmly welcomed by crowds in Prague as well as in Bratislava, he carefully avoided the problem of 1968, exactly in a way as Vasil Biľak wanted to happen. Biľak (who has been a Secretary for 'ideology and foreign policy' of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia since late 1968, practically the second person in charge of the country after the General Secretary) said that if question of 1968 had been raised, it would have been a catastrophe. (Pešek 2003, 44-45; Savranskaya 2010, 9) Gorbachev obeyed his loyal comrades.

The cautiousness of Vasil Biľak and his comrades was well-founded. Both the Soviet analysts and their local comrades knew that the origo of the troubles back in 1968 was the freedom of the press (like in Hungary in 1956). In order to survive on the political stage without public support, Czechoslovak communist bosses needed a tough fist over all type of press. And exactly this was what they did in Czechoslovakia. Sticking to the monopoly of news and sticking to the central party directives on information, it can be understood why Czechoslovakia was so *rigid* on the 'diverse' broadcast stations such as Radio Free Europe. Czechoslovakia was the *last* Eastern European country stopping jamming this radio, and allowing its correspondents to enter the country only in 1990. (Vajda 2011, 149-151) Sticking to the absolute monopoly over news, and the desperate *fear* from the free mass media were the reasons why *Alexander Dubček* was absolutely banned in Czechoslovak press. It is well known for many contemporaries how big fuss and anti-propaganda was done in the Czechoslovak political dailies when, on the turn of 1988 and 1989, Dubček gave a series of interviews to some western medias. (See e.g. Budapest Weekly *Magyarország*, XXV. No. 36. from September 2, 1988, p. 4.)

What is indeed striking is that centralised Czechoslovak press faithfully endured *to the very end* of the communist era. In 1989, there were two central political dailies in the country: the Czech language *Rudé právo* [meaning: *red law*] printed in Prague, and the Slovak language *Pravda* [*truth*] printed in Bratislava, both 'organs of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia resp. Slovakia' (CPCS) as the caption on their title page read. Both were faithful to the communist party till the very end of the regime. Even on November 29, 1989 the front page of the *Pravda* read: "The CPCS has to transform itself to a modern political party".

Not as if there had not been an international column in both central dailies. In fact, there was a whole page for international news in both. But one has to carefully understand the 'smooth' nature of the communist Czechoslovak press censorship of the 1980s. Unlike in the 1950s, when totally open fake propaganda was widespread, in the 1970s and later the Czechoslovak printed press

was more about keeping 'sensitive' things in silence, or slightly distorting them (e.g. to present events less significant than they were in reality), or using some cunning disinformation (e.g. demonization of the political dissent) etc. rather than about open lies. From these manipulations perhaps demonization was the ugliest. E.g. in February 1989, *Rudé právo* issued a whole-page-long report in the broadsheet about the Nazi connections of the Havel family.

News about the 'reforms' in the neighbouring Poland or Hungary could be found on page 5 in the *Pravda*. But the way as they were presented is indeed remarkable: the stress was put on the news which were favourable for or similar to the Czechoslovak regime (printed in big columns at the top of the page), while the 'sensitive' information was placed into the column headed as 'From the World', printed literally in very, very small letters in the right bottom corner of a huge broadsheet page.

Sometimes *Pravda* was surprisingly sincere. In the November 25, 1989 issue of *Pravda*, for instance, the daily quoted the words of Dmitrij Yazov, the Soviet Minister of Defence, currently on an official visit to Austria: "The task of the Soviet troops stationing in Czechoslovakia is *not to intervene* in the home affairs of Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia has to sort out its problems on its own." And yet, in the confusing editorial context of the *Pravda*, where readers were deliberately misled rather than helped to understand the genuine importance of events, even these quite unanimous news were misunderstood, or they did not get the sufficient attention they should have. Besides this, it was an unbelievable *delay in publishing* important news. E.g. western newspapers had published that "Eduard A. Shevardnadze [*was*] confirming last week that Soviet units to be withdrawn from frontline Warsaw Pact states would take their nuclear weapons with them" as early as January 1989. (See e.g. the front page of *The International Herald Tribune* on January 25, 1989.)

Another trick to cheat Czech and Slovak readers was a tendentious contextualization of the news. This meant basically two deliberate procedures carried out by the editors. They either put the 'reform articles', which contained reference to inner Czechoslovak events, among the international news, to a place which was an attractive reading obviously for a smaller audience. The second editorial trick was distorting the possible message of the news. This latter one happened pretty often in the *Pravda* regarding the Malta meeting, when the stress from the '*end of the Brezhnev Doctrine*' was smoothly pushed over to the '*nuclear disarmament*'. E.g. the *Pravda* on November 29, 1989 wrote the following: "The meeting at Malta will not be finished in signing of any prepared document. But it can contribute to the possibility of limitation of strategic arms."

Such and similar news, articles and editors' comments, which were presented as pure US-USSR relations, *as if they had nothing to do with the declining Soviet power in Eastern Europe*, were minimally confusing if not deliberately misleading. And similarly misleading were all the other news or interviews regarding

the Malta meeting in the Pravda. Presenting the words of the Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Sevardnadze, the newspaper wrote: "The meeting at Malta will mean a transition from competition toward cooperation in order to liquidate nuclear threat as well as both environmental and economic crisis – this is our world revolution. It is not the world revolution that our predecessors were talking about, but it is a revolution to save the civilisation of the mankind." (Pravda November 29, 1989) Hence, this was a very typical way of presentation of the 1989 reforms in the Czechoslovak press: showing things, even the most surprising U-turns as steadfast, and normal, and slow change, meanwhile using the well-known communist language ('our revolution'; 'saving the civilisation of the mankind') and often playing on the basic instincts of fear of the readers ('nuclear threat'; 'environmental and economic crisis'). These editorial manipulations and linguistic tricks are extremely obvious if someone compares these articles to the articles of a same kind in the contemporary British, Austrian, or Hungarian press, or even to some Soviet ones. For instance, one can comfortably look into the early 1989 issues of the *Moscow News* where totally open commentaries on the Hungarian reforms and open criticism of Gorbachev's policy can be found.

After the Malta meeting, on December 4, the Pravda still had chosen misleading laconism when it briefly announced that "The discussion [of the two leaders] concerned the situation in Eastern Europe, the arms control, and the situation in Central America." Full stop. Not a word more about the topic which was of a historical importance for all Eastern European countries in general, and for the lagging behind communist Czechoslovakia in particular.

The historical importance of the Malta meeting could not be figured out from the daily's commentaries either. Referring to 'an intimate Soviet source', Pravda presented the major outcomes of Malta in the following way: "One of the major points on Saturday was the preparation of a Soviet-American treaty on 50% reduction of strategic assault weaponry." Besides this Pravda discussed the possibility of Helsinki II, just before turning its attention to the most important thing: "Both sides dealt with those changes that have taken place in Eastern Europe on the economic and political field [in this order], and they expressed their view that these changes have to be judged sensibly." The delegated reporter of Pravda (no name is given in the newspaper) further on states that "regarding the political development in other countries, everybody has to handle its own business", and "changes are underway in the West, too". (Pravda December 4, 1989) So if you were a Czech or Slovak reader who relied exclusively on domestic newspapers, you could know that the meeting at Malta was all about some sensible changes - you did not have to worry about anything.

We have to stress here the deliberately *retrograde nature* of the Czechoslovak printed press (and television too, not analysed here). Unlike other progressive Eastern European newspapers of the time, the utmost conservative voices were heard from Pravda even in late November 1989. Vasil Bilák (the person

who handed over an invitation letter to the Soviets in 1968, in a public toilet) on November 27, 1989 was quoted asking in the parliament “Is this a counter-revolution or not?” Reflecting upon the Czechoslovak mass media, Biřak was further on pondering about the ‘hesitation nature’ of the central newspapers, stating that “It is absolutely unacceptable that our central political dailies afford to take up a hesitant, or considering position”.

Probably not accidentally, but sensing the irreversible processes after Malta, the voice of the Czechoslovak central dailies changed. Malta can be judged as a decisive turning point in Czechoslovakia. December 4, 1989 was a day when Václav Havel was interviewed by both the *Rudé právo* and the *Pravda*, after a very long period of dirty criminalisation and diabolization of him. *Pravda* itself stated at the beginning of the interview with him that “this is the first interview with you”, and that he should introduce himself since the Czechoslovak readers and audience do not know much about him. To which Havel shot back: “If my books could have been published in the last twenty years, public would have known me.”

IV. If they read only the central political newspapers, Czechoslovak readers did not know many important things. Among others they could not know that Mikhail Gorbachev miscalculated the situation in their region. Eastern Europeans did not know that Gorbachev was not sufficiently briefed on Eastern Europe.

As a great fan of eurocommunism (Savranskaya 2010, 13), Gorbachev believed that unreformable systems in the region can be reformed. He was totally unaware of the egoism of the Eastern European communist leaders, whose nationalism and mutual hatred was hiding under jovial smiles at every fraternal meeting initiated by the Soviet comrades. In reality, Eastern European comrades always had different economic motivations, and by mounting pressure on their economy, they became more and more selfish.

Gorbachev miscalculated the growing pro-Western orientation of Eastern Europe, too. He relied on his aging fellow-leaders, and he did not get the point that every buying panic, every devalued currency, every riot, every increase in energy price was a potential landmine under the structure of the local pocket-communism. He was certainly informed about the most common demands made by the marginalized political dissent (such as more democracy, giving up the monopoly of political power, freedom of speech, etc.), but he did not understand their importance in the Eastern European context; on the contrary, even in late 1989 he still used singular ('party') when speaking about Eastern European political systems. Gorbachev was not aware of the hidden pro-Western attitudes especially of the young peoples in Eastern Europe. He did not understand that throughout whole Eastern Europe even a rock concert could serve as a protest against the political system, and thus create a challenge to local leaders.

The Soviet leader underestimated the suggestions from his adviser Georgy Shakhnazarov who offered him a “thoughtful strategic approach toward Eastern Europe”. (Quoted by Savranskaya 2010, xxxiv) He seems to be not attentive to this voice. Or if he was, it was too late. As Svetlana Savranskaya states, Gorbachev received the first memorandum to have a new strategy on Eastern Europe only on June 16, 1989. (Savranskaya 2010, 9) Yet, Gorbachev did not act totally ad hoc regarding Eastern Europe. He undoubtedly made some cautious steps to prepare his communist fellow-leaders to get ready for change. It is well known what he told the communist leaders at Konstantin Chernenko’s funeral in mid-March 1985, as Chernayev recalled it: “He told them that from then on there was no more Brezhnev Doctrine and that kindergarten was over.” (Quoted by Savranskaya 2010, 5) And he repeated the warning, among others at a meeting with the ambassadors of the communist countries, on March 3, 1989, when he explicitly told his audience once again that the Soviet Union will not interfere in their domestic policy. Did the ambassadors and their aging communist bosses at home understand the point? Probably yes. But here Gorbachev was mistaken again. He assumed that Eastern European leaders were in firm control of events. In reality, they were not, or only by pure force.

Finally, Gorbachev’s blindness was mixed with some cynicism. This was quite apparent in his statements about the economic relations with ‘fraternal’ countries. On the one hand, even in 1989 he insisted on improving the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), and he assumed that, after the political changes, Eastern European countries would follow as *reformed socialist* states. (Savranskaya 2010, 7-8) Not surprisingly, he believed in the Soviet model; but rather surprisingly in late 1988 and 1989, he called the Soviet ruled community as a *‘socialist commonwealth’* - a rude and cynical euphemism for anybody who had to queue for hours for a kilo of bananas at the groceries. On the other hand, however, in his inner circles Gorbachev preferred the needs of *his own country*. While not good enough in knowing Eastern Europe, in economic issues he became a realist, stating that “in our relations with the CMEA, we have to take care of *our own Soviet people first*”. (Quoted by Savranskaya 2010, 16)

Perhaps the most cynical remark was the “*kindergarten is over*” comment, made by him at a meeting with Foreign Ministry officials and ambassadors in May 1986: “The time when we helped them [*Eastern Europeans*] to form their economy, their parties, and their political institutions is past [...] We cannot lead them by the hand to kindergarten as we would little children”. (Quoted by Savranskaya 2010, 7) What a ‘kindergarten’? Gustáv Husák, János Kádár and all the company of local Eastern European communist bosses were raised by Soviet experts, and it was the Soviet Union which had accustomed them to a blind obedience. The Soviet Union picked, kept and bred these people, despite their unpopularity in their respective countries, and the Soviets could comfort-

ably rely on these Soviet-installed regimes. (Savranskaya 2010, 5, 10) These local communists were the members of the same class in the 'kindergarten a la Soviet Union'.

V. What was said about *Eastern Europe in Malta*? In early December 1989, the *grand scale* of events in Eastern Europe was pretty clear. It was especially Gorbachev who stressed this issue several times during the official sessions at the Malta meeting. "The changes underway affect fundamental things" - he started off the first session, and he repeated his thoughts of the extraordinary character of times a couple of times during the final session: "Now that the whole of Europe is in a period of flux"; "These changes are deep and historical"; "New phases in European civilisation and world civilisation". (All quotations here and later are based on Shifrinzon 2013)

The American participants agreed, as Condoleezza Rice recalled it: "We knew everything was in change in *Eastern Europe*." And her account was more correct than Gorbachev's who was deliberately speaking about the *whole of Europe*. There can be no doubt that while Gorbachev was speaking about the whole of Europe, in fact, he meant the Soviet Union and its rebelling satellites under this term: "Our main principle from which we proceed is the right of each country to make its own choices and also the right of nations to change that initial choice" - as he stated during the last session. To which president Bush replied: "We don't differ. Self-determination is a value we endorse [...] Western values do not mean the imposition of our system on Czechoslovakia, the GDR or Romania." (Shifrinzon 2013)

At Malta, Eastern Europe got stressed at the beginning and again at the very end of the meetings. During the second session (December 2, from 12 p.m. to 1 p.m.), Eastern Europe popped up only after the leaders having exchanged thoughts on Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, Columbia, and the Philippines - only after these they got down to Eastern Europe. Again, the fifth session (December 3, from 4:35 p.m. to 6:45 p.m.) began with military and security issues, and only after these was Eastern Europe dealt with. The most decisive statement from the Soviet side on Eastern Europe was made during this *final* session. "Gorbachev: "Mr. President [...] I want to say to you and the US that the Soviet Union will under no circumstances start a war [...] The SU is ready no longer to regard the US as an adversary and is ready to state that our relationship is cooperative" (Shifrinzon 2013).

The meeting at Malta was not a moment of frankness on either side. Gorbachev was desperately trying to spare as much from the 'sinking Eastern European ship' as he was able to. In order to keep his face, he was ready to compare incomparable things. When speaking with president Bush about the situation in the Philippines, Gorbachev was pitifully playing with words: "[*Like in the Philippines*] In Eastern Europe there are governments legitimately elected [*sic!*], that

are now being replaced. The question is in Eastern Europe it is prohibited for Soviet troops to intervene. All now is interrelated. Some now are seeing that we are not performing our duty [*sic!*] to our friends. But we have not been asked. [*sic!*]” (Shifrinzon 2013) To which he later added less vehemently: “I agree – peaceful change [*in Eastern Europe*] is the way. Our position is non-interference.” (Shifrinzon 2013) And president Bush was ready to offer his own concession in return: “We will do nothing to recklessly try to speed up reunification [*of Germany*].” (Shifrinzon 2013)

In order to keep up the *impression* of a stable control over Eastern Europe (a well-known Soviet technique all along the Cold War), Gorbachev was twisting and distorting the facts during the sessions of the Malta meeting. Among others he said that “people’s democracy is developing” (Shifrinzon 2013), and was making deep philosophy about the defeat of the Soviet Union, arguing that “the methods of the cold war [*and not the SU*] were defeated. We are aware of that defeat, and the man in the street is more aware than anyone.” (Shifrinzon 2013) Gorbachev was making verbal tricks, including continuously downplaying the importance of Eastern Europe: “Easter Europe’s share of world economy is not much, but look how the world is watching what is happening there.” (Shifrinzon 2013) And yet again, he was either quite off or he was simply lying: “Comecon is looking to make changes to make it more compatible with the world economy.” (Shifrinzon 2013)

One of his most cunning tricks was to whip up president Bush’s appetite for the region. During the last session he repeatedly argued for the need of the United States to remain in Europe: “the acceptance of your role is a basic point with us”, and “we also want the US to stay in Europe. The US is a European power.” (Shifrinzon 2013) To which words president Bush could only agree with some reservations: “What I meant was that we haven’t been that close to Eastern Europe but want to become closer without damaging Soviet interests.” (Shifrinzon 2013) Probably this is the reason why Joshua Shifrinzon described the situation at Malta as “competing US – USSR agendas”. (Shifrinzon 2013) Judging from the way the leaders conducted their dialogues at Malta (offensive Gorbachev, cautious Bush), it was a situation comparable to a situation when two cowboys are sitting in a saloon drinking whisky together after a duel they have just survived.

Most of the time spent at Malta, other topics were much more important than Eastern Europe. Typical is the third session, when besides Lebanon, Gorbachev’s visit to the Pope, tactical nuclear weapons, the issue of reducing the number of personnel deployed on foreign territory, the question of chemical weapons, German re-unification, etc. etc. Eastern Europe was not even dealt with. Judging from the transcript of the Malta meeting, for Gorbachev there were two major territorial issues. First was the desperate state of the Soviet economy. Bush was not shy to touch upon this: “I want more trade and invest-

ment between our two countries”, to which Gorbachev gladly responded: “That is exactly what we favour.” (Shifrinzon 2013) The second major issue which was politically extremely important for the Soviet leader was to gain support in a form of a political statement from the US president “for what we are doing”. And the American president was glad to give his support several times during the Malta meeting.

In Malta, Gorbachev was desperately trying to spare as much from the sinking Eastern European ship as he was able to. He failed. Anyway, battleship Belknap, aboard of which some parts of the Malta meeting took place, was sunk as a target on September 24, 1998.

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