

# The Truth About Soviet Whaling: A Memoir

ALFRED A. BERZIN

Translated from Russian by Yulia V. Ivashchenko

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## Foreword

In November 1993, Professor Alexei Yablokov, who at the time was the Science Advisor to Russian President Boris Yeltsin, stood on a podium in Galveston, Tex., and delivered a speech to the Society for Marine Mammalogy's biennial conference, the premier international event in the field of marine mammal science. Addressing the 1,500 scientists present, he made what amounted to a national confession: that, beginning in 1948, the U.S.S.R. had begun a huge campaign of illegal whaling. Despite being a signatory to the International Convention on the Regulation of Whaling (signed in Washington, D.C., just 2 years before in 1946), the Soviets set out to pillage the world's oceans.

For the next 25 years, ignoring every quota restriction or prohibition

agreed on by the International Whaling Commission (IWC), the U.S.S.R. factory ship fleets killed every whale they could find. Nothing was spared: highly endangered protected species, under-sized whales, even lactating females and their newborn calves—anything that crossed the bow of a catcher boat was considered fair game. Soviet fleets traveled everywhere in their relentless pursuit of whales: from the Bering Sea to the Antarctic, from the Indian Ocean to the coasts of South America, from chilly high-latitude waters to the tropics. They plied their grisly trade from one area to another, from one whale stock to the next, leaving behind them a trail of destruction and devastated populations. They left, as the author of this memoir notes, “a desert in their wake.”

This wanton carnage continued unabated until the IWC finally passed an International Observer Scheme in 1972, a move that had until then been successfully blocked by the U.S.S.R. Even then, as we learn here, the observer scheme was often ineffective, with Soviet and Japanese whalers “monitoring” each other's catches in a way that allowed some illegal hunting to continue. During the long period of illegal whaling, some scientists at the IWC harbored suspicions that unreported killing was occurring. However, none of them could

have imagined the scale on which this was actually being prosecuted.

The truth about Soviet whaling could be revealed only with the end of the Cold War and the flowering of *perestroika*. Following Yablokov's revelations (Yablokov, 1994; Yablokov et al., 1998), a number of former Soviet biologists stepped forward to work with their western counterparts to correct the original catch records and provide details of the Soviet hunts. It turned out that more than one of these men had taken considerable personal risks to preserve the real data, and even then much of this priceless information was destroyed by individuals who, having been leading proponents of the illegal whaling scheme, had no wish to see the truth brought into the light of day under Yeltsin's new and more enlightened regime.

Prominent among those seeking to tell the true story was Alfred Antonovich Berzin, the author of this memoir. Berzin was born on the 2nd of August 1930 at Rostov-on-Don, in western Russia. After a standard Soviet undergraduate education in the biological sciences, in 1955 he began work at the U.S.S.R.'s Pacific Research and Fisheries Center (TINRO) in Vladivostok, and in the

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The author on the shore of Morzhovaya Bay, Kamchatka, 1958. Photo: A. Berzin.

same year made his first voyage aboard the first Soviet whaling factory ship, the *Aleut*. Berzin rose to the position of Chief of the Marine Mammal Division at TINRO and was thus responsible for coordinating the laboratory's scientific studies of whales and whaling.

How the U.S.S.R. managed to keep its wholesale slaughter of the world's whales secret, why the Soviet state embarked on this enterprise in the first place, the details of how it was conducted, and the economic and political context into which the illegal whaling campaign must be placed, are the primary subjects of this remarkable memoir. Berzin was first and foremost a scientist, and as such he was an observant witness to the quarter century of depredation that he documents.

But he was also a storyteller. So here, among the grim details of whaling methods and catches, we find fascinating anecdotes of life aboard ship, as well as sympathy for the whales themselves, and no small amount of dark sardonic humor. He relates the absurdity of the Soviet industrial system, in which meeting the ever-increasing annual targets of the "Plan" represented a goal to be achieved at any price, even if it meant (as Berzin notes in one example) convert-

ing new equipment into scrap or metal shavings because the plan expected that a specified quantity of these would be produced as byproducts of industrial production.

For whales, this system represented an unmitigated disaster. As we have noted elsewhere (Ivashchenko et al., 2007), the government set annual targets for quantities of whale products to be obtained from the hunt, and paid factory fleet crews a bonus only if these targets were exceeded. But when this occurred (as it did in many of the earlier years), the following year's whaling plan would contain targets that had been increased to match or even exceed the production level of the previous season. Consequently, whaling crews were forced to kill more and more whales to obtain their bonuses, and the populations concerned inevitably crashed under the pressure of overexploitation.

In the Southern Hemisphere, the humpback whale<sup>1</sup> populations which feed in the Antarctic south of Australia and New Zealand were so rapidly depleted by the Soviets (some 25,000 humpbacks were killed in just 2 years) that the shore whaling fishery in those two countries was forced to close for lack of whales. Berzin documents this and other extreme examples, including the destruction of sperm whales and right whales in the North Pacific (the latter remain critically endangered today as a result), and the various depredations of the most ruthless whaler of them all, Alexei Solyanik, the "General Captain-Director" who was so notorious that he merits a section of his own.

Berzin notes the continual warnings by Soviet scientists of the consequences of the U.S.S.R.'s whaling policy. These warnings of declining whale stocks became increasingly pointed with each scientific report on that year's whaling; yet they were all ignored by the bureaucracy and party leaders in the clamor for greater production, bigger bonuses, and the coveted awards and privileges dispensed to individual workers by the Soviet state. Indeed, as he notes here,

<sup>1</sup>Genus and species of whales are listed in Appendices II and III.

scientists were often held in low esteem, and they were even excluded from key meetings aimed at planning the next season's whaling campaign. Production was everything; science was irrelevant.

Alfred ("Fred") Berzin died suddenly on the 2nd of April 1996, at age 65<sup>2</sup>, never to see his memoir published. Yet in this bleak but curiously engaging work, he leaves behind an honest and detailed legacy regarding what is arguably one of the greatest environmental crimes of the 20th century. We suspect he would agree with our sentiment that, at a time when there remain calls for a resumption of commercial whaling, any future exploitation of natural resources should be governed by strict and transparent controls lest the disaster that was Soviet whaling be repeated.

#### A Note on the Text and Translation

Fred Berzin's text, beginning with his Preface and ending with the Epilogue, have been translated here from the original Russian. As far as possible, Berzin's very personal style of writing has been preserved in this translation. For the sake of clarity and easier reading, some of the language in the memoir is not transliterated, but rather has been amended to convey in clearer English the intent of the original text which, to a non-Russian reader, would be confusing. If there is any question with regard to meaning, this is indicated by a footnote.

Photographs provided by Berzin have been integrated into the text at relevant points wherever possible. Those specifically referred to by Berzin are numbered as Figures and referred to as such; the remainder are numbered as Plates. Through footnotes, we have attempted to clarify or explain details of the narrative which might otherwise be unclear to a reader unfamiliar with whales, whaling, or the Soviet system. We have also provided three appendices documenting the early history of Russian whaling as well as the scale of Soviet illegal catches in the Southern Hemisphere (which in many ways bore the

<sup>2</sup>An obituary for Fred Berzin, giving additional details of his life, appeared in the journal *Marine Mammal Science* in 1997 (Doroshenko, 1997).

brunt of this whaling) and in the North Pacific. The first gives a brief account of the origins of modern whaling in the Russian Far East. The second (reproduced from Clapham and Baker, 2002) gives a summary of reported vs. actual catches for all species in the Southern Hemisphere (see also Clapham et al., In review, for a detailed breakdown of humpback whale catches, by factory fleet). The final appendix provides a partial accounting of catches of large whales in the North Pacific from 1961 to 1979; the true catch records from this ocean are less complete than for the Southern Hemisphere. We hope that this additional information serves to provide a clearer picture of Soviet whaling as related here by Fred Berzin.

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## A. A. Berzin and His Memoir

Alfred A. Berzin began to study whales in 1955 at the Pacific Research and Fisheries Center (TINRO) in Vladivostok where he is still working at the present time.<sup>1</sup> In the years before the rapid development of Soviet whaling only two fleets (*Aleut* and *Second Kuril*) were hunting whales.

In the winter of 1955, Berzin took part in an exploratory expedition aboard a catcher boat in the area off the Kuril Islands, and in the fall of 1956 he was on the scientific vessel attached to a Bering Sea expedition organized by the U.S.S.R. Academy of Science.

In 1958, TINRO created a laboratory to study marine mammals, and Berzin became its director. In 1959, he led the scientific expedition that surveyed the waters around the Aleutian Islands and Bristol Bay, where for the first time large concentrations of humpback and right whales<sup>2</sup> were discovered. Subsequently,

he took part in many scientific expeditions on Soviet, American, and Japanese ships in different areas of the central North Pacific, in the Okhotsk Sea, and in the eastern North Pacific.

At the end of the 1950's, Berzin began a study of whales from the *Aleut* whaling fleet and at land stations in the Kuril Islands. In 1961–62, the author led the work on one of the Antarctic whaling fleets, the *Sovetskaya Rossia*. In subsequent years he continued studies from the northern whaling fleets.

Berzin defended his dissertation for the degree of Candidate of Biological Science<sup>3</sup> in 1964. In 1971, he published a large monograph<sup>4</sup> dedicated to one of the main exploited species, the sperm whale. This monograph was translated into English in 1972<sup>5</sup> and received wide international recognition.

<sup>1</sup>Translator's note: The Soviet (and now Russian) system of scientific degrees is different from the one used in the United States, the Candidate degree is broadly equivalent to a Doctor of Science.

<sup>2</sup>Berzin, A. A. 1971. *Kashalot. Pischevaya Promyshlennost*, Moscow.

In 1974, Berzin was granted the degree of Doctor of Biological Science for this monograph. He authored more than 100 scientific papers, many of which were published in foreign countries, primarily in the reports of the Scientific Committee (SC) of the International Whaling Commission (IWC).

This memoir is written in popular science form, and it represents the first attempt of a witness to relate the crimes of Soviet whaling. It is an objective description of the outrages that were happening on the factory ships in the Antarctic, with examples of their heartless vandalism. The memoir is well-written.

The combination of the scientific reliability of the account, together with the testimonies of the witnesses to these events, make this memoir unique; furthermore, it represents the first honest exposition of the secrets of Soviet whaling.

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<sup>3</sup>Berzin, A. A. 1972. The sperm whale. *Transl. E. H. Z. Blake, Israel Prog. Sci. Transl. Keter Press, Jerusalem, Israel.*

<sup>1</sup>Translator's note: Alfred (Fred) Berzin died in April 1996.

<sup>2</sup>Genus and species of whales are listed in Appendices II and III.