

A History of Diving in Russia

by Jeff Maynard

Post-Revolution Communism, followed by the Cold War, meant that for a greater part of the 20th century we didn't know a great deal about what was happening inside Russia. Now a new book the *Illustrated History of Russian Diving: 1829 – 1940* goes a long way towards revealing the rich and colourful subject of Russia's diving history.

Like most European countries, Russia's history mentions free-divers doing various underwater jobs, almost from the beginning of written records. During the reign of Peter the Great, diving bells began to be used to build bridges or to salvage ships.

The first diving helmets appeared, coincidentally, at almost exactly the same time as the Deane's open dress. A Russian mechanic, Gauzen, built an open helmet in 1828 and, a year later, it was shown to the 'Ministry of the Sea'. It appears to be a single-light helmet, held in place with a metal strap that passed between the diver's legs. Excess air passes out at the bottom of the helmet and a rope attached to the top raises and lowers the diver. The Science Committee of the Ministry of the Sea used the helmet well into the 1870s.

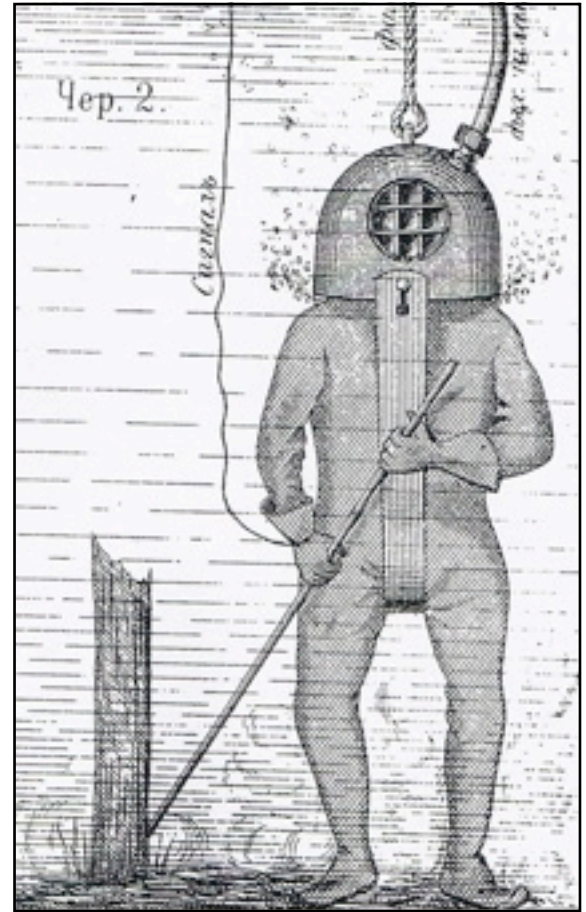
Deane's open helmet was imported in 1838 – at least a year before Augustus Siebe developed it into the closed dress – and this began a tradition of importing the best possible diving equipment

from England, Germany and France.

By the 1850s Russia was importing Siebe and Heinke closed diving dresses, and the Russian Navy formally adopted Heinke gear as its standard diving equipment in 1861.

Civilian divers began importing the French Rouquayrol-Denayrouze (RD) equipment in the 1860s, and this was widely used. One of the fascinating photos in the book shows RD gear in use in the 1890s. It is probably the only photo of this gear in use in the 19th century.

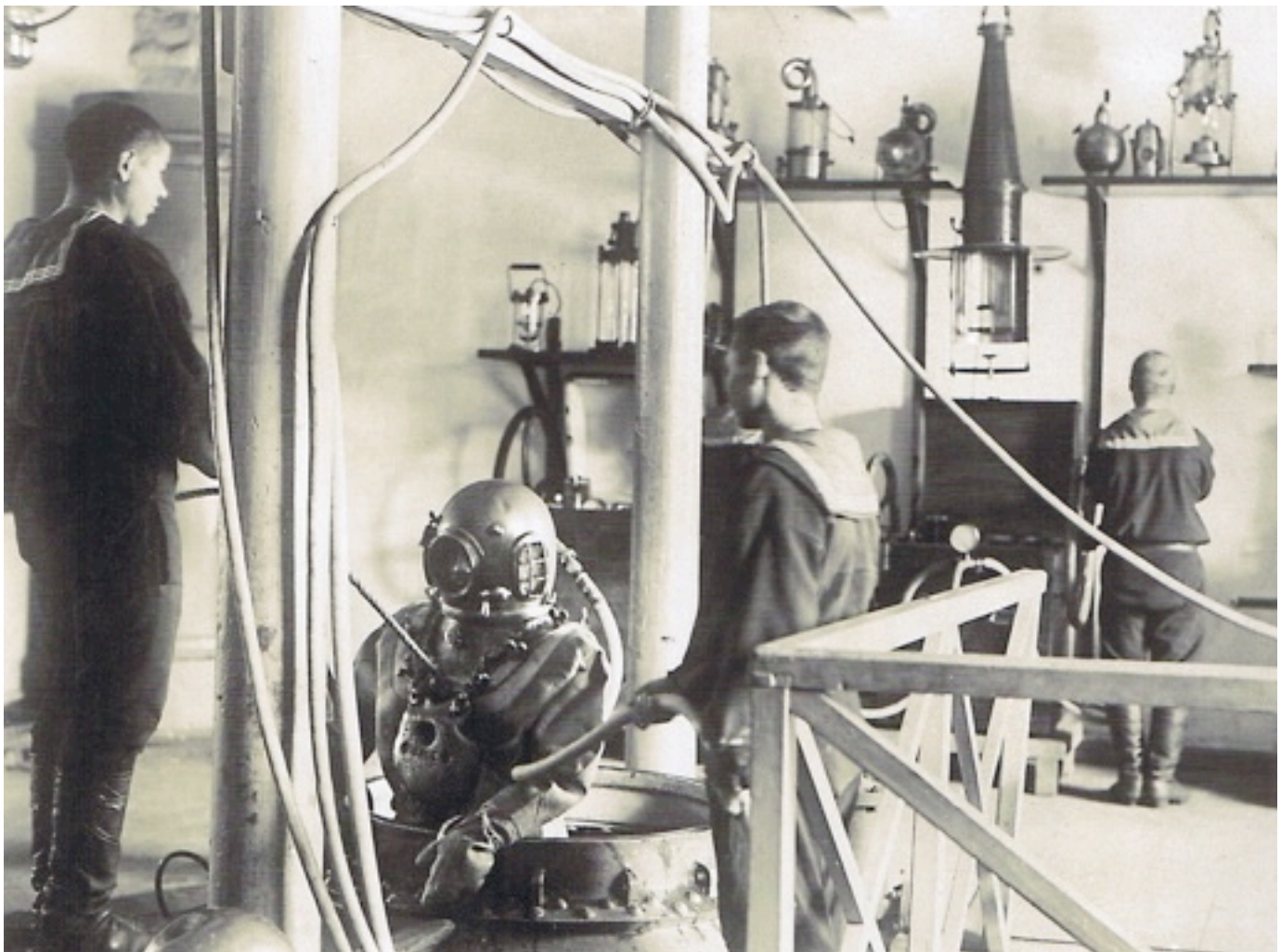
Russian diving got an official headquarters in 1882 with the formation of the Kronstadt Diving School. The school became a centre for diving training as well as a research and testing facility. The Kronstadt Diving School trained navy and civilian divers. A diving course lasted one year and, because the education standard of cadets was often low, included general education as well. It was possibly the first diving school to initiate training in a purpose-built training tank. The book is richly illustrated with photographs of this era and shows divers entering the tank, attending lectures and the using the equipment rooms.



The school was moved to different locations after the Revolution (1917) before settling in Sevastopol until it was merged with EPRON in 1928.

Post-Revolution, another organisation, the Central Diving Base, was formed in Leningrad in 1921. It united various diving companies under the leaky communist umbrella; companies that had been involved in the manufacture of diving equipment or diver training. The Central Diving Base was involved mainly in civil construction until it was merged with EPRON in 1930.

EPRON (Expedition of Special Purpose Underwater Works) was created in 1923 by the OGPU (a forerunner of the



KGB) for the specific purpose of locating gold in a British ship sunk during the Crimean War. It built an underwater observation chamber and, although it didn't find any gold, it did grow over the next ten years to assimilate the Central Diving Base and the Kronstradt Diving School.

EPRON began to concentrate on ship salvage and in 1924 successfully lifted a submarine from 16 metres. EPRON was responsible for refloating much of the Black Sea Fleet which Lenin had ordered sunk in 1918.

After it had absorbed the Kronstadt Diving School, EPRON started diver training in earnest and formed the Navy Diving College in 1931. For new recruits it was gruelling training

in difficult economic times. Of the first 1500 applicants, only 17 were selected to undertake training. Again, the book is richly illustrated with photographs from the Diving College in the 1930s.

The building and maintenance of diving equipment continued to be an issue up until World War Two. EPRON commenced manufacturing its own three-bolt helmets in the 1930s. A

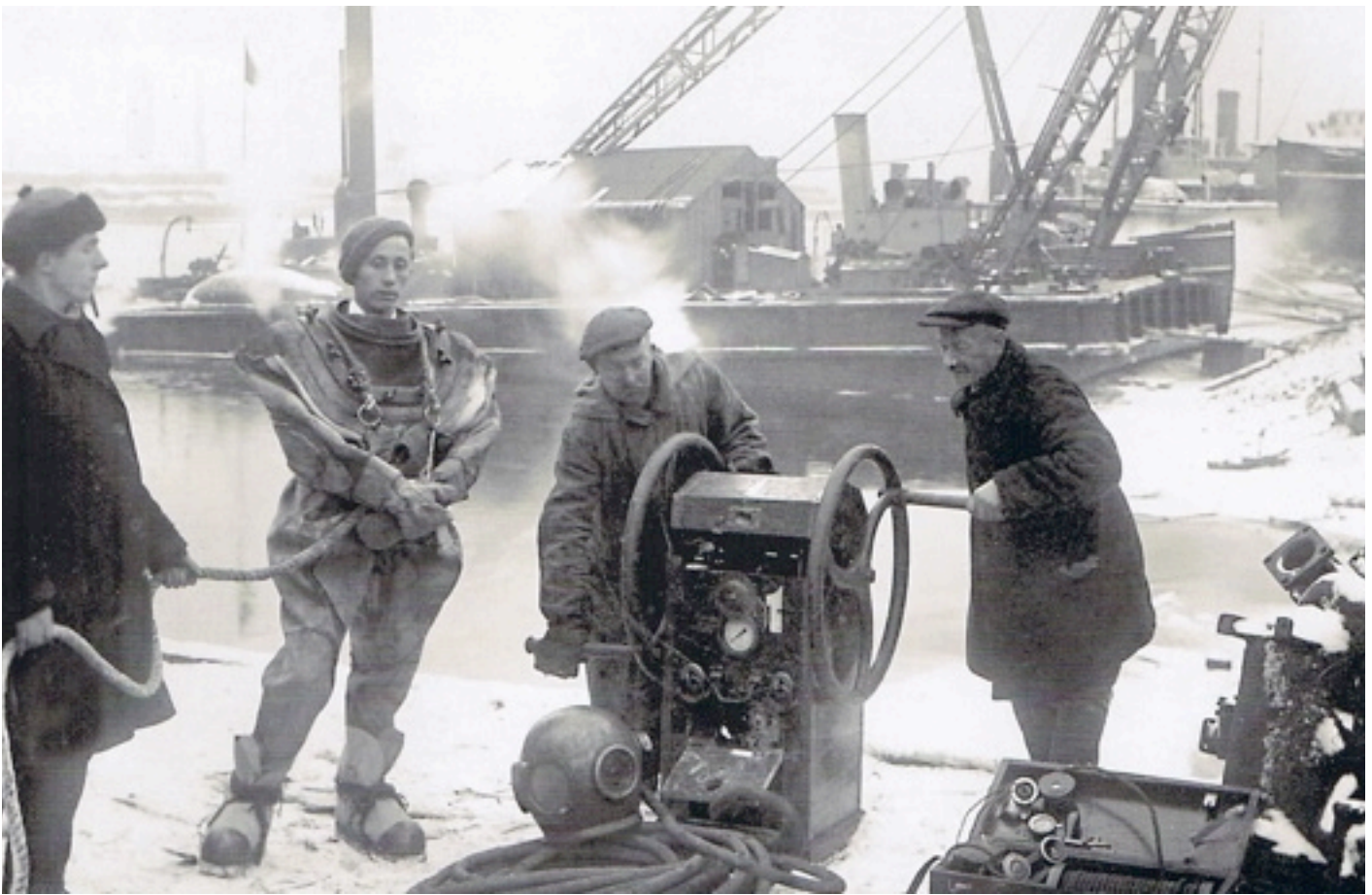
photograph of the gear shows the Star of Russia moulded into the diver's chest weight. EPRON went on to later build both three

and 12-bolt style helmets. Quality was often an issue and, whenever possible, Siebe or Drager helmets were procured and used.

Nevertheless helmets remained



rare and expensive. Right up to the War divers were still using patched-up RD helmets from the 19th century.



Divers were taught to build, repair and maintain their own gear. An important part of this was the diving suits which wore out quicker than the helmets. Divers learnt to work with rubber and canvas and each diver had to make an actual suit.

EPRON also designed and made its own lightweight rebreathers for shallow water work and submarine escape. In addition to its own observation chambers it also imported Neufeldt and Kuhnke iron man suits.

The *Illustrated History of Russian Diving: 1829-1940* was written by Pavel

A. Borovikov and published in Moscow last year. It is 150 pages (hardcover) and mainly a photographic record of Russian diving. It is written in both Russian and English. Sometimes the English translation is a bit clunky, but it is really the photographs that make the book such a collectible. David Dekker in Holland has them available. At

about 120 Euros to have one sent to Australia, they are not cheap. But if you are serious about books relating to diving helmets, then this one should sit alongside *Helmets of the Deep*, *20,000 Jobs Under the Sea* and John Bevan's *Infernal Diver*.

David Dekker can be reached at davidsimpor@zonnet.nl



Previous page: Gauzen's open helmet of 1828. Opp. page top: The Kronstadt diving school in the 1890s. Below: A diving exhibition in 1870. Above: An EPRON diving team in the 1930s. Left: The beautifully produced book.