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Norway, Britain and the Arctic Convoys to the Soviet Union 1941-1945
Matthew Knowles

During the Second World War the Allies were able to successfully supply the Soviet Union with military aid by naval convoys travelling from Britain via Iceland and through the Arctic Seas north of Scandinavia to Russia. The margin between success and disaster for these convoys was narrow. Crews had to endure mountainous waves, temperatures of -40 degrees which froze their equipment, and all the other physical problems this caused. In addition to these hardships, German U-boats patrolled those waters, and Arctic convoys were also threatened by Luftwaffe attacking from bases in occupied Norway and the Kriegsmarine surface fleet, much of which was stationed in Norwegian fjords throughout the war.

The role of Britain and the USA in winning the Battle of the Atlantic is well documented, as is the dispatch of Arctic convoys to Russia. However, the role of the Norwegian armed forces and Iceland in this theatre has received much less attention. As this part of history begins to fade from living memory it is important that these experiences are recorded for posterity. In most cases little is known of the individuals involved in this campaign. This article aims to provide an overview of the part played by Iceland and Norway as important gateways through which the Arctic convoys could move from the Western ports to those of Arctic Russia, usually without incurring disaster.

This paper will examine how and why, despite enormous obstacles, most of the convoys successfully delivered their vital cargoes of weapons, food, shelter and other essential supplies for the Soviet war effort from 1941 onwards. It will also explore the situation in part by drawing on the experiences and reminiscences of a Royal Navy veteran of the Arctic Convoys and additionally through historical analysis of this campaign’s influence on the eventual outcome of the war.

The Allies’ response to the invasion of the Soviet Union

When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Russians seemed to be unprepared for the speed and strength of the German invasion:

‘Staff work was poor, communications primitive, cooperation between the various branches inadequate, the chain of command cumbersome’.1

As a result the Soviet Union lost thousands of square miles of territory in just a few weeks, much of it rich farm land or areas laden with important minerals such as coal. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet troops were either captured or killed. In addition, millions of Soviet citizens were subjected to a brutal Nazi occupation in which some 20 million of them died in the course of the following four years.2

By autumn 1941 the German army was at the gates of the Soviet Union’s two principle cities, Moscow and Leningrad. It was realised in London and Washington that unless something was done quickly to assist the Soviet armed forces there was a significant danger that Hitler would win the war in the East and then turn the full weight of his new empire on Britain and eventually the United States:

‘If Russian forces could be destroyed in 1941, Germany would then, in control of all the resources of continental Europe, face the Anglo-American coalition with confidence.’3

It had become clear that the outcome of the Second World War would be decided on the battlefields of western Russia more than anywhere else.

The British War Cabinet concluded that the best way to help the Soviet Union was to send armed convoys to the Soviet Arctic ports of Murmansk, Pechenga and Archangel. Later on in the war additional supply routes would be opened up via the Persian route and Alaska. In 1941 and 1942 the Arctic was one of only two major passages,

2 Ibid., p. 281.
3 Ibid., p. 61.
the other being from the US via the Pacific and across Siberia constituting a lengthy and expensive journey. The perils of this route were then greatly added to by the onset of war between the United States and Japan in December 1941.

In the late summer and autumn of 1941 most of the convoys reached their destination without incident and successfully delivered vital military equipment, food and medical supplies to the Red Army. This was in part due to Hitler’s belief that an eight to twelve week campaign was all that was needed to destroy the Soviet Union and that any Allied aid would presumably come too little and too late to save it. Hitler had reason to be confident. Both during the Red Army’s unexpected struggle against the Finns in 1939-40, and during the German defeat of Belgium, Holland, Denmark and Norway help from Britain arrived too little and too late.

Leningrad was a key strategic objective for the Wehrmacht in 1941 as a vital port and a major industrial and communications centre. To this must be added the prestige attached to the city by the Soviet authorities, it bearing Lenin’s name and the birthplace of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet state that sprang from it. Tanks, other armoured vehicles, aircraft and guns were delivered helping the Red Army to launch a counter-offensive outside Moscow in December 1941 that drove the German Army back some 160 miles in places, effectively pushing the German army back to the start point for its attack on Moscow. Later in the war the convoys also provided much of the material and technological means for the pivotal Soviet victories over the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad and at Kursk in 1943. At Kursk in particular, the timely arrival of hundreds of modern American transports from Murmansk shortly before the battle allowed the Red Army greater mobility both on the battlefield and behind the frontlines. Such mobility was by this time comparatively lacking in the Wehrmacht.

Norway’s role in the Arctic convoys

In addition to appalling weather conditions, the

5 Parker, The Second World War, p. 113.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
war within the RAF.9

The Norwegian government was in a more fortunate position than many of its fellow governments-in-exile in London. Its members had escaped Norway just ahead of the Wehrmacht advance, along with the King and the country’s gold reserves. More importantly, much of the country’s large merchant navy also managed to successfully make its way to Allied or neutral ports before it could be captured. In 1939, Norway’s merchant fleet was the fourth largest in the world. The fact that it escaped largely intact ahead of the German invasion allowed the Norwegian government to accumulate funds through continued foreign trade and thus finance the redevelopment of its armed forces largely independently.

As a result, by late 1943 the Royal Norwegian Navy included a new submarine, the Ulla, and a destroyer, the Stord. Both vessels played a key role in Allied naval operations off the Norwegian coast, the Ulla being the most successful Allied submarine of the Second World War in terms of enemy tonnage sunk.10 This included a U-974, sunk off the coast of Stavanger in southwest Norway on 19 April 1944.11 By 1945 the Royal Norwegian Navy consisted of a total of 51 combat vessels, and naval personnel of 7,500.12 Additionally, there were 850 Norwegian merchant ships in the service of the Allies from November 1940, when its full capacity was put under Allied control. Many of these vessels were later used for the Arctic convoys.13

Such was the brutality of the Nazi occupation regime in Norway that tens of thousands more of civilian refugees fled Norway over the course of the war, mostly to Sweden and Britain. From these people were drawn many of the men and women needed for the new Norwegian armed forces. From late 1943, a Royal Navy escort vessel, HMS Oxlip, took part in several convoys from Britain to the Soviet Union. Able Seaman Albert Boucher was one of the crew. His first convoy sailed from Greenock in 1944, firstly to the Royal Navy base at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys, where it was joined by several Royal Navy destroyers, and from there north to Iceland, the usual gathering point before the journey to Russia. From here the merchant ships could have air cover for a large part of their journey.

Iceland’s importance in launching naval operations

Iceland, part of the Danish kingdom until 1944, was both a vital stepping stone and a staging post for naval operations in the North Atlantic. Positioned roughly half way between North America and Britain, it was a vital platform for the air support of convoys. The British occupied Iceland on 10 May 1940, landing 746 Royal Marines to secure the island from a possible German attempt to seize it. A week later this force was increased by 4,000 British Army troops which helped secure the island’s key ports and potential airborne landing grounds. With the Low Countries and France being at the same time rapidly overrun by the German Army, this British commitment demonstrates the importance of remote Iceland as a base for its operations.

Although the British aircraft stationed on the island were not the most modern (initially Supermarine Walruses and Fairey Battle Bombers) they provided, even if only as a deterrent, an effective defensive shield for Iceland at a time when Britain itself was under direct threat of invasion and devastated by bombing. Repeated requests by the Norwegian government throughout the winter of 1939-40 for the Royal Navy to patrol Norwegian territorial waters and by so doing hamper or prevent German iron-ore shipments from Narvik had been consistently refused.14 Unrealistic Anglo-French plans for military intervention in Scandinavia and prevarication allowed the Germans to pre-empt British action by launching a successful invasion on 9 April. The British were not going to risk a similar disaster in Iceland. The first port of call for Allied convoys in Iceland was usually the capital, Reykjavik. Often it was referred to as ‘Cold Comfort Harbour’ by Allied seamen, as many

9 Ibid., p. 92.
10 See http://www.historisches-marinearchiv.de/projekte/asa/ausgabe.php?where_value=1046 (last accessed on 3 December 2013)
11 Ibid.
12 Salmon, Britain and Norway, p.82
13 Ibid., p.57
14 Ibid., p. 4.
Icelanders resented any foreign military presence on their territory. 

The destruction wrought by the German Army and the Luftwaffe on Poland had been well publicised by the Nazis as a warning to the Nordic countries not to resist a German military occupation. Some Icelanders had reason to be grateful to the Germans. German engineers had built the country’s road network and other infrastructural projects in the 1930s. However, during the summer of 1938 dozens of German ‘tourists’ had arrived on the island, showing great interest in the plateaued areas of the interior which could have been used to easily land gliders and parachutists. This had caused considerable alarm in the Icelandic government and upon the outbreak of war in September 1939 most German citizens were expelled. Up until this time, German U-boats and ‘civilian’ glider teams had been frequent visitors to Iceland and commercial trade between the two countries was rapidly growing.

The British were fully aware of Hitler’s intention to eventually attack the Soviet Union. When Russia became an ally, it was recognised that Iceland’s strategic significance as a supply link between the Allies would grow. Although supplying and defending the Arctic convoys stretched the resources of an already shortage-stricken country, its success in providing some of the means by which the USSR could resist the German invasion reduced much of the immediate danger to Britain, particularly from air raids which had been nightly in the first four months of 1941. The main focus of the Luftwaffe necessarily shifted to the East to support the German Army’s advance into Russia and with them went some of the U-boats that were taking an unsustainable toll on Allied shipping in the Atlantic.

Shortly after the initial landings by the Royal Marines, the Royal Navy’s Fleet Air Arm 701 Squadron, comprising six Supermarine Walrus amphibious biplanes, arrived in Iceland. These aircraft were to be used mainly as reconnaissance aircraft to spot U-boats and thus warn convoys, and were not suited to anti-submarine operations. Although they may have served as a deterrent to German plans for invasion and to enemy aircraft and shipping these first British aircraft on Iceland were neither well-equipped, nor numerous enough to provide adequate reconnaissance for convoys leaving Iceland or for the defence of the island itself in the event of a full-scale invasion. When this became clear, they were swiftly replaced by the 98 Squadron in July 1940. This squadron comprised eighteen Fairey Battle bombers, aircraft which had first entered service with the RAF in 1936 and one of which was credited with the first aerial combat victory of the Second World War. The squadron was later reinforced with Hawker Hurricane fighters. The Fairey Battle, although superior to the Walrus, carried a three man crew and large bomb payload, making them ungainly and vulnerable to attack. While the most advanced aircraft were being used for the defence of Britain itself the squadrons based on Iceland served a useful purpose through a critical period.

With the German invasion of the USSR in June 1941, Iceland’s strategic importance grew as the British appear to have foreseen. 98 Squadron was replaced by 1423 Squadron, comprising entirely Hurricane fighter aircraft, thus providing a higher level of protection for the convoys at the initial stages of their voyage to Russia. These were then replaced by units of United States air forces later that year. The US 33rd Pursuit Group comprised faster fighter aircraft such as the Curtis P-39 Air Cobra and the P-40 Warhawk, demonstrating also US recognition of the island’s importance. By July 1941 there were also some 25,000 British and Commonwealth troops on the island representing a significant commitment at a time when the Allies were on the defensive in every theatre.

The journey to Russia was extremely dangerous. Freezing sea temperatures meant death in less than ten minutes once men were in the water. On Mr Boucher’s first convoy in August 1944 there were many U-boat alerts, including one in which the frigate HMS Kite was attacked and sunk. Of the 217 crew only 60 were saved and only 14 pulled alive from the water. This was a fairly typical outcome when ships were sunk in Arctic waters.

As this convoy reached the Barents Sea, it was shadowed by a Luftwaffe Condor aircraft from nearby German-occupied Norway. Around fourteen U-boats were reportedly lying in wait for

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15 J. T. Richardson, A Catalogue of Spies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.113

it as it approached Murmansk but thanks to the German cipher code ENIGMA having been broken, unbeknownst to the Nazi leadership, the convoy’s commanding officer knew of the U-boats’ precise locations and was able to manoeuvre around them. In addition, ‘ship-watchers’ on the coast of Norway would often report the departure of U-boats and aircraft to the Allies via radio. This was to prove an important part of Milorg’s intelligence gathering activities as, although the breaking of ENIGMA’s importance cannot be over-estimated, the actions of individual air and sea commanders sometimes differed from their orders from the German Command.

Due to shortfalls in Soviet airpower, the RAF had been allowed to establish a base at Murmansk from which Spitfires provided air cover for the final leg of the convoys’ journeys to Kola Bay. These were piloted for the most part by British crews, but more Soviet pilots were being trained to fly them. A Soviet Catalina flying boat would provide additional cover during the final stages of the journey. There was also a Soviet naval base at Murmansk at which were stationed two destroyers and a number of smaller vessels, none of these ships, however, assisted in ensuring safe arrival of the convoys.

The fact that Stalin allowed an RAF base to operate on Soviet territory again demonstrates the significance of the convoys to the Soviet war effort. The Soviet authorities deeply mistrusted the British. Stalin in particular had a pathological fear that the British would use the first opportunity to establish permanent bases in northern Russia and would switch sides and ally with Nazi Germany against him when they felt it was expedient to do so. Much of this paranoia stemmed from the Russian Civil War of 1918-21, when Britain and other foreign powers had intervened to assist the White Russian armies opposing the Bolsheviks.

A British Expeditionary Force had landed at Murmansk in 1918 and operated a base there until 1920. There had also been discussion in diplomatic circles of re-installing the deposed Tsar Nicholas II there as a focus for opposition against the Bolshevik regime in Moscow. During the Second World War, however, the British had no intention to establish a permanent presence in Russia. Churchill only wished to give the Soviet Union enough aid to dissuade Stalin from making a separate peace with Hitler.

In any case, the welcome the British received at Murmansk was even colder than in Iceland. During the early convoys of 1941-42 Stalin would not even allow the British crews to leave their ships whilst cargoes were unloaded. Only when Churchill demanded that crews be allowed off the boats or there would be no more convoys did Stalin relent. However, crews were only allowed to walk up and down the dockside where they would see little of Stalin’s Russia. Nonetheless, many still glimpsed the horror and cruelty of his regime. Little contact was allowed with Russian civilians. Most of those that Mr Boucher and his crewmates encountered were military personnel, many of them women. In addition the dock workers were often slave labourers. Mr Boucher heard of one being shot dead on the spot by his guard for simply dropping a piece of bread. The true savagery of this regime cannot be underestimated, nor is it likely that the true scale of the crimes of the Soviet state will ever be known. Yet Churchill summed up the practicalities of the situation, saying in the House of Commons shortly after hearing of Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union in 1941:

‘If Hitler invaded hell I would make at least a favourable reference to the devil in the House of Commons.’

Thirty thousand British merchant seamen died throughout the course of the war and the service lost over half of its 1939 tonnage capacity to enemy attacks, some 11.7 million tons of shipping amounting to around 2,000 ships. Consequently, at one stage the Home Office even began issuing free pardons to criminals in return for service on a merchant ship. With the onset of the war in the Far East the Norwegian contribution to the Arctic convoys and their naval and air protection became ever more important. From late 1941 the convoys

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17 For more information see www.naval-history.net.


had the benefit of more air cover throughout their journeys, not just at the beginning and the end. Small aircraft carriers were increasingly assigned to them.

The arrival of several dozen additional US fighter aircraft to the bases in Iceland in December also relieved some of the pressure. In particular the British Fairey Swordfish biplane played a very important role, carrying depth charges and rockets which were highly effective against U-boats. These planes were able to fly from the smaller escort carriers and also merchant aircraft carriers known as ‘banana boats’. On these ships the Swordfish were fitted with a ‘Rocket Assisted Take Off’ mechanism. After completing their mission they could return to the launching ships or to the nearest base if they had enough fuel. These aircraft had entered service with the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) in 1934 and continued with anti-shipping operations until 1945. At the outset of war they appeared to be obsolete with their awkward looking frame and First World War style design, yet they had an advantage over most other types of aircraft for the kind of work they were tasked with: they were nicknamed ‘string bags’ because they could adjust its shape in line with their payload. Also, despite their maximum speed being only 139mph (less than half that of the Spitfire), they had excellent manoeuvrability. They also demonstrated considerable resilience under fire and could carry machine guns as well as torpedoes. One bullet in any part of the engine of a Spitfire would usually down it; not so the Swordfish. Mr Boucher describes the Swordfish pilots as ‘the bravest of the brave’.

The British Royal and Merchant Navies undertook 78 Arctic convoys between August 1941 and May 1945. Of the 1,400 merchant ships that took part, 85 were lost, usually with most of their crews. The Royal Navy lost 16 vessels, also usually with most of their crews. The Germans lost 30 U-boats, 16 cruisers, three destroyers and many aircraft. As well as providing vital aid to keeping the Soviet Union fighting Nazi Germany, the Arctic Convoys also tied down dozens of U-boats close to their Norwegian bases. Without these restrictions they would have been freed up for the Kriegsmarine to use in attacking and possibly cutting the Atlantic sea routes. Without this route Britain itself could not have survived.

In addition sabotage operations by Milorg against railways, roads, bridges and military installations often delayed the arrival of new equipment and personnel to airfields and ports on the Norwegian coast. HMS Oxlip was involved in the last naval engagement in history between battleships at North Cape off Norway in December 1943, a battle in which the Norwegian destroyer Stord also took part. The Allied victory there was completed with the sinking of the Scharnhorst, a German battleship which had threatened the continuance of the convoys for two years. It is a testament to the cruelty of war that of her crew of nearly 2,000 only 36 were pulled alive from the water by HMS Scorpion and HMS Matchless.

Conclusions

When the remnants of the Norwegian armed forces arrived in Britain in June 1940 there was at first little thought given by the British government to how they could form effective fighting units alongside Britain’s armed forces. Most of their equipment had been lost and what they had brought with them was incompatible with British designs. In addition, the Royal Norwegian Navy was primarily made up of obsolete warships, some of which dated from the nineteenth century. The impetus to become a useful addition to the Allied war effort came from these exiled Norwegians. The Norwegian government in London was at first slow to co-operate with the British fully, but many of those it represented in Britain were not. After the resignation of the Foreign Minister, Halvdan Koht, whose activities before and during the German invasion of Norway cast doubt on his loyalties, relations improved and Norwegian pilots began to be trained with the RAF from November 1940.

Eventually, forming three squadrons within the RAF, by 1942 the Norwegian air units had the highest rates of success against enemy aircraft of all the RAF squadrons throughout the war, and therefore, they can be said to have made a significant contribution on the strength of this alone. The fact that one of them, 333 Squadron,


21 ‘Rear Admiral Russen Larssen, Commander in Chief, Royal Norwegian Air Force, to C.L. Paus, former head of Norwegian Commercial Foreign Office’, letter dated 19 October 1942 (Collections, Imperial War Museum, London)
was based in Iceland with the role of convoy protection demonstrates the value placed upon it by British commanders. This squadron, based in Iceland, played a crucial role in protecting Allied convoys as they left the island for the Soviet Arctic ports between June 1941 and June 1943. The increasing use by the Luftwaffe of the Focke-Wolfe Condor from bases in occupied Norway, to which U-boats were added from 1942, made the convoys’ journey ever more hazardous. The protection of the Norwegian-crewed Catalinas became increasingly important. The speed, manoeuvrability and armaments of the Condors meant that ships could do little to evade them or protect themselves. Losses were high as a result, despite protection from the Catalinas for much of the journey.

The effort of Norwegian merchant ships in the Arctic convoys and in the newly built Royal Norwegian Navy destroyers and submarines for both the observation of the Norwegian coast and the protection of the convoys was significant in disrupting and limiting German operations to counter them. As has been discussed, Britain suffered a chronic shortage of resources for its merchant fleet, particularly in manpower, and the Norwegian Merchant Fleet, being the fourth largest in the world, played a significant role in filling some of these gaps in British capability. The role of the Norwegian Resistance or Milorg cannot be underestimated either. Equipped with British radios, Milorg agents, at high risk of being captured by the German occupation authorities, reported the positions and movements of German shipping and aircraft, undoubtedly saving many merchantmen and Allied naval vessels from destruction. By 1944, there were some 300,000 German military personnel in Norway, a country with a population of only around three million at the time, making armed opposition and intelligence gathering highly hazardous.

The use of explosives and other weapons to destroy German military installations and communications caused the occupation of Norway to be an enormous burden to the German authorities. In addition to the Nazi regime’s failure to stop the Milorg’s activities in providing vital information about attempts by the Germans to intercept the convoys as well as much other military activity.

Ultimately the role played by Norway in the Arctic convoys was one which relied heavily upon the support of its allies, particularly Britain and later the United States, while Iceland played an important role as a ‘stepping stone’ from which to provide material support for Russia. However, the investment into regenerating the Norwegian armed forces provided a handsome return in terms of the contribution the Norwegian forces made. The Arctic convoy route was a precarious and tenuous supply link between the West and the Soviet Union. The disaster of convoy PQ17 in July 1942, which led to the temporary suspension of the operations proves this. Without the Norwegian Milorg’s espionage and sabotage operations it appears likely that more such incidents would have taken place. Also the use of the high-achieving 330 Squadron to protect convoys heading for Russia limited losses. Finally the use of a new and well trained, if small, Royal Norwegian Navy, particularly from 1943 onwards, provided a useful addition to the protection that could be afforded the convoys, as well as for the anti-submarine operations that accompanied these off the Norwegian coast.

Without the contribution of the Norwegian armed forces, Norway’s merchant fleet and the militarization of Iceland by the Allies it seems likely that the rate of loss for the Allies in the Arctic would have been considerably higher. In turn, this would have required reinforcement from theatres where resources were already stretched to the limit. It may even have led to the abandonment of the convoys for the sake of keeping open the Atlantic approaches to Britain. Such a situation may well have led to greater losses in other theatres and a consequent lengthening of a war which by 1945 had become one in which Nazi Germany was moving dangerously close to developing weapons of mass destruction and an unassailable technological lead, particularly in aircraft technology.