

Baltic, Black, Barents, and Beskozyrki:

The Soviet Navy in World War II

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On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany launched a surprise attack on the Soviet Union, marking the beginning of Operation Barbarossa. The Nazi war machine marched eastward at an unprecedented pace as the Red armed forces were caught unawares, sweeping eastward towards Soviet cities like Leningrad, Moscow, and Stalingrad. While initially met with bitter fighting throughout the Eastern Front, from the Baltic in the north to the Crimea in the south, Soviet forces survived on the defensive until the pivotal turnaround at the battle of Stalingrad in 1943, culminating in victory in Berlin in 1945. While the exploits, victories, trials, and tribulations of the Red Army have been noted with innumerable accolades and historical treatments, the efforts of the Red Navy have been less remarked upon. These forces, donning their *beskozyrki* (Russian sailing caps), faced wildly varying circumstances in their different naval theaters, supporting ground forces across the entire Eastern Front while achieving important victories of their own. Despite contemporary criticism and a historical reputation to the contrary, the major fleets of the Red Navy in the Baltic, Black, and Barents Seas made contributions to the war effort that were instrumental to the Soviet Union's final victory in the war.

The Soviet Navy had a negative reputation before, during, and after the war (until Admiral Sergey Gorshkov used his wartime experiences to enact reforms that transformed the Navy into a formidable force in the 1960s). German personnel had a particularly low opinion of Soviet fleets, aside from the Nazis' negative opinions toward the Soviets in general. Friedrich Ruge, Vice Admiral of the *Kriegsmarine* (German Navy), wrote extensively about wartime naval operations in the postwar years. He was categorical in his condemnation of the Soviet Navy, saying that German officers did not have "any real respect for [the Soviet] fleet." Furthermore, he assessed that the Soviets lacked "the ability to make quick decisions and to exploit the

ever-changing tactical and operational opportunities inherent to war at sea." Put succinctly, there was "no reason whatever [sic] to fear the opponent."¹

The Germans were not alone in their critique of the Soviet Navy. In a 1943 brief from the Division of Naval Intelligence of the U.S. Navy, American intelligence personnel concluded that the "general efficiency of the Soviet naval forces is rather below that of the navies of the western capitalist powers."² The British shared a similar opinion: Vice Admiral Sir Ian Campbell of the HMS *Milne* wrote after the war that "it was an inescapable fact that the Russians lacked all flair for naval warfare at that time, whatever they may have developed since."³ The animosity of the major powers toward Soviet naval prowess was felt and reciprocated by commanders within the Red Navy: Gorshkov, in his treatise on naval power, asserted that the United States, Great Britain, and France had conspired to allow the Nazi naval forces to exhaust themselves against the Soviet Navy, thereby preserving their own naval reserves in the coming war.⁴

These assessments were not entirely correct, given that the Soviet Union was isolated and only nominally allied with any of the Western powers (first Nazi Germany and then the Allies), necessarily skewing their opinions. Significant to this point was the actual size of the Soviet Navy: at the beginning of the war, the Soviets had three battleships, seven cruisers, sixty-one destroyers, 269 torpedo boats, 218 submarines, twenty-two destroyer escorts, and eighty minesweepers (totaling 660 ships of assorted sizes), all complemented by over two thousand

¹ Donald W. Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power* (New York, NY: MacMillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1974), 386.

² "U.S.S.R. Navy, OP-16-FA-5, serials 40-43," Division of Naval Intelligence, U.S. Navy (published November 30, 1943), 10.

³ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 434.

⁴ Sergey G. Gorshkov, *The Sea Power of the State* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1979), 105.

planes in the naval air force. This assortment of naval materiel, a product of the Soviet government's second "five-year plan," was the result of Soviet shipbuilding output being sixth in the world in 1942, and by 1943, acceleration of this production made it "near the top of the world."⁵ By contrast, the United States had only 478 active ships in its entire fleet in 1940, and that total increased only to 790 by the next year despite having opportunities for naval action in two open oceans (the Atlantic and Pacific), while all Soviet fleets were essentially "locked" to the Baltic, Black, and frozen Barents Seas.⁶

The accomplishments of the Soviet Navy must also be understood within their context. During the entire course of the war, there was only one engagement between two or more fleets on the Eastern Front: this occurred on Lake Ladoga in August 1942 between German and Soviet lake flotillas with no involvement from either of their allies.⁷ Consequently, there were no "naval battles" in the traditional sense on the Eastern Front: engagements in the guise of classic battles like Trafalgar or Jutland did not occur, and, given the nature of the conflict and the theaters in which it was fought (e.g., shallow depths, frozen seaways, rocky island-dotted seas, etc.), such battles were not possible in the first place.

Indeed, Soviet naval theory took a different approach from the strategic orthodoxy at the time. While the different Soviet fleets did have large surface ships, "cooperation with the ground forces was the main assignment of the Navy."⁸ Ivan S. Isakov, Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet

⁵ V. I. Achkasov and N. B. Pavlovich, *Soviet Naval Operations in the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1981), 8.

⁶ "U.S. Ship Force Levels, 1938-1944," Naval History and Heritage Command, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/us-ship-force-levels.html>.

⁷ Jurgen Rohwer, *Chronology of the War at Sea, 1939-1945*, 3rd ed. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 205.

⁸ Robert Warren Herrick, *Soviet Naval Theory and Policy: Gorshkov's Inheritance* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 142.

Union, wrote after the war that the "main and most important task carried out by our navy in all Soviet waters has been to protect the strategic flanks of the Red Army, extending to the coasts, against enemy landing parties and naval operations, and to direct its own blows against the enemy's flanks and rear."⁹ Thus, support of the Red Army through means like artillery bombardment, sea transportation to and from conflict areas, amphibious operations on flanks and sensitive areas, and other forms of aid were the primary goals of the Soviet Navy, and consequently, judgment against that navy due to the lack of any major sea battles like in the Atlantic and Pacific theaters is incongruent with historical facts.

As mentioned, the Soviet Navy was divided into multiple fleets, each of which faced unique challenges in its theater. The largest of these was the Baltic Fleet, which was moored at multiple naval bases throughout the Baltic Sea. While that fleet had a considerable number of bases, the most important of these were Leningrad, the nearby base of Kronstadt, Tallinn in Estonia, and Hanko in southern Finland. The second major fleet was the Black Sea Fleet, which also included the Azov Flotilla in the nearby Sea of Azov. This fleet's main bases were Sevastopol and Odessa in Ukraine, as well as Novorossiysk on Russia's Black Sea Coast. The Barents Sea Fleet (also known variably as the Northern Fleet and Arctic Fleet) was smaller than the Baltic and Black Sea fleets and, consequently, only had a major base at Murmansk on the Kola Peninsula, with Arkhangelsk providing support; this fleet also mostly utilized submarines in its operations, not surface ships. All of these bases experienced considerable action in their defense and also played roles in offensive operations. Numerous smaller combat groups like river flotillas (Don, Danube, Amur, etc.) also existed, but mostly functioned in cooperation with the larger fleets. Additionally, a Pacific Fleet also existed in support of operations against Japan,

⁹ Ivan S. Isakov, *The Red Fleet in the Second World War* (London, UK: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1947), 16.

but these operations only occurred formally between August 9 and August 23 of 1945, so its significance was relatively minor.¹⁰

The Baltic Sea and the naval conflicts contained therein were unusual in their divergence from orthodox naval operations. In particular, both sides made obsessive use of minefields. Indeed, Nazi mining was so extensive at the beginning of the war (taking advantage of the nominal state of allegiance between Germany and the Soviet Union) that the first and only Nazi surface ships lost during those early days were those sunk by their own mines.¹¹ Smaller sea areas like the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Riga were inundated with mines of every conceivable variety; the Gulf of Finland in particular was nearly impossible to traverse at times, due in no small part to its access to besieged Leningrad.¹² This was complicated further by the composition of the Baltic, dotted with small islands and skerries (rocky outcroppings) surrounded by shallow water depths. Consequently, battles between surface vessels were limited to skirmishes involving smaller ships and boats. Even submarines, which were otherwise decisive for the navies on both sides, had limited operational ability in the mine-laden, shallow depths of the Baltic Sea.¹³

The rampant use of mines complicated operations in the Baltic throughout the duration of the war. One of the early important actions of the Soviet Navy, the evacuation of the base at Tallinn in Estonia, highlighted their devastating effect. Part of the German plan to neutralize Soviet ports (thereby minimizing the need for fleet movements of their own) was to take them by

¹⁰ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 447.

¹¹ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 387.

¹² Achkasov and Pavlovich, *Soviet Naval Operations*, 45.

¹³ Achkasov and Pavlovich, *Soviet Naval Operations*, 46.

land. Tallinn was a particularly important part of this strategy due to its proximity to the Gulf of Finland, allowing access to Leningrad.¹⁴ The German forces finally broke through to Tallinn by August 7, 1941, still in the early days of Operation Barbarossa. After a spirited defense by ground forces in the port, an evacuation was finally ordered on August 26.¹⁵

The evacuation of Tallinn involved at least 170 vessels divided over two convoys, each of which was composed of ships of various sizes, including many minesweepers.¹⁶ The convoys faced repeated bombardment from German artillery, aircraft attacks, and significantly, the plethora of mines in the narrow depths of the Baltic. Over the course of two days (including a perilous voyage attempt at night), the Soviet convoys successfully evacuated from Tallinn and headed to Kronstadt, near Leningrad. The convoys, in total, lost eleven ships.¹⁷ The evacuation was conducted slowly to properly sweep the mines, using admittedly insufficient minesweeping ships in inadequate quantities.¹⁸ However, this "mine battle off Revel" (the German name for the evacuation, using the port's classical name) was, despite being "by far the greatest German naval success of 1941," particularly noteworthy for the Baltic Fleet's successful protection of the vast majority of its ships and the personnel onboard.¹⁹

¹⁴ Friedrich Ruge, *The Soviets as Naval Opponents, 1941-1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1979), 19.

¹⁵ Achkasov and Pavlovich, *Soviet Naval Operations*, 50.

¹⁶ Oliver Warner, *The Sea and the Sword: The Baltic, 1630-1945* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, 1965), 218.

¹⁷ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 389.

¹⁸ Achkasov and Pavlovich, *Soviet Naval Operations*, 50.

¹⁹ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 389.

North of Tallinn on the southern coast of Finland, the port of Hanko was also under siege, this time by Finnish forces allied with Germany after the quagmire of the Winter War. Leased from Finland as part of the terms of that war, the port was encircled by land and partially blockaded by sea; much like Tallinn, the surrounding area was also heavily mined. As supplies were running low and winter approached (bringing with it oceanic ice between December and April), the decision was made to evacuate the base.²⁰ Of the 30,000 men garrisoned at Hanko, about 25,000 made it through the surrounding minefields at the port, through the Baltic Sea, and past the mines in the Gulf of Finland to the port in Leningrad. Losses were more considerable here than at Tallinn: the transport ship *Iosef Stalin* hit several mines en route to Leningrad, which caused ammunition aboard the ship to detonate; the resulting explosion killed about 4,000 men.²¹ However, the evacuation was another surprising success for the Baltic Fleet, which largely lacked the capability to transport such large numbers of troops and, more so, to sweep for the huge volume of mines off the Finnish coast.

Both the evacuations of Tallinn and Hanko were significant in setting the stage for naval and land conflicts for the duration of the war. While the ground forces of the Nazi army barreled toward their destinations with inconsequential resistance, the defenses of the Baltic Sea ports (both by land and by sea, as Soviet sailors were often called to take part in both) slowed the blitzkrieg in the north, allowing greater defensive preparation for valuable German targets like Leningrad.²² This was particularly valuable based on the geography of the Baltic Sea, as both Tallinn and Hanko flanked the sea approaches to the Gulf of Finland and, from there, Leningrad.

²⁰ Poul Grooss, *The Naval War in the Baltic, 1939-1945* (Barnsley, UK: Seaforth Publishing, 2014), 127.

²¹ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 23.

²² Grooss, *Naval War in the Baltic*, 63.

Furthermore, the volume of soldiers and sailors rescued enabled both the Red Army and the Soviet Navy to learn from experience the best means of ground and sea defense, not the least of which was improved minesweeping. Ruge noted, in his writings after the war, that the Baltic Fleet "greatly assisted" with the evacuations of those ports and, partially because of their success, they were able to make "full use of the possibilities left to [the Baltic Fleet] in the Gulf of Finland."²³

As mentioned, one of the primary targets of the conflict in the Baltic Sea (and of Operation Barbarossa as a whole) was the city of Leningrad, on the eastern end of the Gulf of Finland near Lake Ladoga. The city was the primary destination for ships evacuating from Tallinn and Hanko, including the defense of nearby Kronstadt. After surviving an order from the commanders of Leningrad's defense to scuttle the ships (ostensibly to block the harbor, which was never the Nazis' objective), the evacuated fleet assisted with defending the city for the remainder of the war.²⁴ Its primary means of defense were the artillery guns on the ships, but the sailors on board also disembarked to assist with operations on the ground.

The use of the Baltic Fleet to defend Leningrad, organized at the behest of Marshal Georgy Zhukov, was categorically important in keeping the Nazis at bay. The Gulf of Finland at this time had experienced so much intense mining (by both Nazis and Soviets) and so many changes of possession of the islands and skerries nearby that it became practically impenetrable from the sea. This, combined with the Baltic Fleet's presence, kept the eastern end of the Gulf firmly in Soviet hands throughout the war. Even artillery and aerial bombardment by German

²³ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 24.

²⁴ Michael Jones, *Leningrad: State of Siege* (New York, NY: Perseus Books Group, 2008), 110.

forces did not wrest the area from Soviet control; so firm was this grasp on the eastern Gulf of Finland that "ships of the Fleet could train there to some extent."²⁵

Nearby at Lake Ladoga, the Ladoga Flotilla was involved in critically important operations, both in combat against the Germans and in the delivery of supplies to besieged Leningrad. As mentioned, it was the site of the only fleet-to-fleet conflict throughout the Eastern Front: near the Soviet naval base at Sukho Island, German ferries and smaller escort boats were attacked by Soviet minesweepers, torpedo boats, and naval planes. The result was that the Germans "were soundly defeated with the loss of at least five ferries."²⁶ The battle definitively ended any possibility of German presence on Ladoga's shores and, critically, the opportunity to siege Leningrad from the east (this, naturally, helped with the eventual breakthrough of the blockade in 1944).

The most important, and perhaps the most esteemed, feat of the Ladoga flotilla was the successful ferrying of supplies to starvation-wracked Leningrad. When the lake froze over during the winter (particularly that harsh winter of 1941), trucks and other vehicles made the perilous journey across the ice to deliver supplies and to evacuate trapped Leningraders; this route was dubbed the "Road of Life."²⁷ However, when the waters thawed in the spring and summer, the flotilla took up this responsibility with a small fleet of "steamers, barges, lighters, launches, and miscellaneous floating craft." The flotilla's actions on Lake Ladoga "undoubtedly saved Leningrad" and resulted in the "greatest strategic contribution of any of [the] flotillas."²⁸

²⁵ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 21.

²⁶ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 438.

²⁷ David M. Glantz, *The Battle for Leningrad, 1941-1944* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 136.

²⁸ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 436.

The resourcefulness and tenacity of the Baltic Fleet were felt throughout the Baltic Theater during the duration of the war. Toward the end of the war, the fleet primarily assisted Red Army ground forces in pushing the Germans westward. After 1943, the naval air force was by far its most effective combat arm and eventually outclassed Germany's *Luftwaffe*. This was, in part, due to how Soviet naval planes were under the direct command of naval officers while German planes remained under the purview of its air force, thus hampering the smooth flow of command and control in ways the Soviet Navy did not experience.²⁹ Even the sinking of ships did not stop Soviet naval ingenuity: the battleship *Marat* was sunk by German aircraft outside the base of Kronstadt, but due to the shallow depths of her moorings, her stern remained afloat.³⁰ The Soviets made use of her stern guns in the defense of Kronstadt and Leningrad and, after the war, made a memorial out of her stern for the defenders of those cities and, more broadly, the sailors of the Baltic Fleet.³¹

Farther to the south, the Black Sea Fleet faced a distinct set of circumstances. Like the Baltic Sea, it was essentially "closed off" as Turkey remained neutral during the war and controlled the narrow Bosphorus Straits. Consequently, the Nazis had few actual naval forces in the Black Sea or Sea of Azov, despite their repeated entreaties to the Turkish government to allow them access.³² Instead, the Axis relied chiefly on the navy of Romania and used its river and railroad means of transport to bring their own ships and submarines to the Black Sea in smaller quantities. The cooperation of Bulgaria and Italy formed a lesser, but important

²⁹ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 12.

³⁰ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 20.

³¹ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 390.

³² Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 390.

contribution.³³ Beyond these unique circumstances, the Black Sea was a considerably more mobile theater since the water was much deeper, enabling the greater use of submarines and a reduction in mining (other than the shallow northeastern portion). Significantly, it also did not experience the same frosts and inclement weather as the Baltic and Barents Seas to the north.³⁴

One of the earliest and most significant naval operations in the Black Sea was the siege of Odessa. From August to October of 1941, the port city maintained a vigorous defense through the cooperation of Soviet naval and army forces. Naval support, under the command of Gorshkov himself, kept the sieging Romanian army at bay for months.³⁵ After seventy-three days of fighting, the isolated Odessa garrison opted to evacuate. However, unlike the evacuations of Tallinn and Hanko, Gorshkov organized an amphibious operation with ships from Sevastopol to the east and flanked the Romanian forces at the rear.³⁶ Using this counterattack, the Black Sea Fleet evacuated 86,000 sailors and troops and over 150,000 civilians within the city of Odessa. This siege and evacuation of Odessa was an "undeniable success at a time when Russian armies were falling back and suffering severe losses."³⁷ Writing about the siege years later, Gorshkov said that they "held up the breakthrough of the southern flank by the [German] South army group and badly upset the strategic plans of the Hitlerite command," which "was made possible only thanks to constant support from the sea of the fighting ships."³⁸

³³ Achkasov and Pavlovich, *Soviet Naval Operations*, 42.

³⁴ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 404.

³⁵ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 65.

³⁶ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 407.

³⁷ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 65.

³⁸ Gorshkov, *Sea Power of the State*, 145.

The siege and defense of Odessa, however, were a mere prelude to the arduous and long defense of Sevastopol. The city, found near the southern tip of the Crimean Peninsula, was a major obstacle to German plans to occupy the Crimea, control the Black Sea, and, most importantly, access the Caucasian oil fields.³⁹ The siege lasted nearly a year, from the end of the Odessa siege until the summer of 1942, well after other conflicts from the initial stage of Operation Barbarossa had concluded.⁴⁰ As was the case with other defensive operations (the Soviet Navy's policy was defense over offense as a rule), naval gunnery formed a major component of the defense of the city. The base was also continuously supplied by transport ships that endured air attacks and mining, since the Crimean coastline was one of the few areas in the Black Sea where mines could be used effectively.⁴¹

The long siege at Sevastopol was in itself a success due to how many resources the Nazi forces needed to invest in the city's capture when it did not fall in a timely fashion, resources that consequently could not be used for the German war effort elsewhere. Key to this long and unlikely defense at Sevastopol was the Soviet Navy's success in amphibious operations. The Kerch peninsula, forming the western half of the Kerch Straits, was the site of a massive amphibious landing in December of 1941 and was "one of the largest operations of its kind undertaken during the Great Patriotic War."⁴² The Black Sea Fleet, in cooperation with the Transcaucasia Front, made no fewer than ten landings along the peninsula. While not all of these were successful, one quickly liberated the seaport town of Feodosia, to the east of Sevastopol,

³⁹ Achkasov and Pavlovich, *Soviet Naval Operations*, 41.

⁴⁰ Rohwer, *Chronology of the War at Sea*, 177.

⁴¹ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 408.

⁴² Achkasov and Pavlovich, *Soviet Naval Operations*, 97.

and put it under Soviet control. This created a second front for the siege of Sevastopol, buying its defenders more time.⁴³

Odessa and Sevastopol, along with the associated amphibious assaults in support of their defense, highlighted the differences in character between the Baltic and Black Sea operations. As mentioned, these operations were a major hindrance for German plans in the south of the Eastern Front. The area, along with the Crimean Peninsula and Ukraine as a whole, remained an active area of conflict throughout the war, making Nazi access to the much-needed Caucasian oil fields much more difficult.⁴⁴ Despite the fall of Sevastopol in July of 1942, the length of the siege was not accounted for by Nazi planners and led to an entanglement of resources that affected other operations. An example of this was that the largest siege guns in the Nazi army were sent to Sevastopol and were not available for use in Leningrad until it was too late to use them effectively.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the Black Sea Fleet demonstrated a more active strategy than the defensive operations in the Baltic by engaging in amphibious operations, which were unlike anything else on the entire Eastern Front.⁴⁶

While the war had begun to turn in favor of the Soviets in 1943, the Black Sea Fleet was battered almost literally beyond repair by that point. Due to the inadequate size of the ports remaining under Soviet control, the fleet had only sixteen submarines and torpedo boats left in commission; without larger ports, more substantial ships could not be repaired and made seaworthy.⁴⁷ Gorshkov wrote that, "as the armed struggle unfolded, the conditions for the fleet

⁴³ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 72.

⁴⁴ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 134.

⁴⁵ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 77.

⁴⁶ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 419.

⁴⁷ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 412.

bases steadily worsened," which was particularly bad in the Black Sea since the "fleet could only be stationed in ports on the Caucasian coast not adapted for this."⁴⁸

As in the Baltic, the Black Sea Fleet's naval air arm was both numerically and technically superior to its German counterpart by the end of the war. Consequently, the fleet was still able to carry out its primary mission of assisting Red Army ground forces, even without a substantial sea presence. These air units assisted the Red Army as it pushed the Nazis westward, retaking Black Sea port cities like Novorossiysk, Rostov, and Sevastopol.⁴⁹ While four years of constant port defense, artillery bombardment, air attacks, and amphibious operations left the Black Sea Fleet barely operational by the war's end, the fleet's "general performance was definitely better than that of the Baltic Fleet."⁵⁰ Gorshkov commented on this success by saying that "it is not possible to over-rate the role of the Black Sea fleet ... in defence of the most important ports and in giving stability to the southern flank of the land front."⁵¹ In this way, the Black Sea Fleet presented the first major hurdle to the Nazi war machine and perhaps its greatest by sea outside of the Atlantic Ocean.

The smallest of the Soviet Navy's fleets was assigned to the Barents Sea. Known as the Northern, Arctic, or Barents Sea Fleet (all names for the waters north of Russia), it had the unenviable task of supporting the frozen sea lanes above the Arctic Circle. Initially, this area was not heavily contested or otherwise considered important by the Axis Powers. However, its importance as a route for supply transport and its proximity to Finland (an early Nazi ally) made

⁴⁸ Gorshkov, *Sea Power of the State*, 141.

⁴⁹ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 112.

⁵⁰ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 419.

⁵¹ Gorshkov, *Sea Power of the State*, 145.

it a tactical priority soon after the war began.⁵² Admiral Arseni Golovko, head of the Barents Sea Fleet, noted that the "weather of the Arctic Ocean was cruel" and that the "vast expanse of the sea was rough and often stormy."⁵³ It was in this frozen expanse that the Soviet Navy experienced its greatest cooperation with Allied forces through the Arctic convoys, laden with supplies for the Soviet war effort.

The Allied convoys, primarily sent by the United States and Great Britain, sailed from the North Sea to the Arctic ports of Murmansk and Arkhangelsk starting in August of 1941, almost immediately after the start of the war on the Eastern Front. These convoys represented "the most important single phase of the naval war in the Arctic," to which the Nazis devoted considerable resources in the form of surface ships, aircraft, and submarines. This necessarily had the effect of diverting those resources away from other naval theaters, particularly the nearby Baltic. The operation, a product of the Lend-Lease agreement between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union, brought in nearly four thousand tons of supplies into these northern ports, nearly all of which successfully reached their destinations.⁵⁴ While the navies of the Allies in the West were instrumental to this effort, its success was contingent on the support of the Barents Sea Fleet. Despite the small size of the fleet, aircraft and surface escorts allowed the convoys to successfully deliver their cargo, which eventually made its way to areas in need like besieged Leningrad.⁵⁵

⁵² Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 421.

⁵³ Arseni Golovko, *With the Fleet* (Moscow, RU: Progress Publishers, 1988), 11.

⁵⁴ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 425.

⁵⁵ Achkasov and Pavlovich, *Soviet Naval Operations*, 297.

One of the primary destinations for the convoys was the Arctic port of Murmansk, located on the Kola Peninsula. The importance of Murmansk was noted by Viktor Leonov, commander of reconnaissance squadrons for the Barents Sea Fleet: without that port, the fleet would "lose important lines of communication" and also be "deprived of the enormous natural resources of the North." For these, the fleet would "fight selflessly for each hill" and "for each boulder on each hill."⁵⁶ The importance of the port was due in large part, as Golovko described it, to its status as "the only ice-free Soviet port in the Polar region." This was to the Soviets' advantage: due to the mountainous terrain and icy conditions, the Nazis were not able to employ their blitzkrieg tactics that had been so successful in other theaters. Barents Sea operations needed considerably more preparation than elsewhere, thus necessarily slowing everything down. This was made worse by the Nazis' increasing reliance on Finnish troops in the region: while they were more accustomed to the area, they were not well-versed in blitzkrieg tactics and tended to inadvertently signal to the Soviets that an attack was impending.⁵⁷

This important port of Murmansk housed the Soviet naval forces that engaged in counterattacks on German shipping in the area. These German shipping convoys, chiefly responsible for bringing supplies to and from Norway and Germany, were ill-equipped to handle Soviet attacks. Continual attacks from the Barents Sea Fleet resulted in German reinforcements being sent north to protect those convoys.⁵⁸ These represented some of the only major offensive operations by any of the Soviet fleets. While the submarines of the fleet attacked the German convoys, the surface fleet remained in Murmansk and Arkhangelsk to support their defense with

⁵⁶ Viktor Leonov, *Blood on the Shores: Soviet Naval Commandos in World War II* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1993), 23.

⁵⁷ Golovko, *With the Fleet*, 13.

⁵⁸ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 142.

their artillery guns, much like the ports in the other theaters. These attacks on German convoys were a considerable success, resulting in over eighty percent of German shipping tonnage being damaged or destroyed.⁵⁹

While active in the smallest of the major naval theaters (excluding the Pacific Fleet's operations in 1945, which did not last for an entire month), the Barents Sea Fleet's actions had wider effects in the other theaters, and not just for the Soviet Navy. The Arctic convoys represented the first real commitment of the Western powers to their Soviet ally and the Lend-Lease agreement. This had important implications for negotiations between the Allied powers as the war continued and, more significantly, after the war's end.⁶⁰ The success of the supply convoys, the largest aspect of the Barents Sea theater, had a direct effect on the survival of Leningrad, Moscow, and even Stalingrad further south. The attack on German shipping also created a chokehold on their supply lines, which had widespread effects in every theater and for every force fighting the Nazis by land, sea, or air.⁶¹

The end of the war in the Barents Sea was marked by continued submarine and surface ship attacks on German forces throughout the Arctic, but the primary mission of the Barents Sea Fleet by 1945 was "protection of the naval communications for the convoys, of fishery, and of communications with northern Norway" (which had become free of Nazi occupation by that point).⁶² Similar to the other naval theaters, the fleet acted in concert with Red Army ground forces, but there were few movements of that sort in the Arctic North (other than minor actions

⁵⁹ Mitchell, *History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power*, 432.

⁶⁰ Warner, *Sea and the Sword*, 249.

⁶¹ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 140.

⁶² Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 185.

in Finland in 1944). However, the fleet did succeed in keeping the Barents Sea free of Axis occupation or, worse, being used as a means of escape as Allied forces closed in on Berlin.⁶³

Across three different naval theaters and four years of constant warfare at sea, the Soviet Navy distinguished itself against the Nazi war machine through artillery bombardment, air support, and even disembarking its sailors from their ships to join the fight on land. The Soviet Union's highest award, the Hero of the Soviet Union, was bestowed on about 12,000 people for service during the war. Of these, 115 were awarded twice, and these included three prominent figures in the Soviet Navy, such as Gorshkov, Leonov, and Colonel V. I. Rakov.⁶⁴ Gorshkov praised the fleets and their heroism, stating that "in this most difficult of wars the fleet justified the hopes pinned on it, the high trust of the Soviet people, and completely discharged its duty to the motherland."⁶⁵ Golovko summarized the feelings of the individual sailors who sacrificed so much for the Soviet Union across the Baltic, Black, and Barents Seas by recounting the naval song "Farewell, Rugged Mountains," which he had heard "many times, and again and again it touches my heart, especially at the most difficult times":

*"I know, friends, I cannot live without the sea,
And the sea cannot live without me."⁶⁶*

⁶³ Ruge, *Soviets as Naval Opponents*, 188.

⁶⁴ Isakov, *Red Fleet in the Second World War*, 65.

⁶⁵ Gorshkov, *Sea Power of the State*, 148.

⁶⁶ Suzanne Ament, *Sing to Victory!: Song in Soviet Society during World War II* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2018), 20.

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