

The Arctic Convoys and the Grand Alliance Against Hitler

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I have been studying and writing about the alliance between Great Britain and the Soviet Union for many years now. When I first started I recall someone saying to me, when I told him what I was studying, ‘but what about the convoys?’. To him, and to many, the convoys were a scandal of wasted lives and resources and a classic example of the ‘phoney’ nature of the alliance. But were they?

On the day that Hitler invaded the USSR, Winston Churchill declared Britain and Russia would fight Hitler together.¹ But what would that entail? Britain had been at war since September 1939 and had suffered serious setbacks. It was desperately short of equipment. It was expecting a German invasion itself at any time, and engaged in a tough fight to protect its vital supply routes at sea and in the Middle East. Right from the start, the supply of war materials to the Soviet Union from Britain was in leaders’ minds as a way to join up their efforts. British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden promised on 30 June that Britain would supply all possible military and economic aid to help defeat Hitler.² In his first message to Churchill on 18 July, Stalin asked for British military action, but he also wanted war materials.³ On 4 September 1941 Stalin told the British ambassador that without a second front, 400 aircraft and 500 tanks a month and aluminium supplies, the

Soviet Union would either be completely defeated, or at best would lose any ability to do active operations against Hitlerism for a long time.⁴

The British military chiefs did not think that Britain could spare any equipment from its own needs. They did not think that anything they could send would make any difference in the USSR. Their view, as the head of the Military Mission to Moscow was told, was ‘They must save themselves, just as we saved ourselves in the Battle of Britain and the Atlantic’⁵

Churchill shared some of these views, but believed that making a sign of solidarity was more important. He told Stalin that he would get all the tanks and aircraft that ‘time, geography and our growing resources would allow.’⁶ The only possible route to send them at that time was around the north of Norway, which was occupied by Germany, to Murmansk or Arkhangelsk, and that was the way they came, beginning with the first convoy we are celebrating here. The Admiralty’s plan was to send a convoy every 40 days.

After the first shipments, arrangements were formalised by the Moscow Conference of 28 September to 1 October 1941. Large commitments were made by Lord Beaverbrook, the negotiator for Britain and Averell Harriman, the negotiator for the US – so large in fact that at one point Maxim Litvinov, who was translating at the conference, jumped to his feet, punched the air and exclaimed , ‘Now we shall win!’⁷. On Beaverbrook’s return, Churchill increased the commitment to a ‘continuous cycle of convoys leaving every ten days.’⁸

The first seven convoys arrived without loss. 53 ships delivered 750 tanks, 800 fighters, 1400 vehicles, 100,000 tons of other stores. These came to Arkhangelsk until 12 December, then Murmansk, which had inadequate facilities to unload such cargoes.⁹

By the end of 1941 the Germans had decided that the flow of supplies had to be stopped, and deployed significant air forces, submarines and surface warships to north Norway. On 22 January 1942 Hitler declared the Norway theatre to be the decisive theatre of the war. The convoys would now have to fight their way through, in appalling conditions.¹⁰

For this and other reasons, the promises made by Beaverbrook and Harriman proved to be difficult to keep. The promised convoys were simply too ambitious for British naval resources, once they were having to fight their way through. The losses began to mount and Admiral Pound warned that the route might be too costly.¹¹ Churchill and US president Franklin D. Roosevelt were determined to keep going: Churchill commented ‘The Russians are in heavy action and will expect us to run the risk and pay the price. ... I share your misgivings but I feel it is a matter of duty.’¹² When Churchill himself became concerned about the cost in ships, Roosevelt reminded him of the ‘compelling’ political and military reasons to continue. Churchill warned that every convoy was now a major fleet operation.¹³

However, despite the political objective of the enterprise, instead of producing a warm cooperative feeling in the alliance and perpetuating Litvinov’s optimism, the convoys tended to be a catalyst for distrust and bitter accusations on both sides. It could be argued that they added greatly to the tensions in the alliance, though they were started and maintained in order to reduce political bad feelings.

From the Soviet perspective, a major theme of complaints was the amount of aid actually reaching the USSR. Beaverbrook and Harriman had made their promises with little assessment of what was actually possible to produce, or, more importantly, to deliver. The issue of delivery was passed over lightly at the conference, with the implication that the Allies were just committing themselves to making the materials available at the places of production.¹⁴

However, the allies had started off with assuming responsibility for delivery and the Soviets quickly regarded it as their duty. Stalin was quite prepared to put it in those terms. He treated the commitments as non-negotiable and took any delay or shortfall as a deliberate act. At one point, Stalin wrote to Churchill ‘The British Government’s deliveries of munitions and other war cargoes to the USSR cannot be treated other than as an obligation assumed by the British Government.’¹⁵

The Soviets showed no sympathy with any difficulties of the supply route in the north, regarding them as minor affairs compared to the challenges of their own military situation. They complained bitterly at cancellations. They protested at losses on the way and found many faults with the state and quality of the items that did arrive.

And then there were issues caused by the presence of allied personnel in Murmansk, Polyarnoe and Arkhangelsk. There was a lot of tension over accommodation for these personnel and the provision of leisure activities for them. There were continual complaints about drunkenness and allegations that they made anti-Soviet comments. At one point Foreign Commissar Vyacheslav M. Molotov complained bitterly about the drunken behaviour of British seamen, claiming that in contrast their Russian counterparts when ashore in Britain spent their time in cultural pursuits such as visiting museums.

There were repeated accusations that allied personnel were attempting to gather information – were spying, in fact.¹⁶ And it seemed to the Soviet authorities that there were far too many allied men in North Russia, especially when the convoys were not running. These people seemed to be idle, and consuming resources in a front-line war zone.¹⁷ Allied requests for facilities, for permission to station units in the north, and for operations to support the convoys were often regarded as criticisms of Soviet abilities to do these things.

Rude comments were made about the Royal Navy's fighting spirit, especially after the disaster that befell PQ17 in July 1942.¹⁸ Stalin complained directly to Churchill, I never expected that the British Government will stop dispatch of war materials to us just at the very time when the Soviet Union, in view of the serious situation on the Soviet-German front, requires material more than ever.”¹⁹ He said “ This is the first time in history that the British Navy has ever turned tail and fled from the battle. You British are afraid of fighting. You should not think the Germans are supermen. You will have to fight them sooner or later. You cannot win a war without fighting”²⁰

Overall, it seems clear, and seemed clear at the time, that while the Soviets pressed for material and complained when it was not arriving, many departments of the Soviet Government did not actually want the convoys there. The secretive, anti-foreigner elements in the security services could not get over their profound institutional and ideological objections to cooperation with foreigners. Or even to having them on Soviet soil.

On the Soviet side what they principally wanted from their allies was a second front. The convoys and supplies were secondary and an unsatisfactory substitute. They

clearly did not want to attach too much importance to the convoys in case it allowed the British to argue that they were an adequate alternative to a second front.²¹ Making the British leaders feel guilty about their level of effort was a favoured technique in the continuing campaign to get a second front. But Stalin also used guilt to maintain the flow of supplies via North Russia. When the convoys were suspended or reduced, he voiced fury – even if the reason was to allow for allied offensive operations. He once complained, ‘I understand this unexpected action (suspension of the convoys) as a catastrophic diminution of supplies of arms and raw materials to the USSR on behalf of Britain and the United States of America... this cannot fail to affect the position of Soviet troops.’²²

The British and Americans therefore felt that the Soviets were unappreciative of the efforts they made, and the sacrifices being made of men and materials. They received very little information about Soviet output of munitions, leading to the belief that Stalin were just making demands as tests of political will and commitment to the struggle. This produced some feelings at the time, which have been repeated in many books since, that the Soviets did not actually need the material at all. They just wanted a sacrifice of allied lives as a symbol of the alliance and an assurance that the burden of fighting Hitler was being shared. To many critics this seemed like a pointless political gesture that actually did not have any effect on the realist and ruthless attitude of Joseph Stalin.²³

Operationally there was resentment that the Soviet Navy did not supply more help to the convoys. With regard to the ships and crews that reached Murmansk and Arkhangelsk, it was felt that they were treated with suspicion and regarded as unwelcome visitors. Their freedom of movement was very restricted. They were allowed little scope

for relaxation, subject to surveillance and NKVD entrapment attempts. Women they socialised with would suddenly disappear, with the only explanation that they had 'gone for a holiday in the Urals'. Facilities in Murmansk especially were rudimentary by western standards, and attempts to improve them were met with hostility. When the British tried to send out a hospital unit to provide medical care for wounded personnel it was refused entry, with the Soviet authorities regarding it as an insult against their own facilities.²⁴

As far as individual crews were concerned, it is clear than many ordinary seamen went to Russia with a great deal of sympathy for the Soviet Union and its politics. Their disillusion was profound. One wrote: 'It was uphill work. The language difficulty could have been overcome with goodwill, but all gaiety and light-hearted talk was smothered by the dour, unsmiling political commissars who attended every occasion, their mean suspicious eyes flickering like cornered animals'²⁵

The British were sure that they needed the personnel that they stationed in North Russia for the efficient running and support of the convoys, and believed the Russians were wrong to claim there were too many. Because it was difficult to get visas for replacements, too many stayed there too long. By September 1943 153 of the 198 allied men in North Russia were due to be relieved, but the Soviet embassy in London would not grant their replacements visas. Murmansk was a front-line city, and prolonged stays there were of course stressful, especially to civilian crews. Some men developed a nervous condition they nicknamed 'Polar Kola' Six had mental breakdowns. One seaman noted in 1943 'Eight months in this joint is enough to drive anyone screwy.'²⁶

On the allied side, the convoys were always regarded by their militaries as a troublesome exercise. The political justification for them magnified this feeling. The Royal Navy was torn between protecting convoys and ensuring their main battle forces were not drawn too far east, leaving it open for German units in Norway to penetrate into the Atlantic. Their attitude towards handling the Soviets was too much tinged with a sense that the Russians should show appreciation of what was being done for them, when the Soviets viewed their contribution, when set against total allied resources, as small, and only what they had a right to expect. They knew the way the Soviet state functioned, yet repeatedly failed to follow protocols – in particular when sending out the hospital unit without securing visas first.

Political leaders – the ambassadors in Moscow and London, the military missions there, and by the leaders at the top, Churchill and Stalin, Eden and Molotov – spent a lot of time trying to settle the issues raised on both sides about the convoys. Angry telegrams were exchanged between Churchill and Stalin on the subject. Once, Churchill thought Stalin's comments were so rude that he handed the message straight back to the Soviet Ambassador, indicating he regarded it as unreadable. .

It would be easy from these points I have just made to conclude that though the convoys were sent for political reasons – to hold the alliance together and make it more friendly – they actually made things worse. They provided a needless friction point and constant crises in overall relations that distracted from other matters on which cooperation and agreement were need. And they were made at great sacrifice on the part of the crews, and the resources used would have been more profitably used elsewhere.

But is that what we should conclude? Are there positives we should weigh against these negative experiences?

First, it is worth pointing out that this was one of the few areas where the anti-Hitler allies were fighting together against the common enemy. Their own military, air and naval forces cooperated together, and had some success, both in seeing the convoys through, and also in broader defensive and even offensive, operations against the enemy in North Norway. The convoys did, mostly, get through, and delivered their cargoes. And these cargoes were important. Especially in the first year and a half, the north was the main route to get supplies in, and while their quantities were relatively small, they can actually be seen as crucial. The margins were so tight in the Soviet situation, that the supply of allied aircraft in 1942, for instance, was very important in keeping numbers just sufficient. In December 1941 the Soviet aircraft industry was producing about 20 percent of what it had made in June. The allied aircraft were crucial for the battles in 1942, including Stalingrad. Stalin's angry reaction as late as October 1943 when he thought deliveries were not being prioritised, indicates the importance he attached to the material and to its delivery in the North.²⁷

Further, the military men in North Russia actually got on very well with each other, and there was significant mutual respect for each other as fighting men. British reports from the senior naval officer and the head of the Naval Mission contain many positive accounts of relations with Admiral Golovko.²⁸

The allied officers tended to blame their problems not on their opposite numbers in the Northern Fleet, but on political figures. Their complaints were all about the NKVD 'green-cap' border personnel, responsible for most of the objectionable rules and

restrictions. It was noticeable that things were easier at Murmansk, which was run by the Soviet Navy. In Arkhangelsk the security services were much more visible and it was they who insisted on the complex rules and restrictions. In Moscow, the British military mission blamed Molotov, and what it called 'the Kremlin Gang'.²⁹ This group was believed not to include Stalin himself, for when it was possible to discuss these issues with him directly, he said very sympathetic things and ordered better treatment. That this rarely fully came about was blamed on the NKVD and Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. The Soviet Navy, it was felt, was doing its best, and was sympathetic.

It is easy to focus on the disputes and bitter recollections of those involved in them. Soviet bureaucracy was a dispiriting thing to engage with for trained diplomats, let alone professional sailors or civilian sea-captains. But to only emphasise this can lead to overlooking the successful operations that did take place. The fleets did work together. Ships of many allied nations came together in the convoys, and the Soviet Navy did contribute. Intelligence was exchanged. Successful military operations did take place. Notable examples are the operations of number 151 wing, flying Hurricanes from Murmansk, and later operations from Vaenga to attack the German battleship *Tirpitz*. Soviet destroyers and submarines worked with the minesweepers based in the Kola Inlet. And Soviet cargo ships, of course, were part of the convoys.

So, to conclude, were the convoys a source of friction or a symbol of unity and solidarity? In many people's eyes, the Grand Alliance was a political arrangement. It happened mostly when the three main leaders – the Big Three of Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt, met together. In military terms, the partners fought their own separate campaigns. Even at the grand strategic level there was not much coordination, as shown

by the lack of a second front in western Europe until 1944. While Americans and British, with Canadians, Poles and others, fought jointly, that is not often said about them and the USSR. But it was the case in the northern battles – the tough campaigns to get the supply convoys through. Here the Big Three allies and their other partners worked together, as a fighting front. As we have noted here, the cooperation was not perfect by any means and the experience of many involved in this cooperation was not positive. One lesson people drew was that meaningful cooperation between the western powers and the communist Soviet Union was impossible, and in particular that their military endeavours should stay apart. But it is important not to let that be the sole conclusion drawn from the campaign. The convoys had an important political role – otherwise they would not have been started or have continued against all the obstacles. They were regarded as worthwhile and that purpose was not entirely delusional. Churchill once commented that while he forgave the Soviets for their past in proportion to the number of Germans they kill, they forgave him ‘in proportion to the number of tanks I send.’³⁰

In addition, this strange alliance needed bonding together by joint action. Cooperation between states and especially states’ militaries and security services is never easy. The conditions in the north could hardly have been more demanding, from the climate to the close proximity of active and powerful enemy forces. This was, after all a fighting front like Moscow or Stalingrad. And here the western allies were able to demonstrate that they were indeed in it with the Soviets and that their alliance had an active military side. If not a second front, it was a front. For all the difficulties, the alliance could have done with a few more of them. Major naval battles took place on this front, and while the allies took heavy losses, so did the Germans – they lost one

battlecruiser and 31 submarines. While the material contribution these convoy operations made to the defeat of Hitler can be debated and should not be over-estimated, they were an important aspect of the war-winning alliance and were a component, for all the difficulties and tensions, that helped that alliance to feel like a real and realistic ongoing concern. And that it should be ongoing was a vital ingredient in the defeat of the fascists.

Notes and References

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- ² Anthony Eden conversation with Ivan Maisky 30 June 1941 British Foreign Office papers FO371/29466 available at British National Archives, Kew, UK (in subsequent references cited as TNA).
- ³ Stalin to Churchill 18 July 1941 in В. О. Печатнов, И. Э. Магдеев, *Переписка Сталина с Рузвелтом и Черчиллем в годы Великой Отечественной войны. Документальное исследование* Том 1 (Москва, 2015): 36-37.
- ⁴ Stalin conversation with Sir Stafford Cripps 4 September 1941 TNA FO371/29490/N5105
- ⁵ Chiefs of Staff to General Mason-Macfarlane 14. July 1941 TNA FO371/29486/N3729
- ⁶ Churchill to Stalin 8 July 1941
- ⁷ Beaverbrook said he had come to Moscow ‘not to bargain but to give’ Joan Beaumont, *Comrades in Arms. British Aid to Russia 1941-1945* (London, 1980): 53.
- ⁸ Churchill to Stalin 6 October 1941 Печатнов и Магдеев, *Переписка*: 79
- ⁹ Peter Kemp, *Convoy! Drama in Arctic Waters* (London 1999): 24
- ¹⁰ Kemp, *Convoy!*: 26
- ¹¹ Kemp, *Convoy!*: 43
- ¹² British War Cabinet minutes WM(42)64th 17 May 1942 TNA CAB65/30.
- ¹³ Roosevelt to Churchill 26 April 1942, Churchill to Roosevelt 1 May 1942 in Warren Kimball, ed., *Churchill and Roosevelt. The Complete Correspondence* vol. 1 (Princeton, 1984): 473, 482.
- ¹⁴ Beaumont, *Comrades in Arms*: 79
- ¹⁵ Stalin to Churchill 13 Oct 1943 Печатнов и Магдеев, *Переписка*: 588-90
- ¹⁶ Group Captain Cheshire report 2 January 1943 TNA FO371/36969/N702
- ¹⁷ Admiral Alafusov complaints to Admiral Miles, British Naval Mission Diary 13 July 1942 TNA ADM119/1102.
- ¹⁸ Maisky comments to Eden 4 September 1942 TNA FO371/32884.

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- ¹⁹ Stalin to Churchill 23 July 1942 TNA PREM3/463. 204-5
- ²⁰ Stalin comments to Churchill, Kremlin, 13 August 1942 TNA PREM3/76A/12.
- ²¹ See Ivan Maisky diary 21 July 1942, in Gabriel Gorodetsky, ed., *The Maisky Diaries. Red Ambassador to the Court of St James's 1932-1943* (London 2015): p 452.
- ²² Stalin to Churchill 2 April 1943 Печатнов и Магдеев, *Перепуска*: 413
- ²³ David Wragg, *Sacrifice for Stalin. The Cost and Value of the Arctic Convoys Reassessed* (Barnsley, 2005): xiii-xv, 130.
- ²⁴ British Naval Mission Diary 9 September 1942, 12 October 1942 ADM119/1102.
- ²⁵ Captain Campbell of HMS *Milne*, Ian Campbell and Donald Macintyre, *The Kola Run: A Record of the Arctic Convoys, 1941-45* (London, 1958).
- ²⁶ Senior British Naval Officer (SBNO), North Russia (Rear Admiral Bevan) report August 1942, TNA ADM199/604; Balfour to FO, notes on arrival in the USSR 10.9.43 TNA FO371/37057/N5808, Arthur Birse, *Memoirs of an Interpreter* (London, 1967): 67, British Naval Mission, Moscow, Diary 23 March 1942, 13 July 1942 TNA ADM 199/1102; Harriman to Eden 4. March 1943 TNA Eden private office papers FO954/26A.
- ²⁷ Observers who reported aircraft simply lying around unused, did not recognise this was often because they arrived damaged. Spare parts could come in different ships and it took time to bring the planes or tanks and the parts together. Beaumont, *Comrades in Arms*: 69-70, compared to Wragg, *Sacrifice for Stalin*: 130.
- ²⁸ Senior British Naval Officer, North Russia report, Murmansk, 20 September 1941 TNA FO371/29491/N5840, Senior British Naval Officer, North Russia letter to Director Naval Intelligence, London, 12 December 1941 TNA ADM223/249.
- ²⁹ Mason-Macfarlane telegram to Chiefs of Staff 22 September 1941 TNA FO371/29490/N5458.
- ³⁰ Beaumont, *Comrades in Arms*: 72