



## MURMANSK AND THE ARCTIC CONVOYS

Sprawled over some 12 miles of the eastern shore of Kola Bay, 30 miles upriver from the Barents Sea, the port of Murmansk is the by far largest city in the world north of the Arctic Circle, and also easily the youngest.

The fact that it shares a birthday with Finland can be no coincidence, since the latter's independence in 1917 denied the Soviet Northern Fleet access to the Atlantic Ocean without the beneficence of neighbouring countries.

Just 67 and 113 miles from the Norwegian and Finnish borders respectively, Murmansk was actually founded in 1916. The last town to be founded in the Russian Empire, it was named Romanov-on-Murman in honour of the Romanov dynasty and after an archaic Russian name for the Barents Sea - Murman. However, like so many Russian cities, it was renamed after the February Revolution of 1917.

While Russia's doomed tsar, Nicholas II, may have put the city on the map, its subsequent rapid growth was a legacy of the stubborn - some would say insane - Soviet policy of carving out well-populated settlements across some of the country's most inhospitable regions, from the cities-on-stilts that were erected amid the permafrost of deepest Siberia to the sunlight-starved towns of the Arctic.

Murmansk's extreme northerly location means it experiences an annual 40-day long polar night from 3rd December to 11th January. During this period, when the sun remains constantly below the horizon, an unsettling semi-twilight occurs each day for a few hours around noon.

Not even the locals become acclimatised to this; the constant darkness makes them feel drowsy all day, but then at night they can't fall asleep.



Benefitting from the warmth of the Gulf Stream which keeps the coastal waters of the Kola Peninsula ice-free, Murmansk played a pivotal role in the delivery of over four million tons of vital supplies to the Soviets during World War II.

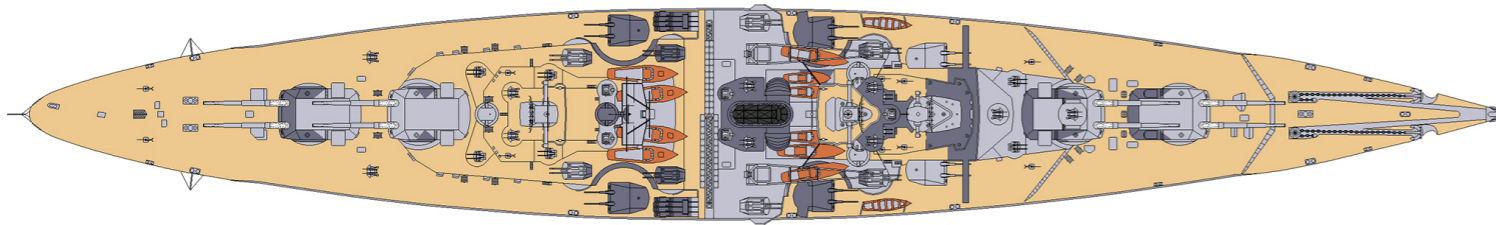
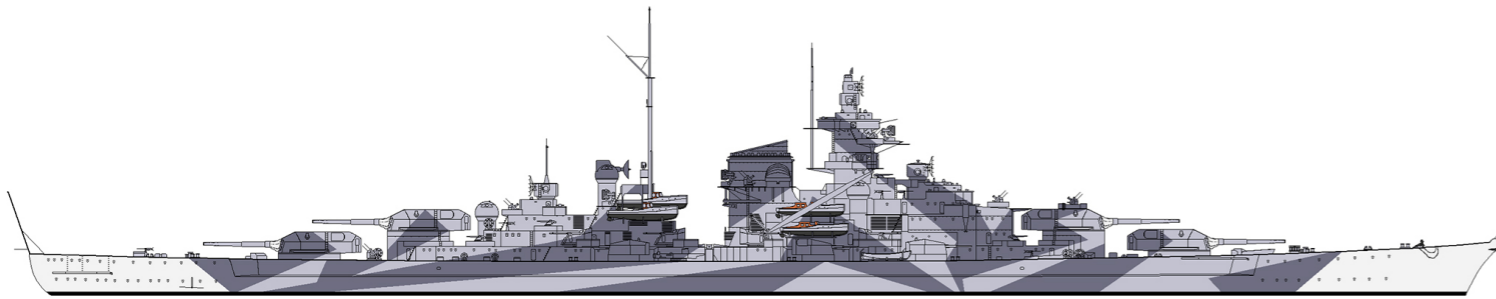
In June 1941, three million German troops crossed the Russian border. Six months later they were within 15 miles of Moscow, and Joseph Stalin was screaming at Winston Churchill for supplies to bolster his country's decimated defences. He demanded 400 aircraft a month, 500 tanks a month, and 30,000 tons of aluminium immediately.

Churchill acquiesced, promising re-supply by convoys sailing around northern Norway to the Soviet ports of Murmansk and Archangel, once every 10 days. The first convoy sailed in September 1941. The route passed through a narrow funnel between the Arctic ice pack and German bases in Norway, and was notoriously dangerous, especially in winter when the ice crept further south.

Conditions were among the worst faced by any Allied sailors. As well as the Germans, they faced 100mph winds, waves as tall as the ships themselves which produced a weight of water on board sufficient to split the decks, and temperatures down to -60 degrees C. Ice covered everything, and had to be regularly chipped off to prevent ships from becoming top-heavy and capsizing.

Merchant Naval nasal hair froze into needles, and many a seaman was astonished to absent-mindedly wipe his nose and then find his face smeared with blood. To add insult to injury, a merchant seaman's pay was stopped the instant his ship sank from under him. Not that this would have been an abiding concern; life expectancy if you did end up in the water was less than 15 minutes and, the hallmark of a convoy being that it simply did not stop, the chances of being picked up were slim to non-existent.





As if all of this didn't make life unpleasant enough for those manning the Arctic convoys, there was just one additional, and truly gargantuan, problem lurking on the horizon- the German battleship Tirpitz. Sister ship to the Bismark (which had recently sunk the pride of the Royal Navy, HMS Hood, with just five salvos fired from a range of 10 miles), the Tirpitz was a formidable weapon -a maritime masterpiece of destructive power.

Despite being over 250 metres long (that's two and a half football pitches in couch-potato), weighing some 58,000 tonnes and boasting armour up to 14" thick, the Tirpitz had a maximum speed of over 30 knots, and she struggled to find destroyer escorts which could keep up.

Each 60ft-long barrel of her main armament -eight Krupp 15" guns- could fire a shell the weight of a Mk1 Mazda MX-5 a maximum distance of 22 miles (roughly Dover to Calais as the projectile flies), every twenty seconds. Incidentally, it took said shell about a minute and half to cover those 38,720 yards - an eternity if you were unlucky enough to see the flash of a broadside you knew was coming your way...

Which, interestingly, no Allied sailor ever did; the Tirpitz never fired on an enemy ship in her lifetime. Nonetheless, this chillingly beautiful behemoth was known as a 'fleet in being' because she was considered such a threat to the Allies that they devoted vast resources to just keeping her penned in the Norwegian fjords.



'Terrified' is not a word one readily associates with the British Admiralty's lexicon, but the effect the very existence of the Tirpitz had came pretty close to conjuring it, as Arctic convoy PQ17 - a fleet of 36 merchantmen protected by 26 assorted warships making it the largest ever assembled - discovered in June 1942.

Hearing rumours that Tirpitz was on the loose, the Admiralty promptly ordered the convoy's pea-shooter-armed heavy cruiser escort to flee. Then, because the convoy had been ordered to scatter leaving them, effectively, with nothing to guard, the Allied destroyers followed suit. With 12 U-boats in the area, 133 bombers and a hatful of torpedo aircraft, the Germans set about the defenceless merchantmen with such merciless vim that by 22nd July 25 vessels had been sunk, and only 11 went on to reach the Soviet Union.

The dread Tirpitz, meanwhile, having no plans to attack the convoy, had merely slunk from one Norwegian fjord to another. Dubbed 'The Lonely Queen of the North' by her reluctant hosts, the majestic battleship spent nearly three almost entirely inactive years in Norway before a clutch of the RAF's five ton 'Tallboy' bombs finally sank her in Tromso fjord in November 1944.







During the Cold War, it's easy to imagine the Kola Bay seal population outnumbered by nuclear submarines as Murmansk grew further in both strategic significance and, with nearly half a million inhabitants, size. Many were attracted by the high wages on offer in the shipping and fishing industries, part of the Kremlin's bid to compensate workers for the hardships of life this far up north.

It may remain a giant by Arctic standards, but today, however, though Severomorsk - a satellite town - remains an important Russian Navy base, Murmansk is shrinking, its population down to just 300,000 shivering souls. Once the Soviet pay bonuses vanished in the newly independent Russia, a mass exodus occurred as people abandoned Murmansk in search of more hospitable climes.

This is a trend that has been encouraged in recent years by a Russian government scheme to relocate elderly people who wish to move further south. Reports suggest, however, that after a lifetime of long, dark winters, and relatively mild summers, many of these Murmansk pensioners find it tough to adapt to life in the sun.