The Soviet Offensive in the Arctic: The Pechenga (Petsamo)-Kirkenes Operation 1944 - Part 1 of 2

by Kai & Iryna Isaksen

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Introduction

The Pechenga-Kirkenes Operation, as it became known in Soviet military literature, is an important part of Soviet military history, but has been largely ignored in Western military literature, even though the last few years have seen an increased interest in the operations north of the Arctic Circle in WW2.

It was the "10th hammer blow", the last in a series of strategic offensive operations conducted by Soviet armed forces throughout 1944, designed to deal a decisive blow to the German ability to conduct counter offensives and mount military operations along the entire Eastern Front.

The battle, or rather series of battles, is the largest ever fought north of the Arctic circle and lessons are still being drawn today from the experience of the two armies that slugged it out in the moonlike landscape of the tundra west of Murmansk.

On October 7th 1944, a Soviet force of nearly 113,000 men of the Karelian Front, commanded by General Meretskov (later Marshal of the Soviet Union) launched an offensive against the 60,000-man German *XIX Mountain Corps*, defending in prepared positions along the Litsa river valley northwest of Murmansk.

Assisted by sea, air, and land forces (Naval infantry/marines) of the Northern Fleet, the Soviet 14th Army defeated the German forces in a three-phased operation that lasted a total of 24 days.

Soviet troops captured the Finnish town of Petsamo (Russian: Pechenga) on October 15th and occupied the Norwegian harbour and town of Kirkenes on October 25th. The offensive ended on October 29th, with Soviet troops stationed as far west as Neiden in Norway.

For Soviet military professionals, the Pechenga-Kirkenes Operation provided a model for the study of warfare on arctic terrain. It was foundation for their arctic warfare doctrine and Soviet era military texts cite historical examples from this operation in support of discussions concerning future combat activities in the Arctic regions. The Norwegian and Finnish Armies used the experience of the German mountain units when the defence of the North of Norway and Finland was planned during the Cold War.

In writing this article, we relied on a number of sources in Russian and German, as well as what little is available in English.

Relatively little has been written about the Operation in English, the authoritative source still probably being the work of Maj. James Gebhardt of the US Army during the early 1980's, but later research into Russian material has shown some of his statistics and battle descriptions to be inaccurate.

What little is available tend to be almost entirely from the German point of view, as much of the Soviet-era documentation is still hard to come by in modern Russia, in addition to the simple fact that very little of this documentation is yet translated from Russian of course.

Many of the commanders involved on both sides have written extensive memoirs that were consulted and a few of the actual operations orders have also been released and studied in detail. Together with eyewitness reports as reported in newspapers and other sources, these provide a fairly balanced and objective description of the events.

German military records, stored at the Central Archives in Koblenz and Berlin, provide the other perspective of this operation.

Extensive copies of divisional records and after-action reports exist for the *2nd Mountain Division*, the unit that received the first Soviet main attack, and also for the *20th Mountain Army* – to which the *XIX Mountain Corps* was subordinate.

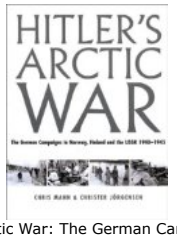
Unfortunately, the only records that survived for the *XIX Mountain Corps* itself, the *6th Mountain Division*, and other major commands involved are those stored in the folders of the *20th Mountain Army* and the actual divisional record appear to have been

- Harris Class APA's
- Aerial Defense of East Indies
- Why the Bulge Didn't Break
- American Forces in WWII
- Shadow Warriors
- Battle of Surigao Strait
- Panzer Brigades
- Adolf Eichmann
- Interview of a WWII Veteran
- Failure and Destruction
- Winter Warfare
- Operation Rusty: The Gehlen-U.S. Army Connection
- Was Hitler right to invade Russia?
- Hitler, Germany's Worst General
- Surface Actions of World War II
- MacArthur's Failures in the Philippines
- Japan's Monster Sub
- Popski's Private Army
- The Soviet Formula for Success
- Japan's TA Operation
- Hitler Youth: An Effective Organization
- After Midway: The Fates of the Warships
- Barbarossa: Strategic Miscalculation
- The Story of a "Go Devil"
- Long Range Desert Group
- Island of Death
- The Failure of Operation Barbarossa
- The Liberation of Czechoslovakia 1945
- Only the Admirals were Happy
- Bicycle Blitzkrieg - Singapore
- Good Grief Sir, We're in Trier!
- Barbarossa
- Thermopylae, Balaklava and Kokoda
- How Hitler Could Have Won
- The Battle of Midway
- Waffen SS - Birth of the Elite
- Nomonhan and Okinawa
- Der Bund Deutscher Mädel
- Rulers of the World: Hitler Youth
- Breakout From the Hedgerows
- Yalta
- Memories of D-Day
- Motivation of the Einsatzgruppen
- Pearl Harbor and Midway
- Amphibious Assaults during WWII
- The 9th SS Panzer Division
- The Warsaw Uprising
- Sea Lion vs. Overlord
- Maginot Line
- Battle of Bastogne
- Battle of the Barents Sea
- Anzio: The Allies' Greatest Blunder
- US Army in WWII
- Battle of Mers-el-Kebir
- Hitler's Ultra-Secret Adlerhorst
- The Wilhelm Gustloff Disaster
- The 88th Infantry in Italy

Kai Isaksen Articles

- Soviet Offensive in the Arctic
- The War between Norway and Sweden 1808
- Review: Gary Grigsby's War in the East

Recommended Reading



Hitler's Arctic War: The German Campaigns in Norway, Finland, and the USSR 1940-1945

A Frozen Hell: The Russo-Finnish Winter War of 1939-1940

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lost during of after the operation.

The German documents were used to establish the strength, location, and mission of the German major units and, also to verify claims and information listed in Russian/Soviet sources.

Notes:

When reading this article, it is recommended to have a general map of the area available to be able to distinguish the different locations and axis of advance from each other. "Pechenga" is the Russian name for Petsamo, and one can sometimes find the operation described as "Petsamo – Kirkenes Operation".

Soviet units generally use the word "Rifle" to denote infantry, so that Soviet divisions generally are called "Rifle Divisions" rather than infantry divisions. In composition and make up, these divisions are essentially ordinary infantry divisions. "Guards" divisions are divisions that have been awarded the term "Guard" by the Central committee, often as a reward for good service. Guard divisions are therefore, not necessarily "Elite" divisions as such.

German units are written in *Italics* whereas Soviet units are written in plain text.

The logistical operations, the air support operations and the naval support operations, are subjects of three upcoming articles by the same authors, and these subjects are therefore treated relatively superficially in this article, which mainly deals with the land combat element of the Operation.

Kiev October 16th 2013
Kai & Iryna Isaksen

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Weather and Terrain

About 320 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle, the towns of Kirkenes and Pechenga as well as the city of Murmansk, represented the main settlements and harbours in the Arctic regions of Norway, Finland and the Soviet Union (today Russia).

The area of operations of the Pechenga-Kirkenes Operation is located between the 69th and 70th degree northern latitude, surrounding these three major settlements.

In comparison, the islands of Attu and Kiska, where American and Japanese forces fought in bitterly cold conditions during WW2, are some 300 kilometres south of the Arctic Circle, and only the northernmost parts of Canada and about a third of Alaska are located above the Arctic Circle. In this inhospitable and barren terrain over 150,000 soldiers would fight harsh battles, ending up costing 16% of them their lives.

The Barents Sea remains unfrozen during the winter months, due to the Gulf Stream, and Murmansk, as well as Kirkenes and Pechenga are ice-free harbours owing to the same Gulf Stream.

In October, temperatures normally range from -5° to +5° C but rarely fall far below 0, although strong moist winds from the Barents Sea can make the cold intensify and heavy snowfalls are not unheard of at that time of year. October also usually sees a mixture of rain and snow, and the area can be very foggy due to the mixing of warm water from the Gulf Stream with the ice cold water of the Arctic.

Daylight is about 10 hours in mid-October, rapidly decreasing towards the winter months, reducing practical operation times in the region. On clear winter nights, the Aurora Borealis is often to see above the barren fields.

The terrain is primarily tundra (permanently frozen ground) with low hills of barren rock along the coast resembling a moon landscape, and a bit further inland steep hills rise up to about 800 metres and rock-strewn slopes, interspersed with swamps and marshes make movement difficult and energy consuming. There are a few lakes that are mostly drained by north-east flowing rivers that end in the Barents Sea. There is hardly any vegetation, except low bushes, permitting clear fields of view and fire from elevated positions. In October the ground and lakes are generally not frozen enough to support heavy vehicles, and traffic is therefore road-bound.

For the Germans, the road network was therefore of great importance when they planned their offensive operations in 1941, as it was for the Soviets in 1944.

In 1944, the Germans had two major roads supplying their forces in the region:

Highway 50 ("Riksvei 50", the modern day E6), an all-weather, but low capacity road following the Norwegian coastline from Tromsø to Kirkenes, and the Arctic Ocean Highway from Rovaniemi in Finland through Ivalo and north to Kirkenes, Pechenga and other towns in the region.

The Germans used POW's to improve the roads running east from Pechenga, and also built a cable car system to ease the supply situation:

• "Speer Road" connected Pechenga to the village of Titovka,
• "Russian Road" linked Pechenga with the units along the Litsa front (*6th Mountain Division*), and finally
• "Lanweg" connected with the Arctic Ocean Highway at Luostari, linking in the positions along the Titovka River (*2nd Mountain Division*).

On the Soviet side, a single main road led from Murmansk to the rear of the Soviet positions, although the Soviets, in preparation for the offensive, made concerted efforts to construct additional roads in the summer of 1944. These were not completed, however, in time for the start of the Operation, something that would come back to haunt the Soviet planners during the Operation.

No roads connected the Soviet and German defensive sectors. The entire three-week offensive thus hinged on both sides attempting to exploit the road net for their own operations while, at the same time, denying its use to the enemy.

Strategic Context and the "10 hammer blow offensives" of 1944

The Pechenga-Kirkenes offensive was not an isolated event far above the Arctic Circle, but rather tied in with a series of other offensives along the entire Eastern Front.

1944 was generally a decisive year on the Eastern Front. In the beginning of the year, the Red Army pushed the German *Army Group North* from the outskirts of Leningrad (modern day St. Petersburg) to the pre-war borders with Estonian and Latvia.

Just south of Kiev in Ukraine, 4 Soviet Fronts (roughly equivalent to an Army Group in UK/US terminology) launched a major offensive in the first three months of the year, pushing the German *Army Group Centre*, including Rumanian and Hungarian armies, out of large areas of the fertile lands of Ukraine.

In April Soviet forces recaptured the Crimean peninsula and moved forward along the Black Sea coast from Odessa.

On the International Workers Day (May 1st) 1944, Stalin laid out the strategic military and political goals of the Soviet Union. They

included:

• Clearing all Soviet territory of German and foreign occupation troops,
• Re-establishment of the Soviet Union's national borders from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea,
• Pursuing and destroying the German Army,
• Liberating Poland, Czechoslovakia and other European peoples from German occupation or regimes that were allied to Germany.

These strategic goals would lay the foundations for the Soviet military operations for the rest of 1944, with the formation of the "10 hammer blows" strategy – 10 major offensives that were designed to push German troops from Soviet territory.

During the summer months the Red Army attacked and mostly destroyed *Army Group Centre* in Belarus conducted by four Fronts. By the end of August, the Soviets had reached the Vistula River, marking the crossing into pre-war Poland.

From June to October, the Soviets kept up the pressure on *Army Group North* in the Baltic states, and by the end of October had destroyed all but a remnant that was still entrenched and holding out in Kurland, in today's Latvia.

Just a week after the liberation of Paris in August by Western Allied troops, the Red Army entered Bucharest, the capital of Rumania, and Bulgaria surrendered a few days later without putting up a fight.

In February 1944, the Finnish and Soviet governments had begun discussing terms for Finland's withdrawal from the war (at this stage it was not surrender discussions). In April, the Finns rejected the harsh Soviet demands, believing they still held a good negotiation position as their troops were entrenched along the Svir River in East Karelia and still held strong defensive positions on the Karelian Isthmus.

The Soviet General Staff then recommended that the Leningrad and Karelian Fronts launch a series of major offensive operations against the Finnish forces in the sector from Leningrad to Petrozavodsk. The strategic objective of the offensive was to defeat the Finnish Army and force Finland from the war.

Consequently, in June 1944, the Red Army launched offensive operations against Finnish forces North of Leningrad and quickly captured Vyborg, thereby threatening the capital, Helsinki. In response to the critical situation on the isthmus, the Finnish High Command transferred forces from the relatively quiet front along the Svir, to reinforce the approaches to the Capital.

The Soviet forces of the Karelian Front, under General Kirill A. Meretskov, then launched the Svir-Petrozavodsk Operation that would become a blueprint for the later operations in the Arctic.

The Soviets attacked in force northwards and westwards from Soviet Karelia and quickly captured most of the area between the two great lakes, Ladoga and Onega. This offensive lasted until August 9th, and forced the reopening of talks between the Soviet and Finnish governments – the Finns now having lost most of their territorial holdings gained in the war and under immense pressure on all fronts.

On September 4th, 1944, The Soviet Union and Finland signed an Armistice that, among other demands, required Finland to actively expel or disarm and intern all German troops still on Finnish soil. The deadline was strict. By September 15th, no German combat formations were allowed to still be on Finnish soil.

Finland's withdrawal from the war left the German units deployed there in a precarious position.

These forces formed the *20th Mountain Army*, commanded by Col. Gen. Lothar Rendulic, and were located both north and south of the Arctic Circle in especially inhospitable terrain with few roads or railway lines to facilitate rapid movement.

The German military presence in northern Finland began back in June 1941, when German units of *Mountain Corps Norway* led by General Dietl, as part of Operation Barbarossa, attacked from Finland on June 29th into Soviet territory along the Murmansk axis. Their mission was to capture the city of Murmansk with its important harbour and cut the Murmansk-Leningrad railroad, which connected the ice-free port with the Soviet interior.

Stiff Soviet resistance halted this drive in September - October 1941 along the Litsa and Titovka Rivers, some 50 kilometres northwest of Murmansk, where the Germans then dug in and built defensive positions. Over the course of the next 3 years, the front hardly moved at all, and both sides settled into something similar to the Western Front in WW1, and built extensive networks of trenches and fortifications.

The Germans initially struggled to keep their units supplied in the moonlike landscape, but by 1944 all German units were well equipped, at good strength and well supplied with clothing, food, fuel, weapons and ammunition, in part through the use of an innovative cable car line that was built to move supplies to the front.

The area captured by the Germans, was rich in important minerals, and Organisation Todt quickly organised the rebuilding and operation of the nickel mines south west of Pechenga (in the towns of Nikel and Zapolyarniy), and iron ore from an open pit at Bjørnevatn, near Kirkenes in Norway.

This was shipped to Germany over Kirkenes and Pechenga harbours, protected by the German Air and Naval units stationed along the Norwegian coast. By 1944, however, the nickel mines had lost its strategic importance, as Germany has stockpiled nickel to last several years at home in Germany.

When Finland began negotiations with the Soviet Union in August 1944, Col. Gen. Rendulic began to withdraw his two southernmost corps - northwards to form a new defensive line across northern Finland from Lyngen in Norway through Ivalo to Pechenga.

Operation Birke, as this plan was called, commenced on September 6th 1944, and by mid-September, both the *XVIII* and *XXXVI Mountain Corps'* had moved back into Finnish territory on their respective axes.

During the second half of September, the *XVIII* and *XXXVI Mountain Corps* withdrew westwards towards Rovaniemi and their Birke positions. Not satisfied with the slow German withdrawal and under heavy political pressure from the Soviets to adhere to the terms of the armistice, Finnish forces half-heartedly attacked the withdrawing German units on September 28th. After some relatively minor skirmishes, the German withdrawal continued.

In late September 1944, the German *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) – Armed Forces Supreme Command – determined that the northern region was no longer vital and ordered the *20th Mountain Army* to withdraw into Norway to new defensive positions along the Lyngen fjord.

The plan was called **Operation Nordlicht** and was approved by Hitler himself in early October 1944.

The *XIX Mountain Corps* was ordered to withdraw along Highway 50 westwards from Kirkenes through the region of Finmark. The two southernmost *Mountain Corps' (XXXVI and XVIII)* of the *20th Mountain Army* would also withdraw westwards into Norway. The *XIX Mountain Corps* had just started preparations for this withdrawal when the offensive of the Karelian Front hit them with full force on October 7th 1944.

Map: Operation Nordlicht – the German withdrawal from the Arctic
Source: Wikipedia

Tactical Situation October 1944

German units and positions

In October 1944, the combat elements of the German *XIX Mountain Corps* (Gen. Ferdinand Jodl) consisted of four divisional groupings:

- *2nd Mountain Division* (Lt. Gen. Degen) with approx 16,000 men
- *6th Mountain Division* (Maj. Gen. Pemsel) with approx 18,000 men
- *210th Coastal Defence Division* with approx 5,500 men
- *Division Group Van der Hoop* (Gen. Freiherr Van der Hoop) with approx 4,000 men
- *Bicycle Recon Brigade Norwegen* with approx 2,500 men

Later in the battle, the Corps would be reinforced by the *163rd Infantry Division* with approximately 16,000 men.

The *210th Coastal Defence Division* consisted of 5 fortress battalions which were widely scattered in the towns along the Norwegian coast in mostly immobile coastal defensive positions.

Division Group Van der Hoop consisted of two Grenadier Brigades (193rd and 503rd) was 3,992 man strong and held defensive positions from the Pechenga fjord, across the Srednii Peninsula to the mouth of the Titovka River, primarily defending against possible Soviet landings by naval infantry.

The *6th Mountain Division*, with the 388th Grenadier Regiment attached, guarded the strongly fortified Litsa front from the Titovka River mouth south and west to Lake Chapr. This front was heavily fortified with trenches, strong posts blasted from granite rock and concrete bunkers and machine gun positions. It also consisted of comfortable barracks for the troops.

The *2nd Mountain Division* defended in strong points along the Titovka River south from Lake Chapr to Hill 237. This was a crack division, created from Austrian Alpenjäger divisions after Anschluss in 1938 and had spent the entire war in the Arctic.

Bicycle Recon Brigade Norwegen, almost 2,500 troops, was initially held in reserve around Kirkenes and would enter the fight towards the end of the third phase.

Because of a genuine lack of combat forces and the inhospitality of the terrain, Gen. Jodl, the commander of the *XIX Mountain Corps*, did not establish defensive positions south of Hill 237, leaving his right flank essentially unguarded.

The *XIX Mountain Corps* was a formidable force, at least on paper. All in all including support elements, the Corps would eventually number nearly 56,000 soldiers.

The divisions were almost at full strength (90.2%), which was uncommon for German divisions at the time, but struggled with not having the usual complement of logistics and support elements.

The divisions were generally well stocked with ammunition and general supplies and felt confident they could hold the front line for a long time if necessary.

Also, having been stationed along a fairly quiet front in the Arctic for three years, with relatively little intense combat activity, the units were inexperienced in divisional and corps-level manoeuvre operations.

As mentioned, just a few days before the offensive started in October, the *XIX Mountain Corps* had been ordered to prepare to retreat westwards towards Lyngen in coordination with the rest of the *20th Mountain Army*, and preparations for this had just started when the offensive hit.

The main mission for the units of the *XIX Mountain Corps* at the time was to defend its positions, so all the thousands of tons off stockpiled supplies could be evacuated through the ports of Pechenga and Kirkenes before the Corps started retreating.

The Germans relied for their defence on three fortified lines of strong points that could mutually support each other.

The first line was manned, whereas the second and third lines were prepared for use, and would serve as rally points for the

defenders if they were forced back. The Germans had also ensured that they dominated the hill tops, which gave them a wide view and good fields of fire and vision, and built covered concrete and steel-reinforced bunkers including ammunition dumps and supply caches in these locations. Each strong point was also surrounded by barbed wire and mine fields.

The size of each strong point varied in relation to the terrain and troops available, but generally held at least a platoon worth of Mountain infantry with support units.

The strong point "Sugar Hill" held by units from *2nd Mountain Division*, for instance, was manned by an entire company of mountain infantry, a reinforced engineer platoon and a mountain artillery observation unit, able to call in fire from a dedicated artillery battalion from the *111th Mountain Artillery Regiment*. In total the strongpoint then had 13 light machine guns, 4 heavy machine guns, 2 80 mm mortars, 2 light infantry guns (75mm) and 2 anti-tank guns (37mm), in addition to the personal weapons (rifles, machine pistols, hand grenades, and pistols etc.) of the officers and men of the mountain infantry unit.

All in all, there were around twelve of these company sized strong points in the *2nd Mountain Division* area, and a number of smaller strong points manned by a platoon or a section. Between the strong points, typically on the low ground, minefields and obstacles created by the engineer units, combined with heavy patrol activity, provided the defensive structure. The *2nd Mountain Division* took additional steps to strengthen these gaps between the strong points in the few weeks leading up to the Soviet attack, adding trenches and observation posts.

The second defensive line was constructed along the west bank of the Titovka River, about 8-10 kilometres behind the first line. This line also consisted of individual strong points covering the natural approaches to the river, as well as obstacles and mine fields.

The third, and final defensive line, was positioned some 20-25 kilometres behind the second line, behind the Petsamo River. This was focused on guarding and defending the approaches to Pechenga itself as well as the town and important airfield at Luostari. Further prepared defensive positions guarded the mines at Nikel, the port of Liinahamari and the port and airfield at Kirkenes in Norway.

Less detail have survived about the strong points in the Litsa sector, the area held by the *6th Mountain Division*, but in general the front was built up along the same principles as the sector held by *2nd Mountain Division* – by the use of fortified strong points and mine fields and obstacles to slow down a Soviet advance in between.

However, later personal visits to the front have shown that the Litsa front was also more of a continuous front with trenches and even comfortable barracks for the troops built at regular intervals along the front. Finnish firms had supplied doors, windows and beds to the German troops along the Litsa line and in general the troops were fairly comfortable despite the harsh climate.

German intelligence on the Soviet preparations had reached the *XIX Mountain Corps*, and they were aware that a major offensive was imminent. On 12th September, Lt. Gen. Degen had told the troops of the *2nd Mountain Division* to be prepared for an imminent attack.

The intelligence report also correctly identified the "Lanweg" as the main axis of advance for the Soviets and a divisional order for the *2nd Mountain Division* from late September prescribed several measures to be implemented by the German units to improve their defensive positions.

No plans or preparations for a retreat from the main line were included in the divisional order, however, as Hitler only ordered this to start in early October, and it was generally expected that the defensive lines would hold until the vital supplies could be evacuated from Kirkenes and Pechenga.

In any case, the Germans were as prepared as they would ever be when the offensive hit them in October.

General Meretskov, Soviet Forces and Preparations

The Soviets had started planning for operations to clear the Germans from the Murmansk area already in February 1944, when talks with Finland were ongoing.

Gen. Meretskov had just replaced Gen. Frolov as commander of the Karelian Front, which covered the area from Soviet East Karelia (the Svir line), all along the Finnish frontier up to Murmansk and the Litsa line in the North.

Meretskov was an experienced Soviet field commander, having served in the Red Army since the days of the Civil War in 1918-1919. Between the world wars, he had served in progressively higher commands and staff positions, and had survived the purges of the mid 30's through his good connections in the Party, and strong service record in the Red Army. At an age of 47 he was considered the ideal for a Front commander, combining active service experience with staff experience and political reliability.

During the Spanish Civil War, Meretskov had been an adviser in Spain, and took command of the Leningrad Military District in 1938, in time for the Soviet-Finnish winter war of 1939-40, where he commanded forces during the less successful initial phases of that war.

From 1942 to 1944, before he took over the Karelian Front, he served as Commander for the Volkhov Front, just south of the Leningrad Front, but as the front lines were shortened as a result of the massive Soviet offensives of early and mid- 1944, his Front Command had been absorbed into other Fronts. He had been given the task to take over the command of the Karelian Front, primarily because he knew the terrain of Eastern Karelia after fighting there in 1939-40, but also probably because he had a personal desire for revenge against the Finns after his relatively unsuccessful operations during the Winter War – although units under his command did breach the Finnish defences at last.

At this stage of the war, the Soviet system of "Socialist Competition" among units and unit commanders was starting to influence the jousting for positions after the war, and Meretskov knew he needed to put some successes on his record to be able to compete for the most treasured positions once the Third Reich had fallen.

In the spring of 1944, Meretskov oversaw tactical war games among his subordinate army commanders, focusing on offensive operations in the Karelian and Arctic terrain facing the Front. He further ordered similar exercises at Divisional and Regimental HQ's to prepare the officer corps for what was to come.

The 14th Army, which had held the approaches to Murmansk since 1941, and successfully stopped the initial German attack just 50 kilometres west of Murmansk, was now commanded by Lt. Gen. Shcherbakov, another Civil War veteran that had served as a division commander in Meretskov's Army during the 1939-40 Winter War. He took command of the 14th Army in March 1942, and was promoted to Lt. Gen. in 1943.

In the summer of 1944, when the main effort of the Karelian Front was focused on the Svir-Petrozavodsk Operation, Shcherbakov had moved his 14th Army of two rifle divisions and two light brigades 10 kilometres closer to the German lines held by *XIX Mountain Corps* in preparation for later offensive operations. At the same time, engineers and other infantry units were ordered to improve roads and bridges in the rear to ease communications and logistics support from Murmansk to the front lines.

As the operations in Eastern Karelia slowed down in August 1944, reinforcements were sent north to the 14th Army via the Murmansk-Leningrad railroad. Further forces were released from the Kandalaksha area just south of the Arctic Circle, where they had held against Finnish units trying to cut the railroad line.

All in all, a further 6 rifle divisions, three Corps HQ, and three light rifle brigades arrived by rail and moved along the newly constructed roads towards the front lines to the west of Murmansk. In addition, the 14th Army received tank and artillery

reinforcements.

By early October, the new 14th Army was ready to start offensive operations.

The 14th Army

The units that made up the Army were of differing quality, origin and experience:

The 14th Army had three standard Rifle Corps:

- 99th Rifle Corps (Lt. Gen. Mikulskij)
  - 114th Rifle Division
  - 368th Rifle Division
  - 65th Rifle Division

Lt. Gen. Mikulskij had commanded the Corps during the Svir-Petrozavodsk offensive and had served with Gen. Meretskov in the Volkhov Front earlier. When operations began, the 99th Rifle Corps was at around 65% of its authorised strength.

- 131st Rifle Corps (Maj. Gen. Alekseev)
  - 10th Guards Rifle Division
  - 14th Rifle Division

The 131st Rifle Corps headquarters was created in late August 1944 and, in early October, was commanded by Maj. Gen. Alekseev, who had commanded the 127th Light Rifle Corps in combat during the Svir-Petrozavodsk Operation.

His two rifle division had spent the entire war in the Murmansk sector and were thus experienced in arctic warfare. The actual strength figures of the 131st are not available but it is estimated that it was around 60-65% when the offensive began.

- 31st Rifle Corps (Maj. Gen. Absaliamov)
  - 83rd Rifle Division
  - 367th Rifle Division

Major General M. A. Absaliamov, who had also earlier commanded a rifle division in Meretskov's Volkhov Front and then in the Svir-Petrozavodsk Operation, now commanded the 31st Rifle Corps.

Absaliamov's two Rifle Divisions were veteran units of the Karelian Front but had limited actual combat experience as the Corps had mostly been a second echelon unit during the operations in East Karelia. When the 31st was committed to battle, the corps was at about 60 percent of its authorised strength.

Two Light Rifle Corps were created from available naval infantry and independent army units, often ski troops.

- 126th Light Rifle Corps (Maj. Gen. Solovev) – formed in spring 1944
  - 31st Light Rifle Brigade (authorised strength: 4,334 men)
  - 72nd Naval Rifle Brigade (authorised strength: 4,334 men)

- 127th Light Rifle Corps (Maj. Gen. Zhukov) – formed in spring 1944
  - 69th naval Rifle Brigade (authorised strength: 4,334 men)
  - 70th Naval Rifle Brigade (authorised strength: 4,334 men)

The light brigades included artillery battalions of 76.2mm howitzers and mortar battalions (120mm) as well as engineers and machine gun companies.

None of the light brigades had any motorised transport, so were dependent on pack animals to transport all heavy weapons, supplies etc.

The 127th Light Rifle Corps had the most combat experience of these having participated in the operations in East Karelia. However, the Corps had lost many men and was consequently initially placed as a reserve unit in the second echelon for the planned offensive in the Arctic.

It is estimated that both the Light Infantry Corps' were at around 60% strength when the offensive started.

In addition to the Rifle Corps' and the Light Rifle Corps', a further infantry formation was available to the 14th Army; a composite corps-size unit named after its commander, General Pigarevich.

- Infantry Group Pigarevich (Gen. Pigarevich)
  - 45th Rifle Division
  - 3rd Naval Rifle Brigade
  - 2nd Fortified Region Infantry Brigade Group

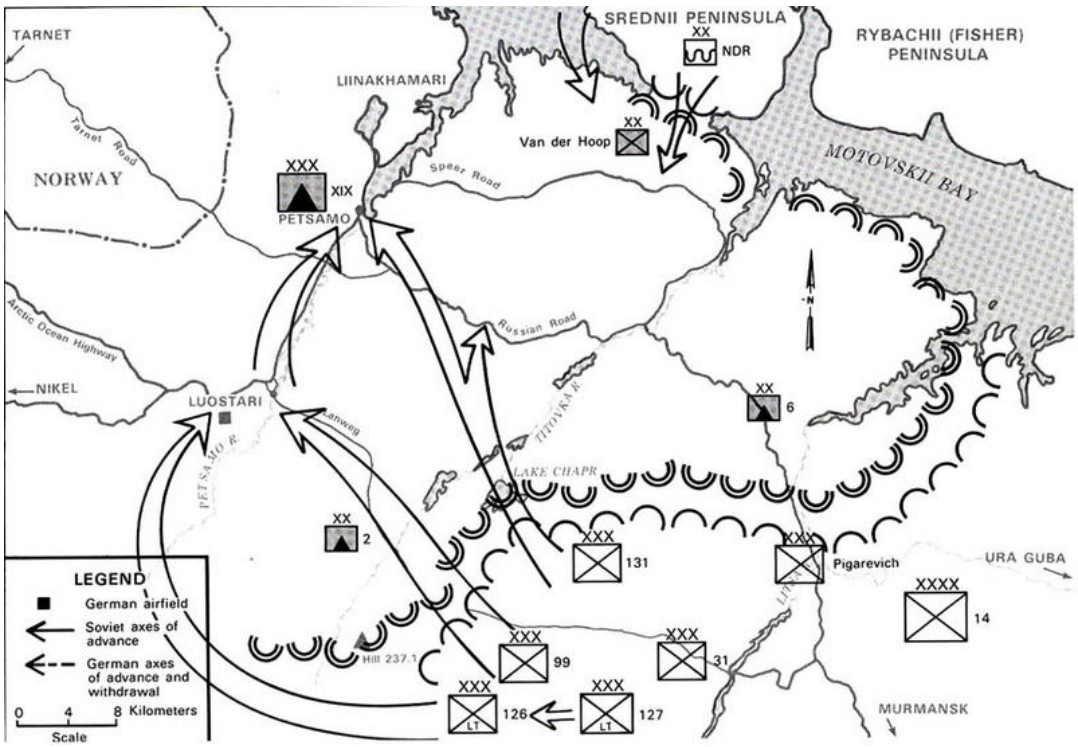
General Pigarevich was a World War I veteran of the Imperial Army who joined the Red Army in 1918, commanded a battalion in the civil war, and served mostly in staff positions during the interwar period. Pigarevich had been chief of staff of the 14th Army during the Soviet- Finnish Winter War of 1939—40. After two years of staff service in the West Front in Belarus, he returned to the Karelian Front as its chief of staff in 1943. He was replaced just before the Offensive operations began in October.

The Operations Plan

A week into September, Gen. Meretskov discussed his plan for the offensive with the commander of the Northern Fleet, Admiral A. G. Golovko, whose air, sea, and land forces would support the coastal flank of the 14th Army.

Then at the end of September, Meretskov forwarded his finished draft plan to STAVKA for approval.

The draft was accepted with some minor adjustments and on September 29th Meretskov issued the order to prepare for the offensive to his subordinate units. The adjustments made by STAVKA would prove to be important for the Operation.



Map: Operations plan phase 1 Source: Wikipedia

Infantry attacks

The main effort in the first phase of the operations would be on the left flank, in the sector held by the German *2nd Mountain Division*, from Lake Chapr to Hill 237. The 14th Army would attack with the objective to defeat, and if possibly destroy, the *2nd Mountain Division*, and occupy the Pechenga- Luostari area by conducting a general frontal attack on three axes:

One the left flank, the 126th and 127th Light Rifle Corps, each with two light brigades, deployed in two echelons (with the 127th in the second echelon). These units were given the task to envelop the German right flank and breach the Arctic Ocean Highway west of Luostari, thereby cutting off the main supply route for the units of the *2nd Mountain Division*. They were further to block the road west of Pechenga, to prevent German reinforcements from reaching the front, as well as preventing the German units of the *6th Mountain Division* along the Litsa front to retreat.

On the 14th Army right flank, from Lake Chapr to the east and north, Soviet forces, again in two echelons would conduct a probing operation against the German *6th Mountain Division* along the Litsa front. The first echelon of five divisions consisted of the 99th and 131st Rifle Corps as well as tank and artillery units and the second echelon of 31st Rifle Corps with two rifle divisions.

On the far right flank, naval infantry forces from the Northern Defensive Region (NDR) under Admiral Golovko would attack across the Srednii Isthmus and along the coastline west of it, against *Division Group Van der Hoop*, to cut that unit's path of retreat and reinforcement. The NDR would employ one naval infantry brigade attacking across the Srednii Isthmus and another naval infantry brigade landing in an amphibious assault to the west of the Isthmus to put pressure. However, STAVKA had intervened to delay the deployment of the naval infantry units so these would land after the main attack had gotten underway.

On the main axis, Meretskov formed the first echelon with the 99th and 131st Rifle Corps (five divisions), the 126th LRC (two brigades), and tank and artillery units.

Group Pigarevich would execute the probing mission on the Soviet right flank along the Litsa line.

Artillery support

Meretskov had learnt the value of artillery support during offensive operations and ordered his chief of artillery to plan a two-hour and thirty-five minute artillery preparation, fired by mortars and artillery numbering more than 150 guns per kilometre of front on the main axis.

Their primary mission was to knock out the enemy's artillery and then to support the breakthrough, the crossing of the Titovka River, and the infantry's attack into the intermediate German positions.

Lt. Gen. Mikulskij, the 99th Rifle Corps commander, ordered his artillery to
• silence enemy indirect-fire assets,
• suppress or destroy enemy troops and weapons systems,
• create openings in enemy obstacles large enough for two to three companies to attack through,
• support the crossing of the Titovka River,
• deny the enemy the opportunity to counterattack or withdraw.

Each rifle regiment had:
• 12-18 82mm mortars
• 4-6 120mm mortars
• 3-4 76.2 mm guns

Each rifle division also had an artillery regiment equipped with:
• A mix of 28-32 76.2 mm and 122mm howitzers
• Up to 50 82mm mortars
• Up to 16 120mm mortars

At least eight mortar and fifteen artillery regiments had been sourced from the 7th and 32nd Armies to support the offensive of the 14th Army. This even included one regiment equipped with captured German 150mm guns.

In addition, further artillery capacity was added to the 14th Army by the attachment of three regiments and two brigades of multiple rocket launchers (MRL) with Katyusha rockets, also called “Stalin organs”.

All in all the 14th Army could rely of the fire power of over 2,100 guns and mortars, as well as 120 MRL systems.

The long range artillery was to suppress enemy artillery, his reserves, and his command and control nodes. MRLs were targeted on the two German strong points believed to be the strongest—one 24-system regiment on each.

The corps artillery group consisted of up to two regiments of long-range artillery (150-mm or 152-mm) and a regiment of MRLs (twenty-four systems). This group was to execute counter battery fire in the breakthrough sector.

The division artillery group varied in size depending on the division's mission.

Regimental artillery groups also varied in size and were a combination of mortar and field artillery units.

Counter battery fires were planned on the basis of "instrumental reconnaissance" conducted during the preparatory period. Forty-three Soviet batteries were targeted on the twenty-one German batteries that were plotted in this manner, a ratio of 2 to 1.

A counter battery mission would typically be 3 to 5minutes of fire, achieving a density of 25 to 30 rounds per hectare (an area 100 square metres) or 2,500 to 3,000 rounds per square kilometre.

In order to hide their location and strength from German observation, as mentioned the terrain is relatively flat and the Germans could observe most of the Soviet front from their strong points on the highest hills, most artillery units were moved into positions at night.

By October 1st, most of the artillery units were in place, ready for the offensive, and the necessary stockpiling of ammunition was taking place.

For the preparatory fire phase, the Soviets allocated a total of 140,000 rounds, including 84,000 fired by mortars and 56,000 fired by artillery. They also scheduled to fire 8,500 rockets from the MRL systems per square kilometre on selected strong points, a total of almost 100 tons of MRL ordnance on each strong point.

After the initial preparatory fire phase, the artillery would steadily shift their fire forward in front of the advancing infantry units as the offensive progressed.

Armoured Forces

All armoured forces belonged directly to the Karelian Front.

For the offensive, Meretskov had brought in three tank and two self-propelled artillery units – four of these had recently participated in the Svir-Petrozavodsk operations.

- 7th Guards Tank Brigade
  - 37 T-34 tanks
- 89th Tank Regiment
  - 18 T-34 tanks
- 339th Guards Heavy SP Artillery Regiment
  - 17 JSU-152
- 378th Guards Heavy SP Artillery Regiment
  - 17 JSU-152

General Meretskov also personally requested a fifth armoured unit from STAVKA, voicing the opinion that this should include a regiment of heavy KV-1 tanks to break through the German defensive positions. STAVKA approved the request and assigned:

- 73 Guards Heavy Tank Regiment
  - 21 KV-1 tanks

to the Karelian Front.

All the armoured units were transported into Murmansk by rail and had arrived by October 5th, although not all had yet reached their staging areas around 8-10 kilometres from the German lines by this date.

The armour units were deployed as follows:

• The 73rd Guards Heavy Tank Regiment was paired with the 378th Guards Heavy SP Artillery Regiment and attached to the 131st Rifle Corps.

Maj. Gen. Alekseev of the 131st Rifle corps had planned to deploy his armour assets for direct support of his infantry units and therefore attached them to the 10th Guards Rifle Division on his left flank, where the terrain would be more suitable for tanks. • The 7th Guards Tank Brigade was paired with the 339th Guards Heavy SP Artillery Brigade and attached to the 99th Rifle Corps.

Lt. Gen. Mikulskij decided to form a mobile force by combining his armour assets with an engineer battalion and some infantry assets from his second echelon rifle regiments. His intention was to use the mobile group to exploit a breakthrough.

• The 89th Tank Battalion did not arrive in the area until after the offensive had started so was placed in army reserve at the outset.

The 14th Army thus had a total of 110 tanks and SP artillery pieces for the offensive, including the 21 heavy KV-1 tanks.

As far as is known the Germans had no armour, expect for possibly one or two old Hotchkiss tanks at Kirkenes, captured from the French at Narvik in 1940– although it is doubtful these would have been effective at all, had they been deployed.

Engineer units

The Soviets had learnt their lessons well in earlier offensives, and the planning for engineer support was comprehensive and massive. The plans took into account the road network (or lack thereof), geological composition of the terrain and the need to deploy engineers for building bridges and crossing points along the rivers etc.

Meretskov had put his engineer units to work early to prepare army assembly points, prepare for crossing of water obstacles and generally support the rapid progress of the troops once a breakthrough was achieved. One particularly important task would be to repair and maintain roads as they were captured, and also to prepare to tie the captured road network to the road network on the Soviet side. A special engineer unit was even created to target the German tram-car system.

A total of approximately 35 engineer battalions were deployed in support of the 14th Army's offensive. Each of the Rifle Divisions had its own divisional engineer battalion, in addition the 20th Motorised Engineer brigade and the 13th Assault combat Engineer brigade had six battalions each.

The 1st Motorised Engineer Brigade had four battalions. There were also at least five separate engineer battalions and two dedicated pontoon bridge units, two road construction battalions and a battalion of demolitions experts.

The 275th and 284th Separate Special-Purpose Motorised battalions were not engineer battalions per se, but were each equipped with 94 American made amphibian vehicles and would support the river crossing operations. The Soviets also had a big arsenal of bridge crossing equipment, varying from pontoons, a captured German bridge set, assault boats etc.

To help tank units maintain mobility during the offensive, each platoon had a squad of engineer troops equipped with explosives to remove concrete or rock obstacles and with logs to negotiate swampy terrain.

Army Air Force assets

Air assets were to play an important part in Meretskov's plan for the offensive.

His plan specified three standard missions to be used during the offensive:

- Close Air Support (CAS)
  - Assisting Soviet artillery during preparatory fire missions to break through German defences
  - Disrupting enemy command and control
  - Suppressing artillery and mortar batteries
  - Accompany tanks and infantry during the battle and support their attacks

- Interdiction
  - Locate and engage enemy operational and tactical reserves
  - Prevent commitment of enemy reserves
  - Destroy river crossing sites to deny the ability of the enemy to withdraw
  - Destroy enemy command posts and communications centres
  - Strike at the enemy's means of mobility

- Air Superiority
  - Target German air fields at Luostari, Salmijärvi and Kirkenes with bombers
  - Cover the battle area with fighter planes and engage German planes as they appear.

One thing to note is that no reconnaissance missions were defined as such. However, the various air units involved had this capability and continuously flew recon missions as part of standard operation procedure, for instance to assess bomb damage and gather intelligence.

The 7th Air Army, commanded by Lt. Gen. Sokolov, and subordinate to the Karelian Front, provided 4 mixed air divisions, one interceptor division and the necessary HQ units for the offensive.

In addition, Meretskov acquired an additional interceptor division from the national air reserves, through STAVKA, which also provided an additional bomber division from the general reserve.

Soviet aircraft types consisted of a variety of different designs, including Pe-2 dive bomber, 11-2 ground attack planes, 11-4 medium bomber, Lagg-5, Yak-3 and Yak-9 fighters and Po-2 utility/transport planes. The 7th Air Army also had a number of American produced aircraft delivered through the lend-lease system, including P-40 and P-39 fighters.

In total the Karelian Front fielded 136 bombers, 52 transport aircraft 193 ground attack aircraft, 318 fighters and interceptors and a further 60 or so assorted recon, forward observer and communication aircraft.

In the same area the Northern Fleet operated an air arm with a total of 275 aircraft, but these were not called upon to support the offensive of the ground forces, but rather used to target the German shipping along the coast of Norway.

For the operational phase, a mixed air division was assigned to each of the 99th and 131st Rifle Corps, which were the first echelon units attacking on the main axis.

The commanders of these air units were located at the Rifle Corps HQ's, with radio equipped liaison officers stationed at each Rifle Division HQ in the field.

From the 14th Army's command HQ, Lt. Gen. Sokolov commanded the remaining two mixed air divisions, the fighters and the bomber division.

Separate plans and priorities were developed for different flying weather, bad weather essentially grounding the bombers but not the CAS and the fighters. Initially, operational plans were developed only for the initial phase of the offensive, but this still amounted to over 4,000 planned sorties.

German air assets in the area had been estimated to a total of 160-180 aircraft, of which half were fighters. These included Bf-109 and FW-190 fighters, Arado-66 night bombers and Ju-87 Stukas.

The Soviets thus on paper enjoyed a 6-to-l superiority in air strength.

Logistics support

All military operations are dependent on good logistics support, but probably nowhere is this more significant that north of the Arctic Circle. The logistics plans that were developed for the Pechenga-Kirkenes operation were based on several pillars.

Logistics units were to:

- Stockpile the necessary supplies prior to the operation
- Provide medical evacuation and treatment to the wounded and sick
- Repair and maintain combat equipment
- Build and maintain lines of communication
- Provide troops with everything needed for combat and survival
- Provide rear-area protection against enemy attacks

The natural hub in the logistical operations was Murmansk, with its port and railway connections. Supplies delivered by rail were either stored in warehouses in Murmansk, or transported forward by trucks to rear areas supply bases behind the lines of the 14th Army.

At the start of the offensive, these bases were around 40-45 kilometres from Murmansk and cargo was transported forward by trucks on dirt roads that were built or improved by engineers in preparation for the offensive. The main aim was that each first echelon corps should have a minimum of one road and one cross-country track in its area to support the resupply effort.

Ammunition was seen as the first priority, and already in early September, artillery units began to stockpile ammunition in all the necessary calibres. By the start of the offensive, some 18,000 tons of ammunition had been stockpiled.

Next on the list of priority came petroleum products, oil and lubricants, which were also stockpiled at the user level, at refuelling points and at rear area dumps, ready to be brought forward to resupply the user level dumps. A total of around 3,500 tons were stockpiled in preparations for the offensive.

Food, both for troops and the pack animals, was also a critical requirement, as the terrain offered little in terms of natural food sources, except perhaps for a few flocks of wild reindeer. Units started the offensive with one week supply of food and forage, of which the first two days' worth had been distributed to the troops directly. At army level was stored another week supply of food and two weeks supply of forage and in the Murmansk area another ten days' worth of food and forage was stored in warehouses and dumps. In addition, around 50,000 dry-rations could be airlifted to the troops every day if necessary.

The weather and climate north of the Arctic Circle is harsh, and consequently clothing becomes important to prevent hypothermia and other weather related problems. The Soviets were fairly-well equipped with sheepskin coats, caps, long woollen underwear, mittens, woollen blankets and newly issued sleeping bags. Thousands of white camouflage smocks were also ordered and issued. The Soviets had experienced first-hand how effective this piece of clothing could be, when the white-clad Finns had dealt them a blow in the Winter War – the Soviets referred to the Finns as Bielaja Smiert (white death), and it is perhaps surprising that the 14th Army had not been issued as standard with white smocks before – although a few units along the front had made use of these before.

Thousands of other details had to be planned, prepared and executed as well. Medical kits had to be restocked and issued, boots and shoes had to be repaired and replaced, tack items for pack animals had to be repaired and made in tip top shape...

To ensure sufficient heating for medical treatment and maintenance facilities – there was almost no vegetation on the tundra so heating fuel could not be sourced in the field – the army logistics units stockpiled 64,500 cubic metres of firewood, a lot of which had to be railed in from further south. Special detachments were created from volunteer workers that would gather more firewood as and when needed.

All in all, it would take around 850-1,000 tons of supplies to keep the 14th Army operational in the field during the offensive. At the start of the offensive, 7 truck battalions were available, in theory capable of moving just about 1,800 tons in one lift, but this capacity, of course was reduced by the state of the roads, vehicle breakdowns etc. Repair shops to keep the trucks moving were set up at strategic points on the road network.

Even as late as 1944, pack animals still played a vital role in hauling supplies, and the 14th Army had a total of 150 horses and over 500 reindeer involved in transport of supplies along the cross country tracks. To keep the animals healthy, forward veterinary positions and animal hospitals were set up to be able to tend to injured animals as fast as possible.

The hospitals in the Murmansk area were set up to manage the bulk of the medical support, a few field hospitals were set up to act as staging areas, but ultimately it was envisioned to transport sick and wounded to Murmansk as fast as possible. The field hospitals could handle up to 7,500 patients at a time, deemed to be sufficient capacity for the upcoming offensive. The field hospitals would follow the front westwards as it moved.

Dogs were employed to locate wounded soldiers left on the battlefield. These would then be removed on sleds drawn by reindeer or by manpower back to the field hospitals.

Final preparations

When all the preparations for the operations were completed, Soviet planners calculated a relative Soviet strength advantage of just over 2 to 1 on the 14th Army front and even higher in the main attack sector opposite the German 2nd Mountain Division.

As it turned out, the Soviet planners had underestimated the size of the units tied to the *XIX Mountain Corps* they would face by approximately 14,000 men (45,529 versus 60,000), while overestimating the strength of the *2nd Mountain Division* (21,655 versus 16,026).

On October 2nd, Lt. Gen. Shcherbakov, the 14th Army commander, spent several hours discussing the operation with Lt. Gen. Mikulskij, the commander of 99th Rifle Corps. That same day, Mikulskij reconnoitred the terrain with his three division commanders for six hours.

On the morning of October 3rd, the division commanders walked the terrain with their regimental commanders and, in the afternoon, regimental commanders with battalion commanders.

On October 4th, the battalion commanders spent the entire day in reconnaissance with staff and company commanders.

On October 6th 1944, the 14th Army commander ordered the artillery preparation to begin at 0800 on 7 October, and the attack 1030, two and a half hours later.

On October 7th 1944, all hell would break loose.

Go to Part 2 >

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