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

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

by Kai & Iryna Isaksen

Phase One: October 7th - 15th 1944

October 7th

On October 7th, the planned day for the start of the offensive, the weather in the areas was favourable for the Soviets. The steady wind from the Barents Sea brought fog to the low ground and patches of mist to the high ground, making it harder for the Germans to see what was happening on the Soviet side.

However, all was not perfect; visibility was reduced because of the low clouds and it had started to snow, making air operations harder and the Soviet aircraft could not provide efficient ground support in the opening hours of the battle.

The artillery opened fire for the preparatory barrage at 0800 as planned, and for more than two and a half hours the Soviets pummeled the German lines with everything they had. More than 100,000 rounds were fired on the Germans, who now were in no doubt that a major offensive was about to start.

The problems with lack of air support, and generally low visibility also for the artillery units and observers, meant the volume of fire was weaker than planned. The result was that German positions were not destroyed or even suppressed as planned, and especially in the sector of the 99th Rifle Corps this meant the Corps would have problems achieving the planned progress. Initially the Germans had few problems holding the Soviets back, raining machine gun fire down on them from their fortified strong points.

After two and a half hours of artillery fire, the Soviets shifted their targeting, as planned, and both first echelon Rifle Corps - 99th and 131st - attacked along the pre-planned axes.

The objective for the first day was to break through the first German defensive line and, if possible, establish bridge heads on the west bank of the Titovka River.

On the right, the 131st Rifle Corps moved rapidly forward, moving through or past the German defenders in the area and by the end of the day, had secured a suitable series of bridge heads on the western bank of the Titovka River. The success was achieved by infantry frontal attacks, supported by artillery fire and a few close air support sorties that could be flown when a gap in the low cloud ceiling appeared.

The tanks and SP units did not participate the first day, simply because they experienced difficulties moving in the difficult terrain.

In the left sector, where the 99th Rifle Corps attacked, heavy German resistance kept the Corps back for hours. After almost 8 hours of hard fighting, at 1800, Lt. Gen. Mikulskij ordered his units to halt the attack for five hours to give them time to regroup and reorganise for a new push.

On the far left, the 126th Light Rifle Corps moved up to Titovka River by the end of the day and prepared for crossing the river the next day.

October 8th

At 0000 (midnight), both first echelon Rifle Corps were scheduled to renew their attacks, keeping up pressure on the German units. With no artillery support, they were expected to seize control of suitable river crossing spots by dawn.

99th Rifle Corps had spent the time well, and had reorganised its assault groups, and now continued to press the attacks on the still intact German strong points. During the early hours of October 8th, groups of German close support aircraft began to appear over the front and attacked the advancing Soviet formations. However, under the pressure of the heavy attacks, one by one, the German strong points began to give way and the entire line held by 2nd Mountain Division started to buckle. By the evening of October 8th, the advance elements of the 99th Rifle Corps had finally reached the east bank of Titovka River, but had still not forced a crossing.

North of the 99th Rifle Corps, however, things were very different. On October 7th, both 10th Guards Rifle Division and 14th Rifle Division had reached Titovka River and during the night, a small group of soldiers from the 10th Guards swam across the freezing cold river in their underwear, pushing their uniforms, and equipment wrapped in water tight ponchos in front of them.

On the far bank they attacked German positions, thereby distracting the attention of the defenders long enough for the main body of the battalion could attempt to capture the existing bridge intact.

In the battle that followed, the Germans managed to blow the bridge up, neutralising the heroic efforts of the small group that had swam the river.

During the fighting, the Soviets managed to capture a staff car, in which they found papers and maps, including an intelligence report showing the expected Soviet axis of advance, for the first time alerting the Soviets to the fact that the Germans were aware of their offensive plans.

In the morning of October 8th, engineers began constructing a light pontoon bridge where the original bridge had been and using this ramshackle construction, the 131st Rifle Corps went about expanding their bridge heads on the west bank and started to push north toward the divisional boundary between the 2nd and 6th Mountain Divisions.

During the day it also became clear that the artillery had problems keeping up with the advance of the infantry units, due to the difficult terrain, and artillery support would be patchy and inefficient for some time. This put even more emphasis on CAS missions, especially in the sector held by 131st Rifle Corps.

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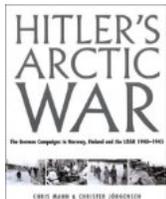
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As a response to the problems faced by artillery and tank units, all the second echelon troops were moved out of reserve status and committed to road building work.

The 126th Light Rifle Corps had reached Titovka River the day before, and had, during the 8th managed to cross it in force and continued to push northwest through difficult terrain with marshes and bogs. The men of the 126th carried enough food for a week with them, and with weapons, ammunition and other equipment, each man carried close to 45kgs on his back and in pouches attached to his webbing. Horses hauled the infantry guns and reindeer carried the ammunition for the guns and mortars. The reindeers, of course, had few problems traversing the landscape, but the horses frequently lost their footing and had to be unloaded and reloaded again, making for a time consuming advance. As the Germans were probably not aware of the attack this far south yet, no fires were allowed and the soldiers ate cold rations and had to endure hours without cigarettes or hot coffee. Smoking was eventually allowed, but only under the cover of a poncho at night.

Whether the Germans were aware of the advance of the 126th Light Rifle Corps at this stage is uncertain. What is certain is that they did not appreciate the purpose and objective of the advance. Already in the first communications on the morning of October 8th, the 20th Mountain Army HQ warned the XIX Mountain Corps HQ of a possible breakthrough towards Nikel, and Col. Gen. Rendulic mentions his concern for an enveloping operation in the south, in his daily report to OKW the same evening. Despite this, however, the Germans failed to react to the advance of the 126th Light Rifle Corps.

In the evening of October 8th, the 127th Light Rifle Corps started to follow in the footsteps of the 126th, but started from a point further to the rear of the Soviet lines, so the distance between the two Corps was slightly more than two days march. Similar to the 126th, the men of the 127th carried heavy loads and also brought rations for five days with them, in addition to 25km of field telephone wire and various other equipment.

Especially in the left sector, held by the 131st Rifle Corps, the situation for the Germans was deteriorating rapidly. The 2nd Mountain Division had sustained heavy casualties in the fighting, and many of the strong points had been destroyed or heavily damaged.

The precarious position and state of the 2nd Mountain Division also concerned the 6th Mountain Division to the north along the Litsa front. A collapse of the 2nd Mountain Division would ensure the encirclement of the 6th Mountain Division so in the evening of October 8th, Col. Gen. Rendulic authorised the commander of XIX Mountain Corps, Gen. Jodl, to pull 6th Mountain Division back to prepared positions along the Titovka River, thereby abandoning the relative comfort of the first line along Litsa. The retreat was to be conducted at night and the division was ordered to deceive the Soviets as long as possible by leaving a few units behind that could keep up rates of fire.

At the same time, the heavily battered 2nd Mountain Division was ordered to retreat to positions in prepared positions just east of Luostari airfield.

There is some evidence that Rendulic realistically at this stage expected to hold these new positions for a fortnight, giving enough time to evacuate the huge stock piles of supplies in Pechenga and Kirkenes. He also communicated his certainty about this to the OKW around midnight on the 8th.

October 9th

In the early hours of October 9th, General Meretskov, now aware of the precarious position of the 6th Mountain Division, ordered the 14th Army to breach "Russian Road" to cut off any chance of withdrawal of the Germans from positions along the Litsa. At this stage he issued an objective for the day to capture Luostari by the evening of October 9th.

In line with Soviet doctrine of reinforcing success, Meretskov transferred the second echelon 368th Rifle Division from the 99th Rifle Corps to the 131st Rifle Corps, and transferred the now heavily committed 10th Guards Rifle Division into the 99th Rifle Corps, mirroring the current roles of the tow Corps; the 131st was to push forward, the 99th to tie down as many German forces as possible. This move enabled the 131st to continue the advance.

While it was still dark on the 9th, the 99th Rifle Corps finally began crossing the Titovka River in force along a broad front. Encircled, and now doomed, German strong points on the eastern bank continued to resist, causing problems for the engineering units waiting to construct roads through the area. Lt. Gen. Mikulskij committed the second echelon 65th Rifle Division to clear these strong points, while the rest of the Corps continued the crossing of the river.

The terrain was already starting to cause major problems for the Soviets at this stage, combat units could not keep their stock of ammunition replenished fast enough, the engineers struggled to build bridges fast enough for units to cross when they reached rivers and artillery and tank units struggled to catch up with the advancing infantry units. Even though forward artillery observers had managed to catch up and crossed the river, the artillery was mostly still out of range, and many of the artillery units had been assigned to road work instead.

During the 9th, in the entire 99th Rifle Corps sector, only about 60 or so long range guns were able to provide fire support, and not very accurate, as they were firing at maximum ranges. There is no doubt this desperate lack of artillery support slowed the offensive down and enabled many German units to withdraw to new positions in relatively good order.

Lt. Gen. Mikulskij tried to improve the situation by pulling back all engineer battalions from the divisions in the front and committed these to road building in his Corps sector.

Gen. Shcherbakov, the 14th Army commander, also during the day abandoned the plan for building a road in each division sector and went to focus on constructing a single road for the entire corps.

This road would have to cover a 20 kilometre stretch and would connect the Soviet and German road networks in the 99th Rifle Corps sector.

For the Soviets, October 9th brought good news in terms of weather, and finally it cleared up enough so all the available air assets could be committed to support the ground troops. During the day, the air units flew close to 1,000 sorties with good results.

On the German side, the situation was not as bright. The many air attacks had wreaked havoc with the

German network of field telephone wires, which instead of burying them in the frozen and rocky soil, often had been strung out along poles on the side of the road, making it easy targets for the Soviet pilots.

The Luftwaffe was not idle on October 9th either, flying over 200 sorties from Kirkenes and Luostari airfields, with varying results. If nothing else, the presence of German planes served to stiffen the morale of the now heavily battered 2nd and 6th Mountain Divisions.

Col. Gen. Rendulic became more and more concerned about his northernmost Corps, and he several times during the day urged XIX Mountain Corps to stiffen the resolve of the 2nd Mountain Division by all means. He also ordered Gen. Jodl to prepare and launch a strong counter attack, which Jodl confirmed in the afternoon he intended to launch the next day, October 10th.

In the mean time the Soviets kept up their advance all day on the 9th with the 131st Rifle Corps driving towards Pechenga and the 99th Rifle Corps driving towards Luostari.

Keeping to the original battle plan, Gen. Meretskov in the evening of the 9th ordered Group Pigarevich on the right flank to attack the 6th Mountain Division positions, conserving their force while doing so.

He also requested Admiral Golovko, commander of the Northern Fleet, to begin his planned ground and amphibious attacks on the far right of the front, along the coast.

October 10th

In the early hours of October 10th (actually just before midnight), around 2,800 troops of the 63rd Naval Infantry brigade landed west of the main German positions on the Srednii Isthmus, and immediately attacked the German positions in the left flank. Initially, the Soviets were opposed only by a German shore battery which was quickly suppressed, and the landing force could start to move inland towards its objectives. At the same time, a Special Forces operation took out a German shore battery located about 30 kilometres to the west, guarding the approaches to the harbour at Liinahamari, preparing for a naval raiding party to attack the harbour itself.

As the news of the naval landings started to filter through to the *20th Mountain Army*, the *XIX Mountain Corps* requested that the agreed counter attack on the main front be postponed one day till October 11th, to allow them to deal with the new threat to the north.

The request was granted by Col. Gen. Rendulic, who realised that the *XIX Mountain Corps* was in no shape by now to launch two counter attacks at once.

On the far southern left flank, the 126th Light Rifle Corps now started to emerge and attack German positions, and the situation looked very bleak indeed for the *XIX Mountain Corps* at this stage.

At 0330 on October 10th, naval artillery units of the Northern Defensive Region began a 90-minute bombardment of German positions along the Srednii Isthmus. All in all, 47,000 rounds were fired, causing havoc and great chaos among the defending Germans from *Division Group Van der Hoop*.

At 0500, Soviet troops of the 12th Naval Infantry Brigade launched their attack across minefields covered by ten inches of fresh snow. By noon on October 10th, the attacking ground forces had broken through the German positions and were linking up with troops of the amphibious force.

By the evening of October 10th, the German forces were in headlong retreat westward along the "Speer Road", with the Soviet naval infantry trying to outflank them and cut them off.

On the axes of main attack, further south, the Soviet units continued to make critical gains during the 10th.

By 0800, the 126th Light Rifle Corps had captured the road crossing west of Luostari, having marched over 40 kilometres in the 72 hours since the offensive had begun. Having reached its objective, the 31st Rifle Brigade dug in facing west, to prevent German reinforcements to arrive, and the 72nd Naval Rifle Brigade dug in facing east, to prevent retreating Germans from breaking through.

In this position, the 126th Light Rifle Corps defeated several local counter attacks and attempts to dislodge them from the road crossing during the day of the 10th.

At the same time, the 127th Light Rifle Corps crossed the Petsamo River in the morning of October 10th. Having been on constant march for five days, the men were by now exhausted and the pack animals started to break down. They had used up all the forage for the animals that they had brought with them. The men had finished the rations they had brought with them and had slowly started to starve. Morale was starting to drop, but despite this, Maj. Gen. Zhukov ordered his Corps to continue the march. They would have to capture supplies and food from the Germans.

The 99th Rifle Corps continued the sluggish advance on the 10th, still aiming for Luostari. The units continued to attack with no artillery support against strong German prepared positions, overlooking the terrain. Progress was consequently slow, and casualties started to mount up.

By 1000 on October 10th, the engineers and second echelon troops had managed to complete the link up of the German and Soviet road systems, and the engineers had built two bridges and two fording sites so the artillery and tanks could slowly start moving up. However, the retreating Germans made sure the road was destroyed as they retreated, and the engineers had to slowly move forward and repair the road as they went, before the artillery and tanks could fully catch up.

The logistics problems now began to affect the battles, and several times Soviet troops had to retreat from high ground they had captured, because they ran out of ammunition.

The heaviest fighting on October 10th occurred in the 131st Rifle Corps sector, where a Soviet force cut "Russian Road" at noon. The *20th Mountain Army* HQ immediately ordered the *6th Mountain Division* to counterattack and reopen the road. The Soviets tried to commit the newly arrived 368th Rifle Division, but it arrived too late to prevent the Germans from recapturing the road and re-establishing the retreat route to the west.

During the afternoon of October 10th, the *20th Mountain Army* HQ initiated two actions that fully shows that the concern for the Northern front now was nearing panic proportions;

First of all, they ordered that the nickel mines and processing plants should be destroyed. At 1600 the *XXXVI Mountain Corps* was ordered to dispatch an artillery battalion immediately, and prepare to send the *163rd Infantry Division* as reinforcements to the now struggling *XIX Mountain Corps*.

On October 10th, the 14,000 man strong *163rd Infantry Division* was positioned around Rovaniemi in Finland, almost 400 kilometres from the theatre of operations in the north. The Division was hastily loaded into trucks and started the journey northwards.

October 11th

In the early hours of October 11th, the Soviets, finally suffering the full effects from lacking air and artillery support, ammunition and food, abandoned the gains around "Russian Road" and fell back, allowing the German units to continue their retreat westward.

In the 99th Rifle Corps sector, all regiments of heavy mortars and artillery moved forward across the Titovka River during the early hours of the 11th and started to deploy along the "Lane". Due to continued problems with ammunition, range and organisation issues, only about half of these could effectively fire on the German positions during the 11th. Even this was, however, a welcome bonus for the tired troops of the 99th Rifle Corps, as they had struggled for days with no artillery support at all.

After the transfer of the powerful 10th Guards Rifle Division to his Corps, Lt. Gen. Mikulskij now had two strong armoured formations at his disposal; the 21 KV-1 tanks and the 17 JSU-152 SP artillery guns attached to the 10th Guards Rifle Division, as well as the 37 T-34 and 17 JSU-152 SP artillery units attached directly to his Corps HQ. These had also managed to cross the Titovka on the newly built bridges during the night. In preparation for the fighting on the 11th, Lt. Gen. Mikulskij had reorganised his forces and attached the entire armoured force to the 65th Rifle Division, and ordered it to attack along the road. The result was massive traffic jam on the west side of the Titovka River which lasted for hours.

The 99th Rifle Corps now attacked toward Luostari with three rifle divisions; the 114th Rifle Division advanced just south of the road, and successfully linked up with the 69th naval brigade of the 127th Light Rifle Corps south of Luostari late in the day on the 11th. The other two divisions, attacking north of the road, were repeatedly thrown back by determined German resistance from the *2nd Mountain Division*, fighting from prepared positions on the high ground.

By the end of October 11th, the 99th Rifle Corps had reached the outskirts of Luostari but further attacks in the evening failed to dislodge the German defenders from their positions.

In the North, the Soviet naval infantry continued to fight their way south on the Srednii Isthmus towards the "Speer Road" and by the end of the day they had managed to cut the road in two places.

Their advance had been slow, and many German units had managed to escape before they managed to cut the road.

October 12th

In the morning of October 12th, the naval infantry in the North began to pursue the withdrawing Germans along the "Speer Road". The fact that the Germans had managed to break off and now had been allowed five hours to move unopposed westward, was by many attributed to the relative inexperience of the naval infantry in extensive combat operations, especially in night operations.

As Soviet ground forces were moving forward in a meat grinder offensive, the Soviet air units were striking the German airfield south of Nikel. In a night raid, the Soviets claimed to have destroyed 33 German aircraft on the ground and a further five in the air. The claim is unverified and is not confirmed by German after action reports. By the 12th, the Soviets had established almost complete air superiority over the region, and reports of German air attacks become increasingly rare after the 12th.

The situation was now becoming more and more critical for the Germans, the entire front was in retreat and local counter attacks rarely managed to dislodge the Soviets from their newly captured positions. The 126th Light Rifle Corps was still holding the road crossing west of Luostari, and from the south the lead units of the 163rd Infantry Division now started to get closer.

In the morning of October 12th, the 70th naval brigade of the 127th Light Rifle Corps crossed the Arctic Highway west of Luostari and moved into blocking positions on Tårnet Road. The town of Luostari itself was now in real danger of falling to the advancing 99th Rifle Corps, whereas the 131st Rifle Corps continued its approach towards Pechenga.

Naval infantry was chasing the Germans west on the "Speer Road" trying to regain contact with the enemy they had lost a few hours before.

Around lunch time on the 12th, the lead elements of the 99th Rifle Corps linked up with the units of the 126th Light Rifle Corps, still holding the road crossing west of Luostari. By noon, Luostari itself had fallen into the hands of the 99th Rifle Corps and the Soviets paused to consolidate their gains and reorganise for the next steps of the offensive.

Around noon, the *163rd Infantry Division* arrived on the battlefield from the south and was immediately thrown into the fighting, literally straight off the trucks after their 400 kilometre journey. The Division was ordered to clear the road crossings for the units from the 126th Light Rifle Divisions, but these had by now established well entrenched positions, and had also been resupplied by air during the night, so had adequate stocks of ammunition and supplies.

As elements of the 114th Rifle Division of the 99th Rifle Corps began to arrive on the scene, the 72nd Naval Rifle Brigade was allowed to pull back, but was immediately ordered to move to the support of the 127th Light Rifle Corps further to the west.

The 114th Rifle Division continued to fight off determined assaults by the *163rd Infantry Division*. The fighting would continue through the night and well into October 14th but eventually the Germans had to withdraw to their starting positions, having failed to drive back the Soviets at the road crossing.

In the afternoon, German Stukas attacked the 127th Light Rifle Corps, which suffered no human casualties, but a number of pack animals were killed, making a fine meal for the hungry troops of the 127th.

October 13th

During the night, the 72nd Naval Rifle brigade of the 126th Light Rifle Corps had cut the Tårnet Road just east of the Norwegian border, and thereby cut off the German escape route to the west. The 70th Naval Rifle brigade of the 127th Light Rifle Corps continued fighting for the high ground on the south side of the road further to the east.

In the morning of October 13th, the *163rd Infantry Division* launched strong counter attacks west and north of Luostari, while the *2nd Mountain Division* consolidated in defensive positions between Luostari and Pechenga along the Arctic Ocean Highway. This delayed the advance of the 99th Rifle Corps by approximately 24 hours, which again allowed the German units around Pechenga to withdraw westward and avoid encirclement.

Soviet Special Forces detachments had attacked and destroyed German coastal batteries guarding the entrance to Pechenga harbour during the night, and the navy quickly gathered and dispatched a force of volunteers from rear areas. This 600-strong force landed in the harbour at Liinahamari in the early hours of October 13th and defeated the German garrison in ferocious fighting during the 13th.

From the East along the "Speer Road", units of the 12th and 63rd Naval Infantry Brigades were closing in on Pechenga, and had established contact with lead elements of the 131st Rifle Corps to the South. By noon on the 13th, Soviet forces were closing in on Pechenga from the North, South and East.

The commander of *XIX Mountain Corps*, Gen. Jodl, realised a counter attack eastwards by his two exhausted mountain divisions would be impossible at this stage.

The single possible escape route lay westwards towards Norway, and at 1500 on the 13th he communicated his recommendation to the *20th Mountain Army* HQ; that all units of the *XIX Mountain Corps* should try to fight their way west and reopen the Tårnet Road to allow as many units to escape as possible. The recommendation was accepted by the Army HQ and a general order to conduct a fighting retreat west and establish a new line just inside Norwegian territory was given.

October 14th

The Soviet forces continued to close in on Pechenga. During the night, the 12th and 63rd Naval Rifle Brigades had crossed Petsamo bay and attacked southwards along the west side of the Petsamo fjord.

At the same time, the troops of the *2nd Mountain Division*, defeated the Soviet blocking force on Tårnet Road west of Pechenga and broke out.

During the day on the 14th October, units from the *2nd Mountain Division*, the *6th Mountain Division*, and *Division Group van der Hoop* managed to withdraw west into Norway. The Soviets estimates that at least 18,000 Germans managed to escape the encirclement along this route.

By late in the day on 14 October, the 131st Rifle Corps was positioned to attack Pechenga from the southeast. The first Soviet troops entered the town from the east around 2200 in the evening of October 14th. While Germans and Soviets fought inside the town itself, other Soviet units outside moved to block German columns retreating from the Litsa front

October 15th

Early in the morning of October 15th, the battle for Pechenga was over.

By 0500 the Soviet flag was hoisted at the town hall, marking the end of the battle for the town. Those Germans that were still alive escaped in small groups across the tundra to the northwest, leaving behind many dead and a considerable amount of supplies and ammunition.

End of the first phase

In the nine days that had passed since the start of the offensive on October 7th, the Soviet 14th Army had achieved a major breakthrough and advanced 60 kilometres across extremely difficult terrain, crossed three rivers, landed two amphibious assaults and captured three towns.

Estimated German losses for this first phase were approximately 6,000 killed and wounded. German equipment and supply losses were also severe. Soviet losses for the same period are still classified information, but are estimated at 10-12,000 troops killed and wounded.

The Soviet units were exhausted however, and many units had completely used up all their supplies of food, fuel and ammunition. The lack of good roads had severely hampered operations, and not even the capture of Luostari airfield on the 12th had helped much in addressing the logistical problems faced by the planners. The terrain could quite simply not sustain continued operations of two forces of this large size.

To reorganise and allow the troops to regain strength and morale, the commander of the 14th Army, Gen. Shcherbakov, ordered a 3 day pause in combat operations.

The Germans were happy to oblige and had no intention of launching offensive operations at this stage. They instead used the time to reorganise and resupply, and prepare positions just inside the Norwegian border.

Phase two of the Soviet offensive was scheduled to being in the morning of October 19th.

Phase Two: October 18th- 22nd 1944

October 15th – 18th

As the 14th Army settled in for a three day rest, Col. Gen. Rendulic Of the *20th Mountain Army* visited the region to assess the situation and discuss options with General Jodl, the *XIX Mountain Corps* commander, and Gen. Rübél, the commander of the *163rd Infantry Division*.

He then ordered the following defensive dispositions;

- *6th Mountain Division* would defend the Kirkenes axis
- *Battle Group Rübél* organised around 163rd Infantry Division to defend the roads east of Akhmalakhti and Nikel in Finland
- *2nd Mountain Division* to assemble at Salmjärvi and ultimately support *Battle Group Rübél*.

The intent was to hold Kirkenes as long as possible to allow the evacuation of supplies from there. *Battle Group Rübél* was placed under the command of *XIX Mountain Corps* commander Gen. Jodl.

Once again, German intelligence efforts were sterling, and the *XIX Mountain Corps* HQ correctly concluded that the main Soviet offensive would hit *Battle Group Rübél*. They assumed that the attack would come in the morning of October 18th and prepared their units accordingly.

The Soviets had used the respite well and had been busy resupplying and reorganising their units for the next phase of the offensive. The capture and repair of the airfield at Luostari meant that supplies could now be delivered by air, which somewhat relieved the pressure on the congested road network.

Recon elements from the various Soviet units were active in front of the main force, clearing up German stragglers and probing the German lines to determine the location and nature of the defensive positions.

131st Rifle Corps moved out from Pechenga and moved west and northwest towards the Norwegian border to threaten Kirkenes. Having reached their jump off points by the 18th, they waited for the order to renew the attack.

99th Rifle Corps made a few probing attacks against the German defenders along the Arctic Ocean Highway and had, by the evening of October 18th, not only driven the Germans back into their main defensive positions, but also completed the deployment of the Corps to the forward jump-off positions for the offensive.

The Battle Plan and deployment of Soviet forces

In order to achieve maximum punch for the offensive, Gen. Shcherbakov reorganised the 14th Army so that all his five Rifle Corps were deployed in a single echelon by the evening of October 18th;

- 131st Rifle Corps was deployed on the northern flank, just west and northwest of Pechenga.
 - The Corps had been reinforced by the 45th Rifle Division from Infantry Group Pigarevich and thus now had three full rifle divisions (45th, 14th and 368th).
 - The Corps was reinforced by a number of artillery and MRL units.
 - The Corps received the 7th Guards Tank Brigade with T-34's for armour support.
 - Engineer support included the 275th Special Purpose Motorised Engineer Battalion, equipped with 94 American built 2 ton amphibians for support in river crossing operations.

Initially the mission assigned to the 131st Rifle Corps was to hold and protect the right (northern) flank of the offensive. They would do this by clearing the northernmost area of the battlefield along the Norwegian border from the coast to the point where the border turns west, just south of Tårnet Road. It became clear, that due to the terrain, this mission would be difficult to achieve without crossing into Norwegian territory.

It should be noted that at this stage the Soviet units did not generally have authority to cross the Norwegian border, and Gen. Meretskov therefore petitioned STAVKA on October 17th for a general permission for his forces to take the fight into Norwegian territory. STAVKA cleared the issue with the Norwegian government-in-exile in London, and gave the permission during the day of October 18th.

This allowed the mission for 131st Corps to be updated to include a supporting attack north westward along Tårnet Road and push the Germans towards Kirkenes in Norway.

- 99th Rifle Corps had consolidated its position west of Luostari.
 - The Corps still had three rifle divisions (10th Guards, 65th and 114th).
 - 73rd Guards Heavy Tank brigade with KV-1 tanks and 339th Guards Heavy SP Artillery Regiment were attached to the Corps for armour support
 - The Corps also had engineer support including pontoon units and a battalion of amphibians.

The mission for the 99th Rifle Corps was to advance along the Arctic Ocean Highway towards the town of Akhmalakhti and the Norwegian border at the Pasvik River valley, driving back all German forces in the region.

- 126th Light Rifle Corps was deployed on the northern flank of the 99th Rifle Corps.
 - o It still contained the two Light Rifle Brigades

The mission for the 126th Light Rifle Corps was to provide flank support for the 99th Rifle Corps' advance.

The 126th Light Rifle Corps had been almost completely depleted of supply when phase 1 ended, and had received some 50 tons of supplies in the rest period. Manpower losses had not been made up, so the corps was weakened in comparison with the start of phase 1 on October 7th. The troops had been completely exhausted after trekking through the wilderness, carrying heavy loads and there are signs that the Corps was not in prime fighting condition when hostilities started again on the 18th.

- 31st Rifle Corps had been in the second echelon during the first phase of the battle and the troops had mainly been involved in road works and hauling supplies to the front line units. On October 16th it was still east of Titovka River, on the southern flank of the 99th Rifle Corps but moved forward in time for October 18th.
 - o The Corps at this stage had two rifle divisions (83rd and 367th) after the 45th Rifle Division had earlier been detached and sent as reinforcements to the Litsa front, where it was attached to Infantry Group Pigarevich.
 - o Two mortar and three artillery regiments were attached to the Corps for fire support
 - o A regiment of t-34 tanks, a weak regiment of JSU-152 SP artillery and a brigade of combat engineers were also attached to provide armour support for the attack

The 31st Corps generally had little combat experience, and the men were trained for the terrain in east Karelia, and found the harsh climate and terrain of the Arctic difficult to cope with. A shortage of trucks meant the logistics support for the Corps left a lot to be desired and stockpiles of ammunition, spare parts, food, petroleum and general supplies, were still inadequate at the start of phase 2. Despite all this, the Corps commander, Maj. Gen. Absalimov was confident his troops were ready and would perform assigned missions.

Both rifle divisions of the 31st Rifle Corps had been occupied with road works in the rear and used the respite to move forward to their jump-off positions west of Luostari. On October 18th the deployment was completed and the Corps prepared to attack along the Luostari-Nikel road, and, in cooperation with the 127th Light Rifle Corps, to capture Nickel and clear the town of German defenders. The Corps should then push on to the road crossing at Salmijärvi and secure this.

- 127th Light Rifle Corps was deployed south of the Luostari-Nikel Road.
 - o It still had two Light Rifle Brigades

The 127th Light Rifle Corps was ordered to support the attack of the 31st Rifle Corps, by attacking cross country south of the road and to cut the road west of Nickel to cut off retreat routes and possibility of reinforcements reaching Nickel.

Infantry Group Pigarevich was disbanded and the remaining units placed in Army reserve status.

October 18th - October 19th

The offensive had been scheduled to start on October 19th, but units had started to move forward from their jump-off points already the day before. The 45th Rifle Division of the 131st Rifle Corps had started to move forward along Tårnet Road close to the Norwegian border already in the early hours of the 18th and at 1350 on October 18th they crossed the Norwegian border as the first Soviet unit.

Here they pushed forward and by the end of the day they had taken up positions in front of a line of German strong points along a small river about 5 kilometres into Norwegian territory. The German positions were manned by units of the *6th Mountain Division*.

On October 19th the 45th Rifle Division launched the attack on the German positions along the river.

Soviet naval infantry had made two landings along the coast during October 18th to clear German coastal gun positions and observation posts.

Further south the 99th Rifle Corps had deployed their divisions in two echelons in preparations for the attack.

The 10th Guards Rifle Division, which had been first in line for the attack on Pechenga, was now moved back to the second echelon to rest and recuperate and played no part in phase two of the offensive.

The 65th Rifle Division was positioned around 20 kilometres west of Luostari and started to attack along the road westwards late on the 18th.

The 114th Rifle Division was in positions just in front of strong German defensive positions on Hill 234. On the 18th they launched a frontal attack on the German positions, but were beaten back, although only with light to moderate losses. The 114th Rifle Division then attacked again during the early hours of the 19th and attacked all day. In the evening they finally succeeded in driving the Germans off the hill with a double envelopment manoeuvre. The Germans retreated westward in accordance with the defensive plan devised by Col. Gen. Rendulic.

North of the sector held by the 99th Rifle Corps, the 126th Light Rifle Corps had been assigned to screen the 99th and support the attacks conducted by the bigger Corps to the south. On October 18th, the Corps set out cross country from their jump-off points close to Mount Maa, moved east and north on Tårnet Road during the afternoon of the 18th.

On the 19th they once again left the road and advanced cross country against light opposition. By the evening of the 19th the 126th Light Rifle Corps had advanced a total of 11 kilometres from their jump-off points.

The heaviest fighting during phase 2 of the offensive occurred in the sector held by the 31st Rifle Corps, supported by the 127th Light Rifle Corps along the road from Luostari to Nickel.

Battle Group Rübél was based around the *163rd Infantry Division*, which had been sent as reinforcements from the south late in phase 1 of the offensive. The division had now been bolstered by additional reinforcements from the *XXXVI Mountain Corps* to the south, as well as a few reserve units from the *XIX Mountain Corps* and remnants of *Division Group Van der Hoop* which had been disbanded.

Battle Group Rübél probably counted around 16,500 combat troops when the battle started, and they were well entrenched. The German objective in the area was to stall the Soviets long enough to allow the evacuation of the supply stockpiles from Kirkenes, and Gen. Rübél had ordered a stubborn defence to achieve this aim and his engineers had skillfully prepared strong defensive positions, using the rocky and hilly terrain with ravines and marshes serving to channel the Soviet advance into the German fields of fire. Some of the defensive positions had been constructed by the Finns during the 1939-40 Winter War and had been carefully planned and prepared.

The Soviets had a distinct advantage in artillery and mortars, but the armour support was virtually useless in the terrain and did not play a major part in this phase of the battle along this sector.

In the morning of the October 18th, the 31st Rifle Corps got the first real taste of combat. A regiment from the 367th Rifle Division conducted recon movement, encountered resistance from a German screening force along the road. The Soviets defeated the German screen and continued to push forward until strong German fire from Hill 466 forced them back. The regiment had then advanced 7 kilometres from the starting point. Further back things did not run as smoothly. Misunderstandings and incompetence had caused the rest of the 367th Rifle Division to be caught up in a major traffic jam on the road, and as even tanks and tracked

vehicles generally were unable to deploy outside the road, the chaos meant the fire support intended for the front elements did not materialise.

During the afternoon of October 18th, Soviet intelligence had concluded that the Germans around Nikel were in retreat and consequently the 367th Rifle Division was organised for pursuit rather than attack when they renewed their efforts on the 19th.

Unfortunately, the Germans were intending to stay and when the 367th Rifle Division attacked at 0900 in the morning of the 19th, only one reinforced regiment led the first attack wave. This meant the Germans at Hill 466 and Hill 349 could hold out until noon and the Soviet attack finally ground to a halt in front of Hill 441 further down the road. By the evening of the 19th, 31st Rifle Corps had advanced around 20 kilometres towards Nikel.

In support of the 31st Rifle Corps, the 127th Light Rifle Corps had moved into positions to the south. The 127th Light Rifle Corps had, similar to the 126th Light Rifle Corps, ended phase 1 practically completely out of supplies, and the rest and recuperation had done the men well. However, they had not received new clothing or boots, and after trekking cross country for most of phase 1, the state of the clothing and footwear was getting critical in the unit. There are reports that the shoemakers of the unit used hide from slaughtered pack horses to do emergency repairs to boots, and generally the men tried to cope the best they could.

Late on October 18th 127th Light Rifle Corps once again began along westward march across the tundra. The Corps was tasked with attacking Nikel from the south, as well as cutting the road to the east of Nikel.

In the morning of October 19th, the 70th Naval Rifle Brigade was attacked by German dive bombers from Kirkenes and lost 5 killed and about 15 or so wounded. The marshy terrain probably served to reduce casualties, as the German bombs buried themselves in the marsh before exploding. The German Stukas attacked several times during the 19th, causing minor casualties.

October 20th

The 45th Rifle Division of the 131st Rifle Corps continued to attack along the Tårnet Road on October 20th against strong opposition from the 6th Mountain Division, but making slow and steady progress.

In the sector of the 99th Rifle Corps to the south, the 65th Rifle Division attacked along the road and, in conjunction with the 114th Rifle Division drove 7 kilometres forward against moderate opposition.

When one regiment of the 65th managed to cut the road west of the retreating Germans, the defenders were forced to abandon all their vehicles and move cross country across the tundra toward the west.

Armour and SP Artillery proved inefficient as the tanks and guns quickly had problems keeping up with the rapid advance of the infantry, and mines left on the road by the Germans slowed down the progress of the armoured elements once again.

The Soviet 7th Air Army finally got involved again on the 20th, flying CAS missions for the 99th Rifle Corps and suppressing German artillery batteries.

The 126th Light Rifle Corps continued trekking cross country and during the 20th moved a further 15 kilometres to the west.

Once again the heaviest fighting took place in the sector of the 31st Rifle Corps around Nikel.

On Hill 441 the Germans had constructed an exceptionally strong defensive position and this now blocked the advance of the Corps along the road. The initial assaults were driven back by strong German fire. The Soviet artillery struggled with ammunition shortages and could not provide supporting fire. Armour was road bound and fell easy prey to well positioned German AT guns. Also, the relative inexperience of the 31st Rifle Corps started to show, as the different units struggled to conduct coordinated attacks, and frequently the units attacked piecemeal rather than in concert. The fighting for Hill 441 continued into the night and by midnight it was still held by the German defenders.

Other Soviet units continued to close on Nikel on the 20th and around noon the lead elements were only about 2 kilometres away from the town. Combat around the town was intense and the Germans had skilfully utilised terrain to their advantage when constructing defensive positions. Fighting continued also here into the night.

The 127th Light Rifle Corps was slugging it across the tundra, and did not engage any enemy units on the 20th. Progress was slow but steady, but the men suffered with their broken shoes and tattered uniforms. Late in the evening the 127th Light Rifle Corps managed to cut the main supply route into Nikel in the south west, trapping the German defenders inside.

The commander of the 14th Army, Lt. Gen. Shcherbakov, believing the Germans in Nikel were all but encircled, ordered the 31st Rifle Corps to capture Nikel and destroy the German forces there the next day – October 21st.

Around 1730 on October 20th, the Germans discovered that their retreat route had been cut off and prepared to counter attack on October 21st.

October 21st

By the evening of the 21st, the 45th Rifle Division of the 131st Rifle Corps had advanced over 20 kilometres towards Kirkenes, but the 6th Mountain Division was still putting up stiff resistance, and the difficult terrain also served to slow down the advance. Nevertheless the division kept pressing the attacks and slowly ground its way forward.

The 14th Rifle Division of the 131st Rifle Corps, which had followed behind the 45th Rifle Division, joined the attack in the morning of the 21st and took up positions just south of the 45th Rifle Division. The Soviets also tried to drive a small armoured force around the flank of the 6th Mountain Division units to the south and west of Tårnet Road, but the tanks got stuck in a swamp after advancing just 4 kilometres and played no further role during the day.

The last division in 131st Rifle Corps, the 368th Rifle Division, had stayed in the second echelon for the first couple of days but now started to move forward towards Bjørndal, where it would link up with naval infantry that had advanced along the coast.

99th Rifle Corps continued operations to destroy all German resistance in the Akhmalakhti sector but faced stronger than expected German resistance and was starting to fall behind their schedule. During the day the 99th Rifle Corps managed to move only 8 kilometres closer to the Norwegian border and still had another 7 kilometres to go before it could prepare to start operations towards Kirkenes from the south. In order to try to make up for the lost time, the Corps continued attacks during the night.

On October 21st, the 126th Light Rifle Corps crossed back into Finnish territory and engaged and defeated units of the German *Bicycle Recon Brigade Norway* to the east Lake Klistervatn.

The Corps was now starting to once again face supply constraints and decided to stop and hold positions about 4 kilometres east of the lake. Once again the 126th Light Rifle Corps had accomplished quite a feat, marching 35 kilometres in four days, across inhospitable terrain and with heavy loads. Despite this, the Corps commander, Gen. Solovev, expressed disappointment that his Corps had been sent "on another wild goose chase" and clearly felt he could have been more useful in direct support of the main attack.

The Germans in Nikel, mostly from the *2nd Mountain Division*, had had a nasty surprise the day before, when Soviet units cut the supply and retreat route south west of Nikel. In the morning of October 21st, *137th Mountain Infantry Regiment* attacked and destroyed the Soviet forces on the road, thereby reopening the lines of communication to the west.

In the regimental after action report (AAR) the Germans claim to have killed around 500 Soviet troops, captured another 400, and forced yet another 200 or so to flee across the tundra. The Germans lost around 100 men. The German victory allowed the remaining 1,100 or so German defenders of Nikel to withdraw in relatively good order later in the day on the 21st.

The battle for Hill 441 continued in the early hours and morning of October 21st, but by noon the 367th Rifle Division of the 31st Rifle Corps had finally succeeded in dislodging the Germans and resumed their advance on Nikel from the east. The next obstacle along the way was strong German positions on Hill 482, and it took another 7 hours to clear also this position so by 1900 the division was still 2 kilometres east of Nikel.

The, by now, almost naked men of the 127th Light Rifle Corps closed in on Nikel from the south, but lead elements were defeated by the German counter attack in the morning. In the afternoon, the lead elements of the Corps, some 2 kilometres south of Nikel, reported hearing loud explosions and seeing smoke and heavy flashes of light from Nikel, Salmijärvi, and Akhmalakhti – everything now pointing to an imminent German withdrawal from the area.

The 14th Army HQ ordered Nikel to be captured no later than noon on October 22nd, and that the entire area, including the airfield should be under complete Soviet control by midnight on the 22nd.

October 22nd

The naval infantry, advancing along the coast, crossed into Norway on October 22nd and attacked German positions along the coast as they moved forward. By nightfall, they had reached the hills overlooking the Kobbholm Fjord and the lead elements had almost reached Storbukt, half-way to Kirkenes.

In the early hours of the 22nd, the 45th Rifle Division of the 131st Rifle Corps finally broke through the German string points opposing them and by the evening they had full control as far west and north as the Jar Fjord.

In five days, the 131st Rifle Corps had advanced twenty-five to thirty kilometres into Norwegian territory against moderate resistance, and the naval infantry had cleared the coastline of German positions up to Kobbholm Fjord. The German *6th Mountain Division* continued to fight delaying actions as it withdrew west towards Kirkenes.

99th Rifle Corps had attacked during the night and kept slow but steady progress during the day of the 22nd, so that by the evening of the 22nd, the Corps finally reached the Pasvik River and the Norwegian border. The 114th Rifle Divisions sent two regiments across the river to occupy the small settlements of Holmfoss and Sletta.

Further to the south, the lead elements of the 65th Rifle Division also crossed the Pasvik River and seized the settlement of Trangsund.

During the night, engineers built a 275 metre pontoon bridge across the river at Holmfoss, allowing the units of the 99th Rifle Corps to start crossing the Pasvik River in force.

Around Nikel, fighting continued during the night and by 0200 on October 22nd the first elements of the 69th Naval Rifle Brigade of the 127th Light Rifle Corps broke through the defences south of the town.

By 0500 in the morning of the 22nd, the 367th Rifle Division entered Nikel from the north east, facing fierce resistance from the *2nd Mountain Division* rearguards. Using the road that the Germans had re-opened earlier, the German units now began retreating south westward out of Nikel, and by 1000 on October 22nd, all resistance in Nikel had ceased.

Gen. Absaliamov, the commander of the 31st Rifle Corps, ordered his reserves – the 83rd Rifle Division and tank and artillery elements – to pursue the retreating Germans. Other units were released for road repair and engineering tasks to ensure the road network was quickly upgraded and repaired so supply could be restored and support units be brought forward for the final offensive.

By nightfall the airfield at Nikel was in Soviet hands and repairs to make it operational after German sabotage were well under way.

End of the second phase

At midnight on October 22nd, at the end of the second phase of the Operation, Nikel was in Soviet hands and the 14th Army had advanced a further 35 kilometres west in five days. The nickel mine at Nikel had been recaptured, although the Germans had managed to destroy it before they retreated.

The 131st Rifle Corps was entirely in Norwegian territory, and lead elements were only 20 kilometres from Kirkenes, just south of the Jar Fjord.

The 99th Rifle Corps, supported by the 126th Light Rifle Corps on the flank, occupied the eastern shores of Lakes Klistervatn and Bjørnevatt, and had even established small bridgeheads west of the Pasvik River along the Norwegian border.

127th Light Rifle Corps had suffered severely from equipment shortage and general wear and tear, but had secured the east bank of Lake Kuetsijärvi.

For the Germans, the situation in the region was desperate. *XIX Mountain Corps* had been forced to withdraw north towards Kirkenes, whereas the *2nd Mountain Division* and the *163rd Infantry Division* had been forced to retreat south towards Nautsi and Ivalo. The *XIX Mountain Corps* was thus split into two combat groups unable to support each other.

The 14th Army was poised for the final phase in the offensive to capture Kirkenes.

Phase Three: October 23rd – November 1st 1944

Battle plan and deployment of Soviet forces – Attack on Kirkenes

The split of the *XIX Mountain Corps* into two separate Combat groups, effectively forced Gen. Meretskov to also split his forces into two groups. On the morning of October 22nd, he issued an order to pursue and engage both the German groups.

The 14th Army HQ went to work to come up with the detailed plan, and by the afternoon of the 22nd, the details were communicated and put into operational orders;

Gen. Shcherbakov planned a coordinated assault to destroy, or at least drive back, the *6th Mountain Division* in front of Kirkenes, and capture the town and harbour. The 131st Rifle Corps was ordered to push straight westwards towards Kirkenes, cross the Bek Fjord, and then capture Kirkenes in coordination with Soviet units attacking from the south.

From the south, the 99th Rifle Corps would push northwards towards Kirkenes and attack and take the town in coordination with 131st Rifle Corps attacking from the east.

The 126th Light Rifle Corps was once again ordered on a cross country march, northwest towards Munkelv, where it was to cut Highway 50, the main German supply and retreat route in Norway.

The Northern Fleet would conduct operations at sea to prevent any reinforcements from reaching Kirkenes, or – as now seemed more likely – any Germans to escape from Kirkenes by ship. The Fleet would also step up operations against German transport

ships, still busy shipping out supplies from Kirkenes. If appropriate, the navy would also support land operations by conducting landings by naval infantry at strategic places along the coast.

October 23rd

On October 23rd, the attack on Kirkenes started with the 14th Rifle Division of the 131st Rifle Corps being forced to respond to, and defeat, several German counter attacks along the Tårnet Road.

The counter attacks were supported by naval gunfire and even coastal batteries in Kirkenes played a part, further illustrating the geographical proximity of this vital town. During the October 23rd, the 14th Rifle Division only managed to advance 2 kilometres against heavy opposition.

In the evening, the 45th Rifle Division crossed the Jar Fjord in the American made amphibious trucks and supported also by local fishermen that volunteered their boats to help the Soviets get across the fjord.

The 99th Rifle Corps had established bridgeheads on the western shores of Lakes Klistervatn and Bjørnevattn already in the evening of the 22nd and on October 23rd the Corps utilised the pontoon bridge at Holmfoss to move the rifle divisions into Norway in rapid order.

The 114th Rifle Division deployed in a skirmish line south of the settlement of Strand in order to guard the flank against attacks.

At the same time 65th Rifle Division and 10th Guards Rifle Division initiated attacks northwards through the Pasvik River valley, steadily forcing the German defenders backwards towards Kirkenes.

Late in the evening of October 23rd, the KV-1 tanks and SP Artillery attached to the 10th Guards Rifle Division crossed the pontoon bridge at Holmfoss and drove into Norway to support the divisions of the 99th Rifle Corps.

To the west, 126th Light Rifle Corps had been ordered to march across the tundra towards Munkelv to cut the Highway 50 at the road crossing there. But on the 23rd, the Corps was still static around Akhmalakhti, having exhausted its supplies of food and ammunition.

October 24th

On the morning of October 24th, the 45th Rifle Division advanced on the west bank of the Jar Fjord and met little resistance as it reached the area of Jakobselv and could see Kirkenes across the fjord in front of them.

In order to assist the progress of the 14th Rifle Division, still fighting off German pockets of resistance along the Tårnet Road, the 45th Rifle Division transferred the armour and MRL units that had stayed on the east bank of the Jar Fjord when the division crossed. This allowed the 14th Rifle Division to reach Elvenes, where the Germans had destroyed the bridge crossing the Bek Fjord.

Lacking engineer units with bridge equipment, the division attempted an improvised crossing of the fjord using rafts and whatever vessels they could find in the area, but the crossing generally failed, although two companies did make it across the fjord about 2 kilometres south of Elvenes where the fjord was narrower.

The units of the 131st Rifle Corps were now acutely aware that they were entering territory strongly defended by well-supplied defenders, and during 23rd and 24th, the Corps was hit by close to 50,000 artillery rounds fired from German field-, naval-, and coastal artillery.

In the 99th Rifle Corps sector to the south, the 10th Guards Rifle Division attacking along the main road, and supported to the right by the 65th Rifle Division, were now only 10 kilometres south of the town of Kirkenes itself.

The 126th Light Rifle Corps had still not been resupplied, and was in no condition to fulfil its mission of cutting Highway 50 to the west.

Consequently, in the afternoon of October 24th, Lt. Gen. Shcherbakov ordered the 10th Guards Rifle Division to take over the mission of the 126th Light Rifle Corps, and detach the 28th Rifle Regiment to drive west towards Munkelv to cut the road. This meant slugging it across over 30 kilometres of inhospitable terrain, strewn with rocks and crisscrossed by small streams and marshes. At midnight on the 24th, communications with the 28th Rifle regiment were lost as it reached the high ground to the west.

Soviet air recon had detected columns of Germans leaving Kirkenes going west along the Highway 50 towards Neiden, and the Soviets concluded that the Germans were about to abandon Kirkenes. This was further confirmed by the sound of large explosions and the sight of fires coming from Kirkenes, indication the Germans were destroying the remaining supplies and even the town itself.

October 25th

From the south, the 10th Guards Rifle Division was fighting in the outskirts of Kirkenes by 0300 on October 25th.

Starting at 0500 units from the 131st Rifle Corps attempted a forced crossing of the Bek Fjord at Elvenes. The German defenders endured a 20 minute artillery barrage and managed to drive the Soviets back in the first attack wave. The Soviets then conducted another 40 minute artillery barrage and attacked again, this time securing a small bridgehead. Slowly expanding this, large parts of the 131st Rifle Corps had crossed the fjord by 0900 and continued operations westwards, now approaching the outskirts of Kirkenes from the south west.

With the support of the KV-1 tanks and the SP Artillery, the 99th Rifle Corps forced its way into Kirkenes from the south in the early hours of October 25th. Elements from the 10th Guards Rifle Division, the 65th Rifle division and the 114th Rifle Division fought German rear guards through the streets of Kirkenes and around 1300 on October 25th 1944, the Soviet and Norwegian flags were hoisted over the remains of the town hall in Kirkenes.

The last organised German resistance had been defeated around 1130, and the Soviets now conducted mopping up operations through the streets for another couple of hours before Kirkenes was officially declared liberated.

October 26th

In the morning of October 26th, the 10th Guards Rifle division captured the airfield at Høybuktnoen, 15 kilometres west of Kirkenes, thereby ending all German influence in the area.

Naval infantry units continued to sweep along the coastline and captured German shore batteries and observation posts as they went along. Late in evening of the 26th the force reached the settlement of Jakobselv, just across the fjord from Kirkenes. At this time the battle for the town was over and the naval infantry therefore halted and prepared to be collected by the navy.

Further to the west, the 28th Rifle Regiment of the 10th Guards Rifle Division reached Munkelv in the morning of the 26th, having crossed the 30 kilometres of rough terrain in two days. German units were still retreating through the area and a fire fight broke out. The Soviets quickly defeated the German forces and took control of the road, forcing the remaining Germans to head north along the fjord, where some of them would manage to escape in boats over the next few days.

The unlucky 126th Light Rifle Corps had finally been resupplied and now marched cross country towards Munkelv and Neiden,

reaching the outskirts of the settlement of Neiden by the evening of October 26th.

October 27th

On October 27th, the entire 99th Rifle Corps pushed west towards Neiden River, where German rear guards were preparing a defence line from the village of Neiden itself, and along the ridgeline north of the river on the west bank.

With the help of local fishermen, units from the 99th Rifle Corps crossed the river and captured the village of Neiden after a heavy fire fight with the Germans. In Neiden, much like in Kirkenes, every single building, except the wooden church had been burnt by the Germans before they left.

In the evening, Gen. Meretskov met his military council to discuss further pursuit of the Germans.

October 28th – November 13th

Given the successful capture of Kirkenes and the late time of year, Gen. Meretskov finally decided to call off the offensive on October 28th, and ordered the units to prepare defensive positions and consolidate the gains that had been made.

On November 13th, a forward recon element from the 114th Rifle Division reached the settlement of Tana; some 120 kilometres west of Neiden, but the Soviets did not advance any further west for the rest of the war.

Battle Plan and deployment of Soviet forces - Southward Pursuit

Despite its relative inexperience, the 31st Rifle Corps had conducted itself well during the battle for, and capture of, Nikel. Now the Corps waited for further orders together with the 126th Light Rifle Corps and support elements in the area just to the south west of Nikel.

At 0530 on October 23rd, the 31st Rifle Corps HQ received a temporary combat order to attack and occupy a series of hills next to the Arctic Highway south west of Lake Porijärvi, and then to continue to attack southward along the road.

127th Light Rifle Corps, now finally supplied with new boots and clothing, was to attack westwards towards the settlements of Menikko and Stenbakk, capture these, and then move towards the south west on the Norwegian side of the Pasvik River.

It was assumed that the Germans from the *2nd Mountain Division* and *163rd Infantry Division* would demolish the road and employ a strong rear guard, so the 31st Rifle Corps commander Maj. Gen. Absaliamov ordered an aggressive pursuit strategy in order to give the Germans little time to demolish the road or establish prepared positions.

The plan was quite simple; frontal attack along the road with support from flank attacks on both sides of the road by regimental and battalion sized units moving cross country. He also ordered engineer units to follow in the wake of the first echelon, so that any road damage could be quickly repaired. Based on the problems with mobility experienced by the armour and SP Artillery units the days before, Maj. Gen. Absaliamov decided to hand the armour and SP Artillery units back to the 14th Army.

The long range artillery would engage in counter battery fire and would be brought forward by tracked vehicles (tractors) so they could keep up the fire support. There would also be some air support from the 7th Air Army.

The main challenge for the 31st Rifle Corps and the 127th Light Rifle Corps was the supply situation. Despite having received some supplies and replacement of the most necessary equipment, there was still a shortage of food, ammunition and almost all other supplies. The two manoeuvre units only had supplies for a few days of combat when the major combat operations started on October 23rd.

October 23rd

Early in the morning of October 23rd, the 367th Rifle Division of the 31st Rifle Corps moved forward and crossed the Suhoniki River on a foot bridge that the engineers had built. Their task was to repair the road using hand tools, in preparation for the main attack force that would follow a day later. When they had managed to put the road in a decent state, artillery units were allowed to drive to their assigned forward positions.

The lead 83rd Rifle Division sent one rifle regiment to assist the artillery units with movement, meaning that on October 23rd, 2/3 of the combat strength of the 31st Rifle Corps was engaged in road repair operations, and only two rifle regiments were ready for combat.

These two regiments moved cross country; the 11th Rifle Regiment secured the airfield at west of Nikel on October 23rd, capturing eight German planes and considerable amounts of supplies.

The 26th Rifle regiment moved further to the west, but to the south of the airfield, reached the Arctic Highway by the evening of October 23rd and skirmished with German rear guard units during the night.

October 24th

In the early hours of October 24th, the 26th Rifle Regiment of the 83rd Rifle Division pursued German elements south along the Arctic Ocean Highway. By noon the regiment had advanced to the banks of the Laukkujoki River and now had Mount Kaskama right in front of their positions.

The Germans had established a strong defensive position on the mountain, manned by rear guards from the *2nd Mountain Division*. The Soviet regiment attacked but was pushed back by the Germans defending from their prepared positions on the slopes of the mountain, ending combat activities for the day.

October 25th

When the attack resumed on the 25th, the 83rd Rifle Division experienced almost immediate shortages in artillery- and mortar ammunition which slowed the approach southwards already from the start.

The 26th Rifle regiment of the 83rd Rifle Division had decided to bypass the German position and continue the drive south, leaving the Germans for the follow up units to deal with. By 1530, the lead units of the regiment, supported by infantry reinforcements from the division, had managed to infiltrate between two German positions and captured the road between Mount Kaskama and Lake Kaskama. At this stage the Soviet forces north of Mount Kaskama were supposed to conduct a frontal attack, but for unclear reasons the attack never materialised, and the Germans could counterattack and break out from the trap around 1800 on the 25th, and resume their retreat south.

By October 25th, the 127th Light Rifle Corps had crossed two rivers at the southern end of Lake Kuetsijärvi.

October 26th

The Soviet forces renewed their attack on Mount Kaskama in the early morning of October 26th, only to find the German positions abandoned.

The 83rd Rifle Division continued the southward movement along the road, and with one regiment marching cross country to the

east of the road to defeat any German stragglers that may be in the area.

The lead elements of the 26th Rifle regiment entered the town of Nautsi in the evening and also overran an airfield just to the east of the town. Here they found large stockpiles of supplies, especially petroleum products, that the Germans had not had time to destroy before they retreated.

The 83rd Rifle Division ended the day just south of the airfield and the town of Nautsi.

As it was, a number of German units escaped across the river to the west, where the 127th Light Rifle Corps should have been to engage them. However, the 127th Light Rifle Corps had fallen behind in the rough terrain, and was still some 15 kilometres to the north.

Once again the food supply problem proved the undoing of the 127th Light Rifle Corps, as the unit had stopped to replenish and did not start movement again until the evening of the 26th.

October 27th

At 0600 on October 27th, 83rd Rifle Division of the 31st Rifle Corps, started operations to capture the large hydro-electric power station on the Pasvik River about 15 kilometres south west of Nautsi. As far as the Soviets had been able to determine, the power station was still intact and it was critical to capture it before the Germans could demolish it.

At noon, strong German fire halted the advance of the 83rd Rifle division to the east of Nautsi, and the Soviets established that the Germans had managed to establish a strong defensive position in the area. No further attacks would occur on the 27th, and the two sides exchanged artillery fire and mortar fire without achieving much success.

October 28th

In the morning of October 28th, the remainder of the Soviet artillery had caught up, and went into action, pounding the German positions. The 83rd Rifle Division executed a full frontal attack, supported by battalion sized flank attacks, and drove the Germans back to their next line of prepared positions, some 2 kilometres behind the first line. The Soviets then spent the rest of the day probing the new defensive line, and bringing forward artillery support for a renewed attack the next day.

October 29th

The hydro-electric power station was captured on October 29th, but by now the Germans had had time to demolish it.

To the east of Nautsi the division attacked the new German line of defences, but the Germans could manage to hold the line through liberal use of mines, hand grenades and barbed wire.

October 30th – November 2nd

In the morning of October 30th, 31st Rifle Corps received new orders from the 14th Army HQ; The Corps was to establish defensive positions east of Lake Inari, with forward blocking positions south of Lake Mustola.

The Corps was further to capture the settlement of Mustola, upon which a detachment would drive south and establish contact with the Finnish Army HQ at Ivalo.

The Finns, of course, at this time was engaged in driving the German forces from their territory in accordance with the Armistice agreement signed with the Soviet Union.

By Nightfall on October 31st, the last German defenders in the defensive line had been driven out after a flanking movement by two Soviet regiments.

Small actions also took place on November 1st and 2nd, but for all practical purposes the fighting in the area was now over and the units of the 31st Rifle Corps prepared defensive positions.

At noon on November 2nd, 83rd Rifle division captured Mustola, thereby having completed the battle orders given by the 14th Army a few days before.

November 3rd – November 5th

A small detachment from the 83rd Rifle Division pushed forward towards Ivalo on the 3rd and 4th, occasionally engaging small German rear guards, but the Germans were at this time in full retreat towards Norway and the entire *20th Mountain Army* was marching along the roads and footpaths of Northern Finland.

On November 5th, the Soviet Red Army established contact with the Finnish Army at Ivalo, ending the Pechenga-Kirkenes Operation.

The 31st Rifle Corps had advanced approximately 150 kilometres south from Nickel in ten days, and received praise from STAVKA for the operation. The inexperienced troops that had started the offensive a month before were now battle hardened veterans.

Aftermath

German losses in the battles totalled around 9,000 troops killed and some 13,000 wounded, whereas the Soviets had lost around 16,000 killed and an unknown number of wounded, equating to about 16% of both armies.

Over the next several months after the conclusion of the Operation, troops from the Norwegian 2nd Mountain Company arrived to Murmansk from the UK and were attached to the 14th Army.

The Norwegian unit established HQ in Kirkenes, the first Norwegian town to be liberated and eventually over 2,000 Norwegian troops took over the responsibility for the Norwegian territory from the Soviets.

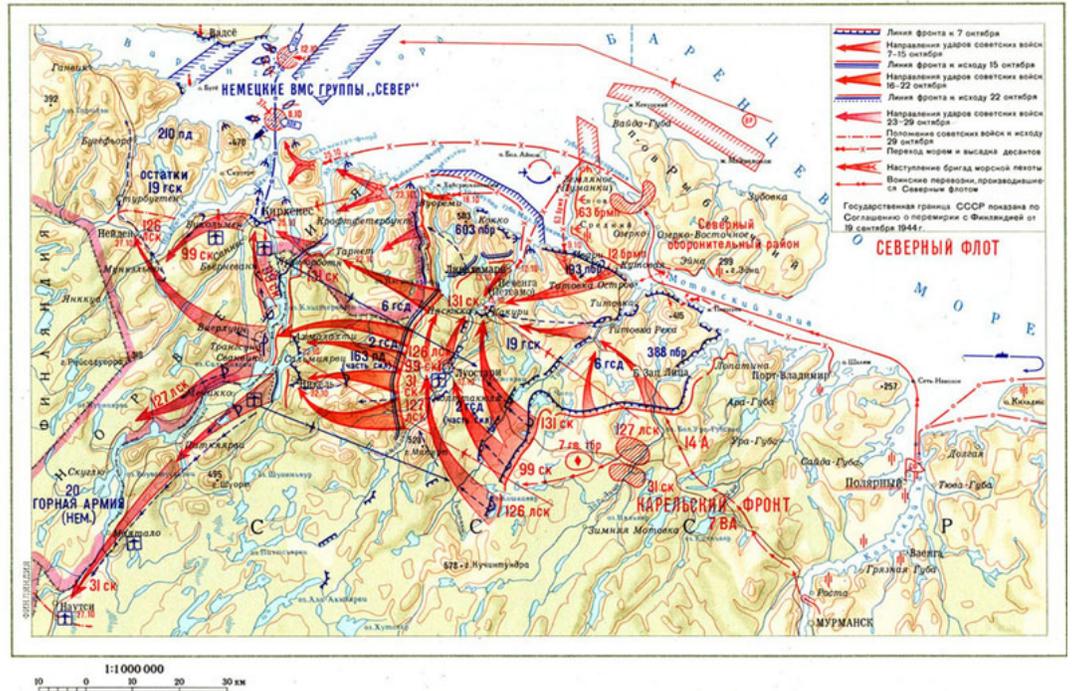
During the winter of 1944-45, the Soviet 45th Rifle Division remained in Kirkenes to help the inhabitants to rebuild the town; only 7 houses were intact in the entire town.

In October 1945, the Soviets left Norwegian territory and the Iron Curtain slammed shut behind them as they closed the border gate.

General Meretskov was promoted to Marshal in November 1944 and in the spring of 1945 he was given command of the 1st far Eastern Front in the campaign against Japanese forces in Manchuria and Korea. He brought with him most of his staff and the commander of the 7th Air Army, General Sokolov. In Manchuria and Korea, Meretskov's forces operated in difficult coastal terrain, coordinating their actions with operations by naval infantry from the Pacific Fleet.

Summary and Conclusions

НАСТУПЛЕНИЕ СОВЕТСКИХ ВОЙСК В ЗАПОЛЯРЬЕ. ОСВОБОЖДЕНИЕ СЕВЕРНЫХ РАЙОНОВ НОРВЕГИИ. 7-29 октября 1944 г.



Map: Overview of the entire Operation – Soviet situation map of the entire Operation. [Original Image](#)
Source: 14th Army battle records, Presidential Library, Russian Federation

Timing of the operation

One of the main discussion points among Soviet, and later Russian, scholars, has been the timing of the offensive to capture Kirkenes.

While it is generally agreed that the offensive could not have started any sooner, given that many of the units involved were also used in the Svir-Petrozavodsk operation, some scholars have argued that Meretskov could, and perhaps even should, have waited until winter when the ground would have been frozen and probably more suitable for cross-country movement. It is possible that frozen lakes and marshes would have made it easier to cross obstacles and move outside the few roads, but with the Arctic winter would also have come further supply challenges in addition to the ones already faced by the 14th Army. Winter would also have brought darker days and less daylight, thereby reducing the operational efficiency of the units, and especially air support would have been made even more difficult than it was.

There certainly was also a great element of politics involved when the offensive was planned and conducted. It is possible that the 14th Army could have just sat out the war and waited for the Germans to retreat from Northern Norway; they were already retreating from Finland when the offensive started, and orders had been issued to the XIX Mountain Corps to prepare evacuation of the Peenega-Kirkenes area. However, there is also evidence that STAVKA even in August 1944 feared a German push for Murmansk, and Stalin was also personally eager to ensure that the German forces were not allowed to withdraw “unpunished” from the north.

The Soviets also had the desire to secure the Northern part of Finland, which they were to demand in compensation from Finland in the peace negotiations that would follow. As always, “possession is 9/10th of the law”.

Likewise it has been discussed why the Soviets did not stay in the occupied parts of Norway, where the strategically important town of Kirkenes was located. There is no evidence that the Soviets ever considered occupying this part of Norway, and the decision to cross into Norwegian territory was done for pure military reasons. The Soviets even ensured the border crossing was cleared and approved by the Norwegian government-in-exile in London before any units crossed the border, even if the Soviets technically had not recognised the Norwegian government as legitimate. The fact that the Soviets left Norwegian territory in October 1945, leaving the border as it had been since 1807 also support this conclusion.

Soviet Plans and conduct

All in all, the Soviet offensive ran according to plan, and in general the operational plans appeared to be sound and based on what knowledge was available at the time. The Soviets clearly underestimated the logistical side of the operations and some units found it hard to keep the ambitious time plans when moving in the rough terrain. The combat power of the light infantry was overestimated.

One of the weak points of the operational plans appears to be the timing of the naval landings. For a great part these had been imposed by STAVKA and there is little evidence that the naval landings directly contributed to the operational success of the operation. The naval infantry units did clear away a number of German coastal gun positions and other German outposts, but these had no real influence on the battle itself and would eventually have been cleared away anyway. It is worth noting that Meretskov in his original plan had proposed the naval landings to be conducted simultaneously with his land attacks, but STAVKA imposed a delay for unclear reasons. The delay meant that several opportunities for encircling German forces were lost, and several times the Germans could withdraw just hours before the trap slammed shut around them.

The original plan for the operation did not actually include phase 3- the movement into Norway, although this should have been a natural part of the plan. Meretskov and his officers did react quickly and managed to update the plans as the operations were in progress, and the initial oversight (?) did not seem to affect operations to any larger degree.

Military Scholars have pointed out that the plan was exceptionally successful because it focused maximum effort at a single point of breakthrough, and by amassing superior forces, each German battalion in the line faced more than a division of Soviet troops. This, of course, was based on experiences the Soviets had made during the winter war and later, where wide frontal attacks had tended to fail because they could not concentrate enough strength at a single point. Meretskov used these lessons and achieved a rapid breakthrough, despite facing a well-prepared, highly professional and motivated enemy. The grand plans to employ tanks and SP artillery did show, however that the understanding for how arctic terrain hampers operations, was still not present at all levels in the Karelian Front organisation, and initially it looks like some of the Corps commanders expected to repeat the operation they had conducted in the Petrozavodsk region a few months earlier. Gen. Mikulskij, the commander of the 99th Rifle Corps, admits this in his memoirs, and says that when the operation started, both he and his staff had unrealistic expectations for what was possible in the

climate and terrain north of the Arctic Circle.

Command and Control (C2)

Even under "normal" conditions, the Soviet command and control (C2) system was complex and unlike anything found in the Western Allies' armies. Although the Soviets had largely done away with the system of Political Commissars by 1944, and reinstated old army ranks and functions, the system still required STAVKA to approve all operational plans of the Fronts, even when commanded by an experienced and well-liked officer like Meretskov.

The Soviets also employed a "dual command" concept, where support assets would be ad hoc tied to operational units, but administratively belong to another; for instance the 7th Air Army in this operation; Gen. Sokolov received his operational orders from Gen. Meretskov, as his ad hoc superior, but was formally reporting to the Central Air Staff in Moscow, and received corrugations and comments from them all through the operation.

However, although the system may seem complex and inefficient, it had been developed over time and battle tested, and seemed to function well in the Red Army. The Soviets had conducted much larger and more complex offensives than this operation and the system had worked well.

It has been argued that the glue in the model was the personal trust and relationship between the commanders, a point which may well be true. Gen. Meretskov chose Corps and Divisional commanders he knew and trusted for the operation.

Another aspect of the command and control element of this battle is the personality of Gen. Meretskov himself. He was a "lead from the front" type character, and he maintained his operational HQ only 15-20 kilometres behind the lead elements of the offensive at times. This allowed him to frequently visit the Corps and Divisional HQs, but without bypassing or stepping on the authority of his Corps commanders. As a result of Meretskov's active supervision of his subordinates, this culture was established throughout the 14th Army, and the Army commander would regularly visit the Corps commander, who in turn would visit the Divisional commander and so on. This meant commanders at the different levels communicated directly a minimum of once per 24 hours and the system allowed for rapid updates and changes in battle orders.

As a comparison, the command HQ of Gen. Degen, the commander of 2nd Mountain Division was well on the west side of the Titovka, several kilometres behind his front units. The XIX Mountain Corps HQ of Gen. Jodl, in turn, was at Pechenga, almost 30 kilometres away from the front lines. And finally the *20th Mountain Army* HQ of Col. Gen. Rendulic was over 100 kilometres to the south, and he only visited the battle area once during the entire operation.

The Soviets also displayed great levels of adaptability, especially when the logistic operations turned sour almost immediately, and the immediate assignment of combat troops to road building duties would probably not have occurred in the more static Red Army of 1939.

Another example is the exchange of Rifle Divisions between the 99th and 131st Rifle Corps' on October 8th, to allow the 131st to advance faster. Likewise the reassignment of 126th Light Rifle Corps mission to cut Highway 50 to a Rifle regiment from 10th Guards Rifle Division shows adaptability and flexibility in the command structure.

Only one major change in command occurred during the operation, except for the replacement of the ageing Gen. Pigarevich before the battle; On October 23rd, the 131st Rifle Corps commander gen. Alekseev was replaced by one of his divisional commanders. Soviet era sources disagree about the reason for this; some sources claim Meretskov was dissatisfied with the slow progress of the 131st Rifle Corps towards Kirkenes, others claim it was purely for health reasons and that Gen. Alekseev had suffered a heart attack the day before.

Other aspects like the problems with radio communications due to atmospheric disturbances this far north, as well as unreliable maps also created challenges for the C2 situation.

Employment of forces in the Arctic

Combat units of both sides appear to have displayed a great level of skill and motivation during the operation. Considering the great strain and hardship placed on the units from the terrain and climate, it appears remarkable that units from both sides functioned as well as they did. It should be noted that most of the units involved were battle hardened, and only the 31st Rifle Corps could be described as inexperienced.

The Soviets employed regular infantry units in frontal attacks up hills and mountains, defended by German mountain troops – at the outset seemingly placing the odds in favour of the Germans. To compensate for the possible lack in quality, although this seems not to have been directly discussed by the Soviet commanders, the Soviets employed flank attacks by up to regimental sized formations to dislodge the German defenders of strong points.

Attacks were often conducted at night in terrain that even during the day presented a challenge, and the Soviets were fighting on an increasingly overstretched supply system, whereas the Germans could fall back on well stacked supply depots and stockpiles.

The deployment of Soviet light infantry merits a study in itself, especially as modern day NATO strategy and operational doctrine teaches that light infantry is the unit of choice for arctic operations. In all three phases, the light infantry of the 126th and 127th Light Rifle Corps' were assigned similar missions; advance long stretches cross country and carry supplies and ammunition with them. At the end of the trek, they were to secure an objective and hold it until the main force arrived.

The success of the light infantry units was variable; the 126th was inherently more successful than the 127th during the first phase, where the 127th arrived too weak to accomplish its mission after an exhausting trek over 7 days across the tundra.

Similarly, during the second phase, the 127th accomplished the objective of cutting the road west of Nikel, but was too weak to defend it against the German counterattack by the *137th Mountain Regiment* the next day, allowing most of the defenders in Nikel to escape the trap.

And again, during phase 3, the 127th Light Rifle Corps failed to advance fast enough to prevent the German defenders to escape across the river to the west of Mount Kaskama, again due to problems with logistics support.

The legacy of the 127th Light Rifle Corps leave many questions unanswered;

Why was the 69th naval Rifle Brigade seemingly not employed during the 11-15 October period?

Why was no attempt to resupply the struggling 127th by air made, although it had (partially) succeeded with the 126th?

Also, the 127th seems to have been denied air support in the critical phases?

Even careful study of recently released documents by the Russian Presidential Library, has been unable to provide an answer to these questions, which clearly heavily impacted on the performance of the 127th Light Rifle Corps.

On the plus side, Soviet light infantry units proved to be highly mobile, but in combination with the logistical problems and the problems to bring up artillery support, this mobility was often wasted. Instead it placed them in battle positions where their light combat ability became a liability rather than an advantage, for instance in attacking prepared German defensive positions.

Modern day military analysts will be quick to point out that helicopters and true all-terrain vehicles have changed the rules of the

game, and that light infantry units today enjoy far better support than what the Soviets were able to muster during this operation. Certainly this is backed up by experiences from NATO exercises in north Norway, where light infantry units are regularly employed as the main combat element of the operations.

A final point applies to the deployment of armoured vehicles; despite a complete superiority in tanks and SP Artillery guns (the Germans probably had none at all), it did not affect the outcome of the battle, because the Soviets failed to be able to employ them at all. Only during the final fighting in the streets of Kirkenes did the heavy KV-1 tanks have an impact, the rest of the operation the tanks and SP guns generally were stuck far behind the front lines, although from time to time they were able to contribute limited fire support. The Germans skilfully employed anti-tank weapons and obstacles, and could easily compensate for their relative lack of armour in this operation.

An interesting aspect is that both Soviet cold war and modern Russian doctrine continues to emphasise the employment of armour units in Arctic terrain. It is possible, and even likely, that modern day armoured vehicles are better than their WW2 counterparts, but it still appears unsuitable to employ large armoured formations north of the Arctic Circle. Modern day defence plans and doctrine in both Norway and Finland emphasise anti-tank weapons and tactics rather than employment of tanks and armoured vehicles in this terrain.

Logistical operations

It would be impossible to end this article without a few specific comments on the logistical situation and challenges faced by the Soviets.

Although the Soviets allotted considerable time and energy to the development of a comprehensive logistical plan, and allowed ample preparations before the offensive, the entire logistical wheel came off almost from day 1.

The Soviet attitude was expressed by Lt. Gen. Khrenov, the commander of engineer troops in the Karelian Front;

"There is no such thing as absolutely impassable terrain...it merely depends on the level of engineer support". His belief that engineers could solve all problems may be shared by many modern day technical wizards, but as it turned out the terrain north of the Arctic Circle proved too much, even for the fairly large engineer force that was deployed for the operation and despite the enormous effort and achievements by the engineers during the operation. In his memoirs, Lt. Gen. Mikulskij, the 99th Rifle Corps commander, wrote that "engineer support was the single weakest aspect in the planning and preparation of the corps offensive."

Some Russian scholars have pointed out that much of the delays experienced partly could be traced back to the time before the offensive even began; for instance much of the road work leading up to the jump-off points for the October 7th start, should have been completed during the summer of 1944, but the engineers were still building when the offensive kicked off.

The engineers also had combat responsibilities and were supposed to assist infantry forces in defeating enemy strong points, as well as aid in the recon of terrain and plan axis of movement. Under "normal" circumstances, engineer units are quite able to conduct all these missions, but during this operation they experienced a "mission overload" and consequently struggled to perform any of them to the best of their ability.

It is possible, of course, that Lt. Gen. Mikulskij is overly critical in his memoirs, but other sources also seem to confirm the impression that engineer units failed to meet the demands of the combat units during the operation.

To the credit of the 14th Army, they quickly realised they had been overly ambitious in the plan for road construction, and quickly adapted a new plan, calling for only one main road to each Corps sector, thereby reducing the strain on the engineers. The deployment of combat units to support engineers in road construction also certainly helped the situation, but was mainly made possible because the German inability to launch major counter attacks.

Overall the achievements of the Soviet engineers are seemingly impressive but despite the seemingly strong statistics, the engineers could not match the speed of the offensive. During the operation, Soviet engineers;

- Built 17 kilometres of new road suitable for tanks and tracked vehicles
- Built 210 kilometres of new tracks and roads suitable for wheeled vehicles
- Built 35 temporary bridges with capacity up to 16 tons
- Built 20 temporary bridges with capacity up to 60 tons
- Built 4 pontoon bridges
- Organised 4 assault crossings of rivers and fjords up to 1,5 kilometres wide
- Constructed 30 fords for armoured vehicles
- Restored and repaired over 500 kilometres of demolished roads
- Removed over 16,000 explosive devices (mines, booby traps)

*The Air support and naval support elements of the operations is the subject of a separate future article and will not be discussed in more details in this article.

Was the Pechenga- Kirkenes Operation a success?

Even though at first glance the Pechenga-Kirkenes Operation appears to have been a resounding Soviet success, things may not be as clear once we look into it in more depth. The Soviets certainly captured more terrain than originally envisioned, and did inflict heavy casualties on the enemy forces. They secured control of the area that they would later claim from Finland in the peace settlement.

However, General Meretskov's original combat order for the Operation, stressed that the primary objective was to encircle and destroy the *XIX Mountain Corps*. In this aspect one could argue that the Soviets failed in their mission, since both the Mountain Divisions and other combat elements of the *XIX Mountain Corps* managed to escape destruction, albeit with heavy losses.

Only recently have scholars started to discuss why the 14th Army failed to achieve this overall objective, and during Soviet times, the Operation was hailed as a resounding success full of Heroes of the Soviet Union. The residents of Kirkenes would probably also describe the operation as a success.

Modern day scholars point out that one of the main reasons for failing to destroy *XIX Mountain Corps* was that the advance of the 99th Rifle Corps was too slow, general mobility and logistics support problems, lack of adequate artillery support etc etc.

It is also pointed out that the STAVKA imposed delay of the naval infantry landings severely hampered the opportunity to encircle at least the *6th Mountain Division*. Furthermore, the failure of the light infantry to keep control of the road west of Nikel is singled out as a major reason why encirclement operations failed.

For the general outcome of WW2, it probably did not matter much whether the *XIX Mountain Corps* was destroyed or not, but units did make it back to Germany and took part in the fighting there – for instance the *2nd Mountain Division* which fought the western allies around Trier, where it was finally destroyed.

As for "punishing the Germans", which had been Meretskov's personal goal – one must conclude that he delivered on all accounts.

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About the author:
Coming soon...

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