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Review by Duncan Redford, Maritime Warfare Centre

_Arctic Convoys: Bletchley Park and the War for the Seas_ by David Kenyon is an excellent and long overdue book. It explores the role of signals intelligence at the operational and tactical levels on the Arctic Convoys of the Second World War and is firmly based on the rigorous analysis of primary sources, some of which have not been exploited. As Kenyon rightly points out, the general view of the Arctic Convoys was determined by the popular understanding of the Convoy PQ-17 catastrophe. In 1942, Convoy PQ-17, the first significant joint Anglo-American naval operation under British command, was ordered to scatter, resulting in the sinking of 24 out of the 35 Russia-bound merchant ships by German submarine and air attack. This book is therefore a useful corrective to the notion that the Arctic Convoys were only defined by PQ-17, and, more importantly, explores what was known, assumed, and feared at the time—not just for PQ-17 but for the other convoys as well.

In three well-written and organized sections, _Arctic Convoys_ covers first the war in the Arctic, the German codes that were being attacked by the British codebreakers, and how codebreaking fits into other intelligence tools that target an enemy’s used of radios. The second section of four chapters examines the convoys that sailed for the Soviet Union (PQ) and those that sailed from the Soviet Union (QP). In November 1942, the convoys’ marking was changed for the reasons of secrecy to the following identifiers: JW for the journey to Russia and RA for the return journey. The third section of four chapters covers the JW and RA convoys before providing a very useful retrospective of the whole campaign. Within these three sections Kenyon enlivens his story with dives into the personalities involved, not just the civilian staff at Bletchley Park, but also the naval officers who had to act on the intelligence or cope with its shortcomings or even non-existence, such as Admiral Robert Burnett, who commanded the British cruiser force that decisively intervened in the fight around convoy JW51B—the Battle of the Barents Sea (155-159, 195-199). Nor does Kenyon neglect the “other side of the hill,” seeking to understand the viewpoints and constraints of the German commanders, thus explaining why actions developed in the way that they did.

Kenyon also throws into stark relief the complexity of these Arctic Convoy operations. They were whole-fleet operations that were vastly different from the trade convoys that ploughed their way across the Atlantic. This different approach in the Arctic to the protection of convoys was driven by the different nature of the threat compared to the Atlantic route. In the Arctic, the convoys had to be able to cope with air, surface, and submarine attacks. The surface threat was particularly problematic as it could (and did) take the form of

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destroyers, cruisers, pocket battleships, battle cruisers, and the most powerful battleship in the German fleet, the **Tirpitz**. This meant that the convoy required a close escort to deal with German air, submarine, and destroyer attacks, as well as a close covering force of cruisers that lay a few hours away in order to defend against any sorties by German major surface combatants such as the **Hipper** and **Lützow**. Further off still, there was a distant covering force from the Home Fleet of at least a battleship, a fleet aircraft carrier, cruisers, and escorting destroyers whose orders were to engage the major or even capital units such as the **Tirpitz** or **Scharnhorst** if they sailed and could be located by intelligence or other means in time for the British to intercept them.

Kenyon also provides more than just entertaining and illuminating vignettes on the impact of interwar treaties or the career paths of key players. He shows the impact of environmental conditions on the utility of intelligence—that knowing an enemy is in the area is different from being able to find and engage them. Quite simply, in pre-radar days, at night, or in bad weather, ships could pass close to each other without realizing it—no matter how good the intelligence support was. This is important not just for the historical record but for naval practitioners today. For example, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces that operate in the north Norwegian Sea can learn from this history, not just over the opportunities and limitations of good and timely operational and tactical intelligence, but what might happen in the future if, in a less than benign operating environment, they are unable to use their radars, radios and other electronic aids as freely as they might be used to, for fear of detection by the Russians.

Another of Kenyon’s central themes is that the Royal Navy could not afford to lose cruisers and capital ships while mounting these major convoy operations and the constraint this imposed on operations, such as not running convoys during the Arctic summer when the threat, particularly from the air (which had a good-weather, daylight only capability), was at its greatest. That the Royal Navy was short of the resources it found hardest to obtain during the war, warships of cruiser size and above, was a function of interwar disarmament, rearmament decisions, and production priority decisions made in the war itself. But the root problem, that highly complex and resource-intensive weapon systems cannot be quickly produced in response to a rapidly evolving international threat, remains an issue.

Above all, *Arctic Convoys* is about the operational- and tactical-level employment of signals intelligence and, most importantly, what it cannot do. In this regard alone, it is a valuable corrective to the oft-held view that if one can break the enemy’s codes, one will know what they are doing. Kenyon shows this is not the case; that strategic understanding of an enemy’s plans is not the same as being able to use that intelligence to stop them at the tactical or operational level. Furthermore, his book reveals that even if the information is available, it may not be timely enough for the commander or the front-line unit to make use of it, or there can be technical limitations on what signals intelligence can do or be used for. *Arctic Convoys* is thoroughly recommended.

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