**Churchill’s Arctic Convoys**, William Smith; Pen and Sword Maritime, Philadelphia, (2022)

Reviewed by Capt. Richard Dick, USN (Ret.).

*Churchill’s Arctic Convoys* tells the story of the convoys that sent war materiel from the United Kingdom and UK-controlled ports to the Soviet Union from mid-1942 until the end of the war. The title is apt, in that the British prime minister took the lead in promising British aid to Stalin during a June 22, 1941 speech, the same day that Germany invaded the Soviet Union. He communicated specific commitments (American-made Tomahawk fighters and raw materials) to the Soviet General Secretary on June 25 and the first convoy, PQ-1, sailed on August 12, 1941, while the initial return, QP-1, reached the UK in October 1941.

The summer convoys sailed unscathed since Germany had few assets positioned to detect and attack these targets. Winter weather began to complicate the voyages and, in December 1941, German destroyers attacked a PQ convoy escort for the first time but without loss to either side. Not until January 1942 was the first merchantman attacked and sunk (SS Waziristan by U-134).

January proved a month of firsts, as Germany began to employ radio intercepts to route submarine wolfpacks onto an Arctic convoy, PQ-8, which was also the first to include an American merchant ship. By the end of the war, 56% of losses from the Arctic convoys had been of American or Panamanian registry. January 1942 also saw the first merchant ship damaged by the Luftwaffe. These January trends would continue to accelerate.

German attacks increased from the spring of 1942 as the importance of the convoys to Stalin’s survival became more apparent and the weather became [relatively] better. Air and submarine attacks multiplied and the British Admiralty reckoned that major German surface units also posed a growing threat, although in fact fuel shortages and operational restrictions mitigated the actual danger posed by surface warships.

In March 1942, both sides “upped the ante” in the northern war as Germany, responding to press reports of British convoy successes, declared the opening of the “Battle of the Arctic.” Even as Germany increased the scale of reconnaissance and attack, the pressures of the Battle of the Atlantic severely limited the number of antiaircraft and antisubmarine escorts available to the merchant convoys. For example, the close escort to PQ-13 consisted of two destroyers, a minesweeper, and two armed trawlers. In June and July of 1942, the worst Arctic convoy disaster of the war, PQ-17, demonstrated how the threat posed by German surface warships in Norway, especially the battleship *Tirpitz*, magnified the ability of aircraft and submarines to savage a convoy even when the surface ships did not engage. PQ-17 lost 22 of 36 merchantmen after the Admiralty ordered the convoy to scatter in response to what turned out to be a non-existent threat from *Tirpitz*.

By contrast, convoy JW-51B (convoy designations changed after PQ-18) from December 1942 to January 1943, represented from the British standpoint one of the classic small naval victories of the war. Two British light cruisers and six destroyers fought off a German pocket battleship, a heavy cruiser and six destroyers with no losses to the convoy. Growing Allied naval...
and air strength as well as massive production of merchant vessels, coupled with growing German losses, fuel shortages, and Hitler’s disdain for the surface fleet after JW-51B, slashed convoy losses. This was especially true of losses as a percentage of ships which sailed. For example, from March to November of 1942, the Allies lost 51 merchant vessels of 179 dispatched. From August 1944 to May 1945, the convoys lost 2 ships of 249.

Smith’s book highlights his strengths as a researcher of both sides of the Arctic battles and across naval surface and underwater, air, and merchant categories. His book is essentially a detailed, well-written log of the actions in the campaign with some useful observations on the battle as a whole. What the book lacks is an assessment of the cost-effectiveness of the convoys as a means of supplying the Soviet Union during the stages of the war. For example, the convoys were initially the only means of supplying British war materiel to Stalin, since neither the North Pacific nor Persian Gulf routes were available or initially even accessible. To what degree were the other routes effective in accomplishing the same mission as the war went on? David Wragg’s *Sacrifice for Stalin* (2005) goes part way toward addressing this question, as does B.B. Schofield’s older *The Russian Convoys* (1964). The *U.S. Army in World War II* volume *The Persian Gulf and Aid to Russia* discusses the Persian Gulf route in some detail. Despite what is not in Smith’s book, what is there is admirably researched, well-illustrated, comprehensive, and engagingly written.

William Smith is a retired British civil servant with 42 years of experience in naval, joint service, and NATO logistics. Determined to dive into naval history in his retirement, Smith chose to focus on World War II convoys and the Arctic, driven by his grandfather’s service in the Royal Navy in World War I and his father’s voyages in the Merchant Navy in World War II.

Captain Dick, USNA ’75, is a retired submariner; he also served over 29 years in the defense intelligence community in scientific and technical intelligence, intelligence support to the acquisition process, and foreign materiel.