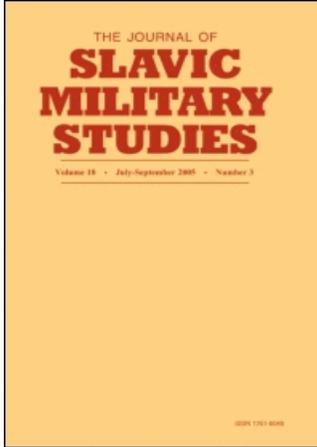


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## The Journal of Slavic Military Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:  
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713636668>

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Online Publication Date: 01 July 2007

To cite this Article: Suprun, Mikhail (2007) 'Operation "West": The Role of the Northern Fleet and its Air Forces in the Liberation of the Russian Arctic in 1944', The Journal of Slavic Military Studies, 20:3, 433 - 447

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/13518040701533022

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13518040701533022>

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## OPERATION “WEST”: THE ROLE OF THE NORTHERN FLEET AND ITS AIR FORCES IN THE LIBERATION OF THE RUSSIAN ARCTIC IN 1944<sup>1</sup>

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Mikhail Suprun

Translated by Vera Hill

*The Petsamo-Kirkenes Operation, the naval component of which received the codename Operation “West,” saw the Soviet Northern Fleet play a major role in the liberation of the Russian Arctic in late 1944. The capabilities of the Northern Fleet had been substantially enhanced by Lend-Lease aid since the summer of 1941 and British and American vessels provided in lieu of the Soviet share of Italian naval assets. Nonetheless, it seems that a fear of losing major naval units led to timidity in their use and only partial fulfillment of the objectives of the operation.*

During World War II, 1944 was a year of decisive victories for the Allies. By the autumn, the German Army had retreated hundreds of kilometers on the Eastern Front. On the map, the solid front line almost coincided with the dotted line of the pre-war Soviet border. However, in the North it remained the same as the invaders had marked it in 1941.

On 31 March 1944, Stalin signed a special directive on the liberation of the Russian Arctic.<sup>2</sup> From this point on, the leadership of the Karelian

<sup>1</sup>The translation of this article from Russian was made possible thanks to support from the Center for Military and Strategic Studies of the University of Calgary. Maps covering the region discussed in this article are provided with the introduction to this special issue of the *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* on ‘Russian and Soviet Naval Power in the Arctic 1914–1945’.

<sup>2</sup>For a wider account of the Petsamo-Kirkenes Operation from a Soviet perspective, see Major James F. Gebhardt, *The Petsamo-Kirkenes Operation: Soviet Breakthrough and Pursuit in the Arctic, October 1944* (Leavenworth Papers, Number 17) (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1990). For a broader overview of the war in the Arctic from a German perspective see the reprinted Earl F. Ziemke, *The German Northern Theatre of Operations 1940–1945* (German Report Series) (Uckfield, E. Sussex: The Naval and Military Press Ltd, no date) (ed.).

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