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The conduct and outcome of a NATO conflict will be contingent on the security of the North Atlantic SLOCs and this security is greatly dependent on who holds Norway. This analysis, drawing on lessons learned in World War II, was prepared as part of the course requirements of the College of Naval Command and Staff, Naval War College.

SOVIET THREAT TO THE ATLANTIC SEA LINES OF COMMUNICATION: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE GERMAN CAPTURE OF NORWAY IN 1940

by

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The German Invasion and Capture of Norway.

Events Prior to the Invasion. World War II began when the Germans invaded and captured Poland in September 1939. Within a few days, the Germans unleashed their submarines against Allied shipping and the Battle of the Atlantic was on. In October 1939 the British mined the Strait of Dover and the Germans were forced to send their ships and submarines through the North Sea and Norwegian Sea around the north of Scotland to reach the Atlantic.

Shortly after the outbreak of the war, Norway, Sweden and Finland declared neutrality. In November 1939 Russia attacked Finland. Finland held out for 3½ months, but in February 1940 the Russians massed 27 divisions against the Mannerheim Line and broke through. Finland surrendered on 13

March 1940 and was compelled to cede some territory and bases to Russia. The Allies had made plans to help Finland by moving troops through Norway and Sweden. The plans were dropped when Norway and Sweden refused to cooperate and the troops were dispersed after Finland sued for peace.¹

Sweden's iron ore was essential to Germany's wartime industrial needs. It came to Germany via the Baltic Sea and by rail through northern Norway to Narvik and then by ship along the Norwegian coast and through the Danish Strait.

The British attempted to blockade Germany, denying them needed supplies and resources, but were reluctant to interfere in Norwegian territorial waters. However, in February 1940 the British gave clear indications to the Germans that they no longer intended to respect Norway's neutrality when

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H.M.S. *Cossack* intercepted the German supply ship *Altmark* in the Jossingfjord and rescued 299 British seamen that had been captured by *Graf Spee*.

German Capture of Norway. Both the Germans and the British realized the strategic importance of controlling Norway and the Norwegian Sea. The Allies initially made plans to use naval forces to block the iron ore traffic along the Norwegian coast, but decided not to land troops until the Germans took some action against Norway.² The Germans made preliminary plans, in late 1939 and early 1940, to invade Norway.³ The strategic aims of the invasion were: to restrict the power of the British Navy by establishing air and naval bases along the Norwegian coast; to open the North Sea, Norwegian Sea and North Atlantic to the German Fleet; to establish air superiority in the region; to place their ships and aircraft in a more advantageous position to attack enemy sea lines of communication (SLOCs); and to secure the iron ore sea route and permit land-based aircraft to attack the British Isles.⁴

On 28 March 1940 the Allies decided to mine Norwegian waters and occupy some bases along the Norwegian coast.⁵ Fearing that the British or Russians might capture Norway or that the British might take further actions to interfere with the iron ore shipping, the Germans accelerated their plans and decided to invade Norway and Denmark in early April 1940.⁶

The British laid the northerly of their minefields on the morning of 8 April. At about the same time, the Germans were transporting troops and equipment to Norway. On 9 April 1940 the Germans invaded Denmark and Norway. The basic German plan was to pounce on Denmark and the important Norwegian harbors and then defend them until reinforcements could arrive.⁷ Denmark fell to the Germans within a few hours. The Germans attacked Norway with six main groups of para-

troop and amphibious units, covered by aircraft and ships from the German Fleet, and captured Oslo, Kristiansand, Trondheim, Bergen, Stavanger and Narvik. The Allies landed counterforces in Norway to try to repel the Germans, but they met with little success and had to be evacuated. The Norwegian Army capitulated on 9 June 1940 and Germany began what was to be a 5-year occupation of Norway.

From nearly all aspects, the German invasion and capture of Norway was a success. They had caught the allies by surprise and had used well-planned and coordinated combined operations effectively. With little losses in troops, they had met the primary aims of the operation and gained significant strategic advantage over the Allies.

Possible Soviet Wartime Norway Scenario. If war occurs in Europe between NATO and Soviet Forces the outcome will depend heavily on the West's ability to reinforce, then re-supply, NATO. Consequently, the Soviets can be expected to take actions to seize control of the North Atlantic and interfere with NATO shipping.

In wartime, the Soviet Northern and Baltic Fleets would most likely be responsible for countering NATO naval units operating in the North Atlantic and Norwegian Sea, particularly submarines and carriers; supporting Warsaw Pact/Soviet Forces in Europe; attacking military and merchant shipping in the North Atlantic; and interdicting attempts to reinforce the northern flank of NATO by sea. In recent years the Soviets have concentrated on improving their ability to interdict NATO SLOCs and to conduct and support amphibious operations.

A possible Soviet scenario involving Norway and the Norwegian Sea might be as follows:

- conduct operations to seize Norway. Ground forces, armored units, aircraft, airborne troops and amphibious

forces would attack the northern portion of Norway and Finland. Some of these forces would then move south along the coast of Norway to seize major ports and then seize control of southern Norway in combined operations with the Baltic Fleet;

- conduct operations to seize control of the Danish Strait using Warsaw Pact amphibious forces from Poland and East Germany and units of the Baltic Fleet to invade Denmark, while Soviet troops replaced these troops on the front against West Germany;

- seize control of Iceland;
- heavily defend the Kola Peninsula and Baltic Sea areas;

- concentrate initially on blocking NATO receiving ports through mines and bombing; and

- attack NATO naval units, particularly submarines and carriers, and merchant shipping en route to Europe via the SLOCs, with land-based aircraft and submarines.

The above actions would give the Soviets strategic advantage in protecting their operations in the Danish Strait, North Sea, Norwegian Sea, North Atlantic and Baltic Sea. Norwegian territories could be used as bases, increasing the range of both air and sea operations and possibly dominating the airspace over the North Atlantic. Holding Norway would also provide protection for Soviet aircraft flying from Russia and help in protecting the Kola Peninsula and Baltic areas.

Lessons Learned from the German Invasion of Norway.

Lesson 1—Strategic Importance of Norway. "The rule is that unlike land power, the strength of sea power does not spring from manpower, but instead from strategical (geographical) position."⁸ In World War II the Germans found Norway to be strategically valuable because, from bases there, they could more easily restrict the power of the Allied Fleet, open the North Sea,

and North Atlantic to their fleet, increase the range of their aircraft and submarines and more easily attack Allied SLOCs and protect their own SLOCs.

In any future conflict in Europe, possession of Norway will continue to be of strategic importance to either NATO or the Soviets. With Norway in NATO control, NATO could more easily strike Soviet forces in the Kola Peninsula, provide earlier warning of Soviet airstrikes, improve the ability to protect NATO SLOCs and restrict the movement of the Soviet Northern and Baltic Fleets. With Norway in Soviet control, the Soviets could more easily protect their operations in the North Sea and Norwegian Sea, increase the range of their aircraft and ships, more easily protect the Kola Peninsula and Baltic Sea bases and improve their ability to strike NATO SLOCs.

In evaluating the Soviet threat to NATO SLOCs, NATO plans must consider reinforcing Norway so that it can be held by NATO forces, thus denying it to the Soviets.

Lesson 2—Geographic Constraint of Fleets. In World War II the German Fleet was constrained geographically because it could get out only through the Danish Strait and North Sea. The Allies took advantage of this by mining and controlling various "chokepoints," forcing the German ships to make a longer voyage up and around the Faroe Islands or Iceland to reach the Allied SLOCs in the North Atlantic.

The Soviet Fleets are similarly constrained geographically. The Northern Fleet can reach the North Atlantic only through the Norwegian Sea and the Baltic Fleet only through the Danish Strait and North Sea.

In evaluating the Soviet threat to NATO SLOCs, NATO plans must consider denying Soviet ships easy access to the North Sea, Norwegian Sea or North Atlantic. This will require strong defense

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of Iceland, Denmark and Norway, preventing the Soviets from seizing any of the three.

Lesson 3—Threat of Land-Based Aircraft. With the seizure of Norway, the Germans were able to establish airbases and extend the range of their aircraft. These aircraft posed a threat to convoys en route to Russia through the Norwegian Sea, the Murmansk Run. The striking power of German land-based aircraft from Norway also posed a serious threat to Allied navies in the North Sea and along the coast of Norway, preventing them from exercising their accustomed naval superiority and influence. "One unmistakable new lesson had emerged: that ships at sea could not operate in waters dominated by enemy air power."⁹

In recent years the Soviets have developed a long-range bomber, the *Backfire*, that doubles the range at which Western surface forces can be attacked. The primary task of these aircraft probably would be to attack NATO carrier task forces; however, some of them may be tasked with attacking shipping in NATO SLOCs.¹⁰ If the Soviets seize Norway, they could extend the range of their aircraft even further, avoid early detection and avoid overflying NATO ground defenses.

In evaluating the Soviet threat to NATO SLOCs, NATO plans must consider countering the Soviet land-based aircraft in any anti-SLOC campaign. NATO forces must hold control of Norway and establish ground defenses and land-based interceptors to harass the Soviet aircraft.

Lesson 4—The Threat of Naval Bases in Norway. During World War II German submarines were able to conduct heavy attacks on Allied convoys while operating from bases along the coast of Norway. These ports had the advantage of being free of ice all year, yet far enough north to facilitate operations and resupply.

In a European conflict the Soviets are

likely to try to seize some Norwegian ports or fjords for use as forward submarine bases. These bases would not be constrained by ice, would reduce the transit distance from the Kola by about 1,000 miles and would ease the Soviet logistic support problem.

In evaluating the Soviet threat to NATO SLOCs, NATO plans must include provisions for denying the Soviets the use of forward submarine bases in Norway. In the event bases are established, contingency plans must provide for dealing with them.

Other Lessons Learned. The main objective of this paper has been to review the German capture of Norway in 1940 for lessons learned to consider in evaluating the Soviet threat to the Atlantic SLOCs, but several non-SLOC related lessons may be useful to consider in evaluating NATO's ability to meet other Soviet threats:

- the value of well-coordinated combined operations using naval, ground and air components, as the Germans did.
- the problem of considering neutral nations under international law, in time of war.
- the threat of mine warfare in blockading harbors or controlling SLOCs and chokepoints.
- the value of surprise. The Germans owed much of their success to the element of surprise and the deficiencies in the Allied intelligence system.
- the necessity of preparing for combat in unusual climate and terrain. In the Norwegian Campaign, the Germans were better prepared for winter warfare and rough terrain than the Allies.
- the value of air superiority. German aircraft gave close support to their ground and naval forces and applied pressure against Allied forces.
- the importance of preventing delays and vacillation within NATO. In the Norwegian Campaign, the Allied

forces were hampered by hasty planning, unsatisfactory improvisation, inadequate equipment and poor leadership, all of which caused delays and gave the Germans the initiative.

- the importance of having an amphibious capability. Allied counterforce efforts were hampered by their inability to get armor and artillery ashore.

Conclusion. Events in World War II provide lessons showing the strategic importance of Norway to the Germans. By controlling Norway the Germans opened the North Sea and Norwegian Sea to their fleet, increased the range of their aircraft and submarines so that they could more easily attack Allied SLOCs, restricted the power of the Allied Fleet, established air superiority in the region and protected their iron ore shipping route.

In any future conflict in Europe involving NATO and the Soviets, control of Norway would be similarly important to either side. With Norway in Soviet control, they could protect their operations in the North Sea and Norwegian Sea, increase the range of their aircraft and ships so that they could more easily attack NATO SLOCs, restrict the power of the NATO Fleet, establish air superiority and protect their Kola Peninsula and Baltic base areas.

In evaluating the Soviet threat to NATO SLOCs, NATO must maintain control of Norway in order to deny these advantages to the Soviets. The ability of the West to reinforce and resupply NATO forces depends on the West's ability to maintain control of the North Atlantic. This, in turn, depends on controlling the Greenland-Iceland-U.K. Gap and the Norwegian Sea. Control of the Norwegian Sea can only be maintained by controlling Norway. Thus, while the main conflict may take place in the heart of Europe, the outcome may be determined by which side holds Norway.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Lieutenant Commander G.L. Underwood graduated from the Coast Guard Academy in 1966 and from the Naval Postgraduate School with an MS degree in Management in 1973. He has served in USCGC *Ingham* and as Commanding Officer

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