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CONVOYS TO NORTH RUSSIA, 1942.

Admiralty foreword:—

The safe passage of convoys carrying vital war supplies to North Russia was one of the chief commitments of the British Home Fleet from August, 1941, until the end of the European War in May, 1945.

Like the passage of the Malta convoys, it involved a series of major fleet operations. The Russian convoy routes, in contrast to the complete freedom of movement of the Atlantic routes, were restricted to the east and south by an enemy-occupied coastline and to the west and north by ice. The convoys themselves were subject to attack by surface forces over a large part of their 2,000-mile passage, to air attack for 1,400 miles, and to U-boat attack throughout their entire run. The severe Arctic weather added to their navigational difficulties during winter months, but they ran a greater risk of attack between March and September owing to the continuous daylight of the Far Northern summer. Nevertheless, in spite of these very adverse conditions, under British command, and almost entirely under British naval and air escort, forty outward and thirty-five homeward bound Russian convoys made the passage during a period of nearly four years.

The first, which sailed from the United Kingdom in August, 1941, only two months after the German invasion of Russia, arrived safely, and by the spring of 1942 twelve more had made the passage with the loss of only one out of 103 ships. From the spring of 1942, however, the threat of attacks on the convoys increased, for the Germans were already preparing to stop the flow of supplies to Russia with every means at their disposal, including the basing of heavy ships in Norway, among them the new battleship TIRPITZ.

This new and evergrowing threat could be met only by giving greater protection to the

convoys, but the general war situation still very severely limited the numbers of allied escorts available in northern waters.

In July, 1942, the Russian convoys suffered their first and greatest disaster when Convoy P.Q.17 lost twenty-one of its thirty-four ships during a series of heavy enemy daylight attacks lasting a week. The next convoy, P.Q.18, which sailed in September—the August convoy to Russia was abandoned in favour of a convoy to Malta—was also heavily attacked and lost thirteen of its forty ships. Then followed a break of two months, during which all available escorts were taking part in the Allied invasion of North Africa. After the invasion the Russian convoys were resumed, and on 31st December strong German forces, endeavouring to attack the convoy, were engaged in the Barents Sea. A German heavy cruiser, the ADMIRAL HIPPER, was crippled, an enemy destroyer was sunk and the whole convoy reached Archangel without loss.

During the next two years the Russian convoys ran only during the long dark months of winter and lost only three ships, all in January, 1944. No further losses were sustained until March, 1945, when one ship was sunk. This proved to be the final casualty and brought the total losses in outward bound Russian convoys to sixty-two, or 7.8 per cent. of the 792 ships sailed in them during the war. In the homeward bound convoys, twenty-eight, or 3.8 per cent., of the 739 ships sailed were lost. The total casualties in merchant ships on the Russian route were 829 officers and men. The Royal Navy, too, paid a heavy price, for two cruisers, six destroyers, three sloops, two frigates, three corvettes and three minesweepers were sunk with the loss of 1,840 officers and men.

The forty outward bound convoys carried to Russia the huge total of £428,000,000 worth of