



## *Miracle at the Litza: Hitler's First Defeat on the Eastern Front*

by Alf R. Jacobsen.

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Review by Timothy Heck, King's College London (timothy.heck@gmail.com).

The opening days of Operation Barbarossa saw unprecedented German advances into Soviet territory. Thousands of Red Army soldiers became casualties, the Soviet military command was nearly crippled, and German victory seemed imminent. High above the Arctic Circle, far from the rapid thrust of panzer forces, the crack alpine troops of Mountain Corps Norway under Gen. Eduard Dietl launched Operation Silberfuchs (Silver Fox). Divided into three phases, the combined German-Finnish attack ultimately failed to seize key objectives and stalled after vigorous combat along the Litza River.<sup>1</sup>

In *Miracle at the Litza*, Norwegian investigative journalist Alf Jacobsen traces these actions in a fast-moving narrative, while clarifying the concurrent political intrigues between the Soviet Union and Great Britain. He vividly portrays the campaign through the eyes of military commanders, staff officers, and national leaders.

The book's prologue, "August 1940: The Northern Front," lays out its overarching themes. Jacobsen begins with Dietl's personality clashes with his superior, Col. Gen. Nicolaus von Falkenhorst, which portended problems during the campaign. He then turns to the British ULTRA (wartime signals intelligence) program, hinting at its significance for the coming campaigns.

The prologue concludes with a look at Soviet military commanders in the Kola region, specifically 14th Army commander Col. Gen. Valerian A. Frolov. Having set the stage, Jacobsen devotes chapters 1-2 to German planners in Norway, British codebreakers at Bletchley Park, and Soviet commanders nervously eyeing German buildups over the border.

The account of Operation Barbarossa starts in chapter 3. Jacobsen moves between frontline commanders and the national strategy concerns of Stalin, Hitler, and Churchill. German and Finnish troops were preparing a pincer movement into Soviet territory toward Murmansk, Salla, and vital rail lines. In Operation Platinfuchs (Platinum Fox), General Dietl led troops of the 2nd and 3rd Mountain Divisions in a drive toward Murmansk.

On 28 June 1940, fully six days after Barbarossa commenced, German troops launched their cross-border attacks against Soviet defenses. That delay cost the Germans and Finns the element of surprise but did not preclude their early successes. Despite the extra time, Soviet commanders misaligned their defensive posture, believing the Germans would launch an amphibious assault. Soviet troops resisted the initial German attacks "with desperate courage and defended each and every position with bitter determination" (43). But they lacked the numbers to stop German advances and, by evening the next day, the border had been breached and the 14th Army "torn apart and driven to flight, leaving much of its equipment behind" (49).

Jacobsen vividly describes the challenges that difficult terrain, including many rivers and

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1. The translation of the book from Norwegian seems to have caused inconsistencies in the transliteration of names: e.g., "Zjukov" instead of "Zhukov" and "Litsa" for "Litza."

cliffs, posed for the alpine troops. A lack of robust motorized transport and decent roads further impeded their progress and complicated their logistics. Every kilometer of their advance took them farther from their supply depots; eventually, it required three days travel by horse and mule to reach the front. As they approached the Litza, the Germans, who had not conducted adequate intelligence preparation, discovered that “the only existing dirt road ended six kilometers east of the bridge” (49). The men and animals would have to cross to the river via unimproved trails. And as they advanced, they met with increasingly tenacious Soviet defenders.

On 6 July 1941, the German assault across the Litza collapsed in front of the Soviet 52nd Division. The Luftwaffe was nowhere to be seen and casualties mounted. Dietl ordered a retreat the following day. The morale of the mountain troops was crushed along with their illusions of invincibility after a string of victories since 1939.

Quoting from diaries of the participants, Jacobsen reconstructs the bitter infighting of German commanders over resources and the focus of their main effort. Nevertheless, they launched another attack a week later, envisioning envelopment of Soviet positions east of the now-ruined bridge and a subsequent advance to Murmansk. By 16 June, Dietl recognized that his forces were spent. His appeals to Falkenhorst for reinforcements only resulted in another battle of egos. The Germans had to cease their attack and dig in. Using his connections with Hitler, however, Dietl secured 25,000 new troops starting in September, including the 6th Mountain Division. Falkenhorst, recognizing Dietl’s political patronage, sought a reconciliation but events overtook his attempted truce.

Jacobsen next turns to the successful British submarine actions against German supply and troop ships along the Norwegian coast. These ultimately stymied German naval relief efforts, and Army Command Norway ordered the 6th Mountain Division to move south by rail to the Litza front. They did not arrive until October, far too late to influence the stalled northern campaign.

*Miracle at the Litza* ends with the operational defeat of the German and Finnish forces on the Litza; the theater stagnated, becoming what Earl Ziemke described as a backwater of the war.<sup>2</sup> Both the Germans and Allies focused their efforts elsewhere. Operations in the far north centered on the vital Lend-Lease convoys and the ports of Murmansk and Archangel.<sup>3</sup> As 1941 gave way to 1942 and then to 1943, German losses and defeats mounted, increasing concerns within Finland’s government. The German defeat at Stalingrad led to the significant conclusion “that the war had passed a decisive turning point and that for Finland it had become necessary to get out at the first opportunity.”<sup>4</sup> The ensuing years showed a more reserved Finnish support for German operations, resulting in Finland ultimately withdrawing its support from Germany in September 1944.<sup>5</sup> Within a month, its troops were actively engaged against the Germans.<sup>6</sup> Later that month, the Soviets’

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2. *The German Northern Theater of Operations, 1940–1945*, pamphlet no. 20-27 (Washington: Dept. of the Army, 1959).

3. See, further, Dmitri Luzin, “The Northern Sea Route during World War II, 1939–1945,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20.3 (2007) 421–32.

4. Note 2 above, 243.

5. See, further, Henrik O. Lunde, *Finland’s War of Choice: The Troubled German-Finnish Coalition in World War II* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2011).

6. For a personal account of the Finnish-German War, see Johann Voss, *Black Edelweiss: A Memoir of Combat and Conscience by a Soldier of the Waffen-SS* (Bedford, PA: Aberjona Pr, 2002). “Voss” (a pseudonym) served with SS-Gebirgsjäger-Regiment 11, part of the 6th SS Mountain Division Nord, in Russia and Finland.

own counterattack, the Petsamo-Kirkenes Operation, drove German forces back into Norway.<sup>7</sup>

Two appendices conclude the book. The first is an analysis of the ground campaign by the Norwegian general Sverre Diesen, with welcome attention to the military art employed by both sides. The second presents Norwegian historian Frode Lindgjerdet's 1941 evaluation of the Red Army. Though marred by sweeping generalities about the fighting capabilities of Soviet soldiers, it makes for interesting reading, while showing little mastery of the relevant historiography.

The book's bibliography excludes scholarly articles, and (inadequate) references to primary sources are confined to endnotes. While this may reflect the publisher's editorial policy, it does not inspire confidence in the author's research. Furthermore, Jacobsen's sources are predominately German; just six of 130+ are Soviet in nature. In this regard, one particularly misses references to the authoritative work of David Glantz and his protégés, which has brought the Soviet perspective to Western audiences. And Jacobsen relies too heavily on Hauptmann Hans Ruf's biased account of Mountain Corps Norway in *Gebirgsjäger vor Murmansk*.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the Red Army's role in defeating the Germans gets less play than ULTRA, the weather, and German personality conflicts. And Jacobsen's neglect of works published after 2000 risks unwittingly inserting an ideological bias, given the impact of the Cold War on the study of the Great Patriotic War. Finally, the absence of Finnish combatants' voices and roles obscures the nature of coalition campaigning in the opening days of Barbarossa.

Although these shortcomings will trouble his specialist readers, Alf Jacobsen has written a gripping account of the roles of tenacious Soviet defenders, British code-breakers and sailors, and rugged northern European terrain and harsh weather in halting Germans along the Litza. His story moves briskly from German to Soviet soldiers on their battle lines to strategists in London and Moscow and British submariners in the North Sea. A popular audience of English-language readers will welcome this lively and salutary introduction to a dramatic sideshow of the Eastern Front in the Second World War.

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7. See James F. Gebhardt, *The Petsamo-Kirkenes Operation: Soviet Breakthrough and Pursuit in the Arctic, October 1944* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Inst, 1989).

8. Subtitle: *Der Kampf des Gebirgskorps "Norwegen" an der Eismeerfront 1941/42* (Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner, 1957).