



Reader's report:

Asbjørn Jaklin:

*The Narvik Campaign. 62 Desperate Days*

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Asbjørn Jaklin, the author of this account of the 1940 Narvik campaign, published in Norwegian, is an accomplished journalist and author with a string of books to his name. His writing style is direct, vivacious, and bold, indeed in line with a highly praised oral tradition in northern Norway – and above all he is dauntless in drawing pointed, even controversial, conclusions. Jaklin's books include both thrillers and historical accounts, mainly set in the Norwegian far north during the Second World War and the Cold War. The method in his latest book is to focus on the war experiences of both civilians and military personnel on the ground, with specific emphasis on the close observers and those who were affected by the hostilities in different ways. This approach has succeeded due to his access to a unique collection of diaries, interviews, letters and personal accounts.

Norway became part of the Second World War when the country suffered a devastating bolt-from-the-blue attack by Germany on 9 April 1940 – the *Unternehmen Weserübung* – which brought the 'Twilight War' of 1939–1940 to an end. Until the German attack on France and the Low Countries a month later, Norway was the only theatre of land operations, and the fighting engaged forces from five nations, Norway, Britain, France, Poland and Germany. Most of the Norwegian governmental apparatus was paralyzed by the initial German blow.

Considerable uncertainty reigned in the Cabinet, the civil service, the armed forces and parliament – not to mention society at large. Nonetheless, without too much hesitation the government decided to take up the fight and stuck to the decision against all odds for the duration of the war. When the authorities had composed themselves, a two-month campaign ensued. Due to the overall configuration of geography and society, and the number of countries involved, the campaign in Norway lasted longer than in Poland, France, the Low Countries and Denmark – 62 days in Narvik. These 62 days have made 1940 a landmark in Norwegian history. However, to people outside Norway it is to a large extent unfamiliar. Jaklin's popular account which narrates the dramatic events chronologically through the eyes of the participants, may therefore fill in a knowledge gap in the history of the Second World War in Europe.

At the outset, the situation in the Norwegian far north was depressing and uplifting at the same time. The local army commander at Narvik surrendered without any resistance at the day of the invasion and on the back of the Norwegian navy's most harrowing loss ever. Two old armoured artillery ships moored in the ore port of Narvik were torpedoed by German destroyers and some 290 officers and men lost their lives. In Jaklin's account we learn about this through the notorious local commander, Colonel Konrad Sundlo. He was a prominent and long-standing member of Quisling's Nazi party and is contrasted to the gallantry of many other officers in the chain of command. They were all reservists and conscripts badly trained and insufficiently equipped after the armed forces had been twenty years in the doldrums – a fate shared by some of the British troops who came to their aid. Jaklin does nothing to curb his indignation at the mild treatment of Sundlo in the legal purge after the war. We also get to know his polar opposite, the division commander in North Norway, General Carl Gustav Fleischer. His lack of hesitancy in the face of the invasion and his undaunted leadership was obvious from the outset.

On the uplifting side, notwithstanding the occupation and partial destruction of the port, German forces were isolated in Narvik, around 400 miles as the crow flies from the nearest German units in the major mid-Norwegian city of Trondheim. That provided both Norwegian and allied forces with precious time to prepare and conduct systematic operations against the isolated German troops. These operations and their dramatic consequences for local communities and an array of individuals are the crux of Jaklin's account.

Jaklin accentuates some noticeable characteristics of the Narvik campaign. One is that for the British it was predominantly a naval operation involving shore bombardments, amphibious operations, intrepid sea transports in the war zone (organized and carried out by local civilians) and sea control operations in the adjacent waters. Moreover, the exceedingly crucial anti-aircraft artillery in the theatre of operations was also British. However, in the eyes of Norwegian, French and Polish militaries, in particular the rank and file, the campaign was all about protracted ground operations under extremely strenuous winter and thaw conditions in the mountains. Another, and arguably more important, focus is on the destiny of the civilians in Narvik and the neighbouring villages. They were trapped in the field of fire – exposed, defenceless, inexperienced and utterly unprepared but, as Jaklin tells their story – with an invincible will to survive and an ability to adjust. The readers get to know the local teacher and his family who watched the war fighting ringside, the newly wed couple from a small farm in an inland valley who lodged and equipped soldiers on a daring mission, the puffer crews who criss-crossed the fjords under cross-fire. We are inevitably moved by the deeds and achievements of these unassuming and little known participants.

There are numerous accounts of the Narvik campaign in Norwegian historiography, and references are made to it in other countries as well. However, most of these accounts reflect grand strategy and the main operations, not the experiences of individuals in the lower echelons. The first accounts appeared during the actual events and immediately afterwards. Initially the campaign caught the imagination because warfighting in an extremely hostile mountainous environment and the recapturing of Narvik on 28 May were remarkable achievements at a time when Germany was regarded as invincible. Officers and men had endured two months of severe cold, lack of provisions, rapidly deteriorating hygiene, sleep deprivations and strenuous manoeuvres in a precipitous terrain. Large swaths of Narvik and the whole village of Bjerkvik were levelled to the ground. In spite of this, the allies managed to force the Germans out of fortified positions at Narvik and then start a pursuit operation that drove the Germans towards the Swedish border. Understandably, the Norwegian Defence Command portrayed the campaign as Hitler's 'first defeat', a notion that passed into popular memory culture. In reality that is something of a stretch but the fact remains that Norwegian troops showed its capabilities under conditions few others would endure – and that, of course, gave rise to great national pride.

Only hours before the Germans had anticipated a decisive defeat the operation was called off by Whitehall, and allied forces were evacuated in the first days of June, around 26.000 officers and men. Both the allied forces in the field and the Norwegians themselves were nonplussed by the sudden and unexpected surrender on the eve of total victory. The surrender was even more painful than the fighting and the decision created an overwhelming bitterness on the Norwegian side. To be the junior partner in a coalition of great powers was increasingly difficult for the Norwegians. Not only because they were not respected as soldiers by the arrogant British but also because of conflicting aims and the harrowing fact that the British did not inform their comrades-in-arms about their plans. To quote the allied army commander in North-Norway, General Claude Auchinleck, in his preliminary report to the Imperial General Staff, 30 May 1940: “The worst of it all is the need for lying to all and sundry in order to preserve secrecy. The situation vis-a-vis the Norwegians is particularly difficult and one feels a most despicable creature in pretending that we are going on fighting, when are going to quit at once.” Jaklin gives a lively account of the reactions and emotions among the Norwegians who were only informed when the withdrawal was a fait accompli, even though the defence command had somehow suspected this since before the recapture of Narvik.

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