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**The Defence and Evacuation of the Kuban Bridgehead,
January – October 1943**

by

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Author's Note

The following convention is used in this thesis for the naming of military units and formations:

- **Armies:** The names of German and Axis armies are spelled in full (Seventeenth Army, First Panzer Army, Romanian Third Army), whereas Soviet Armies are denoted using Arabic numerals (18th Army, 5th Guards Army).
- **Corps:** German Corps are denoted using Roman numerals (V Corps, XXXIX Mountain Corps), whereas Soviet Corps are represented by Arabic numerals (20th Corps). At certain times during the campaign in the Kuban, V Corps and XXXIV Corps were known by the names Gruppe Wetzels and Gruppe de Angelis, respectively. For simplicity, these names are not used in this thesis.
- **Divisions:** All divisions and smaller units on both sides are named using Arabic numerals (97th Jäger Division, 83rd Marine Infantry Brigade). On occasion "German" or "Soviet" is added for clarity.

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Introduction

David M. Glantz, one of the foremost scholars of the Soviet-German war of 1941-5, makes frequent reference to what he calls the “forgotten battles” of the war, the many operations that are partially or completely overlooked in the published history. These operations are understandably obscured by more famous events, such as the initial German advance in the summer of 1941, the Battles of Moscow, Stalingrad and Kursk and the huge Soviet offensives of the later period of the war.¹ Glantz argues, however, that a comprehensive understanding of the war cannot be gained without some knowledge of these forgotten battles, as they accounted for upwards of 40 percent of the Red Army’s total wartime operations. There are a number of reasons why this situation has come about. Access to Soviet/Russian sources has long been a major challenge for Western historians, and even many Russian researchers have been forced to ignore or gloss over facts or events considered politically embarrassing or inconvenient. The early English-language histories, which formed the Western view of the war that has largely persisted to the present day, were forced to rely heavily on the memoirs of German generals such as Heinz Guderian, Friedrich von Mellenthin, and Erich von Manstein, which were written from personal notes without the use of archive materials and naturally presented a one-sided view of events.²

The operations in the Kuban bridgehead, the subject of this thesis, can certainly be included in the ranks of the forgotten battles. Indeed the entire campaign in the Caucasus during 1942-3 is often viewed as merely a footnote to the Battle of Stalingrad, even though the oilfields were the primary objective of Operation Blue, the Wehrmacht’s 1942 summer offensive, and the forces sent to the Volga were initially intended to act as a screen for the advance to the south. The Kuban bridgehead, which was held by the German Seventeenth Army from January to October 1943, receives even less attention. As an example, John Erickson’s *The Road to Berlin* devotes several early pages to the Soviet offensives and German withdrawal that led to the pocket being

¹ David M. Glantz, *The Soviet-German war 1941-1945: myths and realities: a survey essay*, Presented as the 20th Anniversary Distinguished Lecture at the Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs. Clemson University, South Carolina, 11 October 2001. Available at http://sti.clemson.edu/publications-mainmenu-38/commentaries-mainmenu-211/cat_view/33-strom-thurmond-institute/153-sti-publications-by-subject-area/158-history (27 Nov. 2013).

² David M. Glantz, *Colossus reborn: The Red Army at war, 1941-1943*, (Kansas, 2005), pp xv-xvii.

formed, then briefly mentions the Soviet plans to eliminate the bridgehead, but the next mention of Seventeenth Army sees it in the Crimea in October 1943 following its evacuation over the Strait of Kerch from the Kuban, which is not discussed at all.³

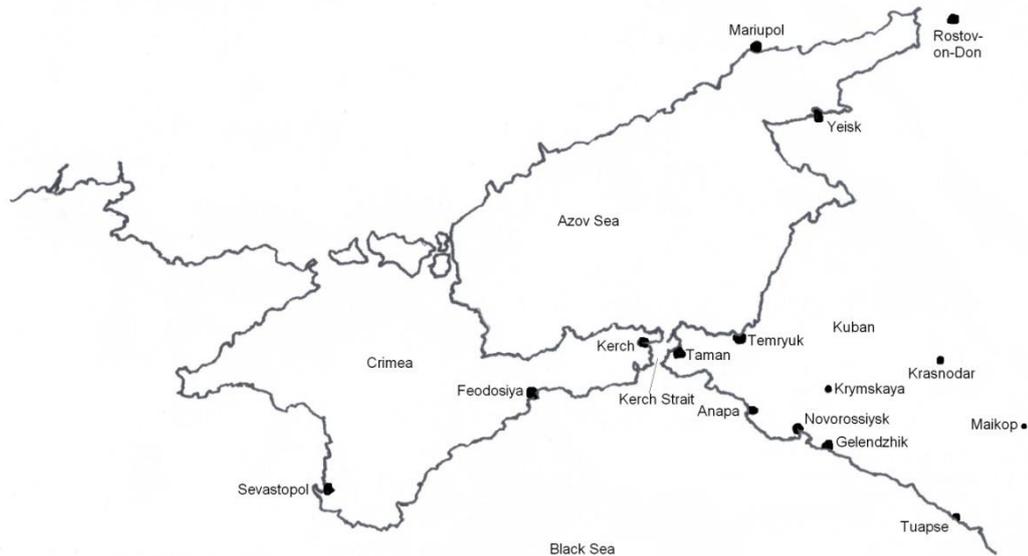


Figure 1: The Kuban and Crimea

Even within the sparse coverage of the actions as a whole, certain aspects have received more attention than others. Aerial combat and amphibious operations, for example, have received some attention, whereas the Soviet ground offensives have been almost completely overlooked. A simple explanation for this may be gleaned from a single table in Glantz's *Colossus Reborn*: while other Soviet offensives around the same time achieved advances of hundreds of kilometres, the gains in the Kuban were a mere four to twelve kilometres.⁴

Given Glantz's fame as a scholar of the Red Army, his advice to historians studying lesser-known aspects of the war on the Eastern Front may initially be somewhat surprising. In light of the issues discussed above, he recommends that the records of Wehrmacht formations in the German archives, including daily operational and

³ John Erickson, *The road to Berlin: Stalin's war with Germany volume two*, (London, 1999), pp 28-32, 59, 122-3.

⁴ Glantz, *Colossus reborn*, p. 129. In comparison, Western Front's Operation Suvorov in the Smolensk region gained 200 - 250 km, Central Front's post-Kursk Operation Kutuzov achieved 150 km and Southwestern Front's Chernigov-Poltava Operation reached as far as 250 - 300 km.

intelligence maps, provide the best means of identifying Soviet as well as German operations, down to quite low levels.⁵

Primary Sources

The primary research for this thesis was conducted in the Military Archives Department of the German Federal Archive (Bundesarchiv) in Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Baden-Württemberg, which contains the surviving records of all Prussian and German military forces from 1867 to the present day.⁶ In the Bundesarchiv's collection, Seventeenth Army's war diary (*Kriegstagebuch*) is divided into ten chronological sections, each typically covering a three – six-month period. For this thesis, the sections of particular interest were No. 6, which spans the period from 1 February to 30 June 1943, and No. 7, which covers 1 July – 9 October 1943. Each of these sections is complemented by a number of supplementary files, including orders of battle, collections of orders and communications, maps, etc. The supplements to No. 6 used for this thesis were orders of battle (5 Feb. – 25 June), operational files (14 March – 25 June), communications from corps (21 March – 1 May) and communications to Army Group A (16 April – 30 June). Two supplements to No. 7 were consulted: a collection of files on the withdrawal (4 September – 7 October) and a collection of orders and communications from General of Pioneers Erwin Jaenecke, who assumed command of Seventeenth Army from General Richard Ruoff on 25 June and remained in command throughout the evacuation across the Kerch Strait. Two sections of the war diary of V Corps (Nos. 10 and 11) were examined in relation to the defence against the Soviet landings at Novorossiysk in February 1943, and a collection of combat reports submitted by XXXXIX Mountain Corps during the withdrawal from the Kuban was also used.

An interesting, although not especially useful, contemporary document is a guidebook that was published to accompany an exhibition about the operations of the 97th Jäger Division in the Kuban, which was held in the division's home city of Bad Tölz in Bavaria in the spring of 1944. The booklet features a number of personal accounts written by veterans of the campaign and artwork produced by some of the soldiers. Its worth as a historical source, however, is limited due to a significant lack of specific information,

⁵ Glantz, *Myths and realities*, pp 108-9.

⁶ Bundesarchiv: Department Military Archives (Department MA)
http://www.bundesarchiv.de/bundesarchiv/organisation/abteilung_ma/index.html.en (28 November 2013).

which is most likely due to the twin demands of wartime censorship and propaganda. The effects of censorship can be seen in the almost complete absence of specific details about dates, places, and events. The clearest example of this is that the division is not named anywhere in the document, although it is relatively easy to identify it by using other sources. Dates are also lacking, with only a few of the accounts even mentioning a specific month. As would be expected from publically available wartime documents, there is a significant element of propaganda in the guidebook. It is filled with heavily descriptive pieces glorifying the division's troops and sentimental paeans to the dead. A typical passage from the opening paragraphs of the first account reads: "A Division of Bavarian Jäger took part in this powerful defensive success. These are men from Berchtesgadener Land, from Cheimgau and the Inn Valley, from the Loisach and Isar regions, from Ammergau and Lechgau, who all have been the bravest of soldiers since the opening offensives against the enemy on the Eastern Front. Waves upon waves of attacking Bolshevik units have failed against the wall of strong and stout hearts of our proud sons from Upper Bavaria, stationed in the east at the Straits at Kerch."⁷

Secondary Sources

As has already been discussed, the operations in the Caucasus region, and in particular the defence of the Kuban bridgehead following the retreat of the bulk of Army Group A, are poorly covered in the English-language literature. Most general books on the war devote at most a few pages to the campaigns, although a small number do provide a more in-depth examination.

One book that focuses exclusively on the battles in the Caucasus is *The Caucasus and the Oil: the German-Soviet war in the Caucasus 1942/43* (Winnipeg, 1995) by Wilhelm Tieke, a former officer in the Finnish Volunteer battalion of the Waffen SS.⁸ This is a translation of a German-language book that was originally published in 1970, and it covers the period from the German capture of Rostov-on-Don in July 1942 to the final withdrawal from the Kuban Bridgehead in October 1943. A major concern over the book

⁷ Augustin Peter Kollmuß, 'Sechs Monate Kubanbrückenkopf' in M. Hartmann (ed.), *Jäger am Kuban: Ausstellung einer Oberbayr. Jäger Division in Verbindung mit dem stellv. Gen. Kdo. VII. A.K. Bad Tölz 26.3-16.4. 1944* (Bad Tölz, 1944), p.8. (Available at <https://archive.org/details/Hartmann-M-Jaeger-am-Kuban>) (7 Jan. 2014).

⁸ Axis History: Finnisches Freiwilligen Bataillon der Waffen SS: <http://www.axishistory.com/122-germany-waffen-ss/germany-waffen-ss-minor-units/1396-finnisches-freiwilligen-bataillon-der-waffen-ss> (5 Jan. 2014).

is the complete absence of any bibliography or citation of sources. In a short afterword, Tieke thanks the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (Military History Research Department) of the German Armed Forces in Potsdam, the Bundesarchiv/Abteilung Militärarchiv (Federal Archive/Military Archive Department) in Freiburg-im-Breisgau and the Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte (Library of Contemporary History) in Stuttgart, as well as a number of former Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS personnel, but no source documents are cited in the book. Some questions must also be raised over the quality and accuracy of the translation. For example, one error that is repeated several times is a reference to the 73rd Infantry Division as being French. The division was in fact based in Nürnberg and raised from the city and the surrounding region of Franconia,⁹ which presumably gave rise to confusion in the translator's mind due to the similarities between the German words for France and Franconia (Frankreich and Franken, respectively). An error as basic as this raises concerns over the accuracy of the rest of the translation. The text of the book is quite dense, so it by no means easy to read and is definitely more suited for examinations of particular actions than for reading from cover to cover.

Paul Carell's *Scorched earth: The German-Russian war 1943-1944* (Pennsylvania, 1994) is one of several books that examine the operations in the Caucasus as part of a narrative of a larger part of the war. Carell, whose real name was Paul Karl Schmidt, worked in the press department of Joachim von Ribbentrop's Foreign Ministry.¹⁰ The structure of the book is quite unusual in that it begins by describing the battle of Kursk in July 1943, before backtracking about six months to recount the retreat from the Caucasus and a series of battles around Leningrad. It then jumps forward again to describe the Soviet recapture of Ukraine in the autumn of 1943 and spring of 1944 and finally, the collapse of Army Group Centre in Belorussia in the summer of 1944. It devotes a section of about 20 pages to the Soviet amphibious landings at Novorossiysk in early February 1943 and the subsequent, unsuccessful, German efforts to eliminate the beachhead, but neglects the summer battles and the final withdrawal. Carell and the book's translator Ewald Osers are skilled writers, and *Scorched Earth* is by far the most accessible of the translated German books discussed here.

⁹Lexikon der Wehrmacht: 73. Infanterie-Division: <http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Gliederungen/Infanteriedivisionen/73ID-R.htm> (4 Jan. 2014).

¹⁰ Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II, *The myth of the eastern front: the Nazi-Soviet war in American popular culture* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 115.

A third book of interest is Werner Haupt's *Army Group South: The Wehrmacht in Russia 1941-1945* (Pennsylvania, 1998). As with Carell, "Werner Haupt" is a pseudonym: the author's real name was Georg Tessin.¹¹ As the title suggests, the book is a broad history of the operations of Army Group South throughout the war. It devotes a section of about 15 pages to the actions in the Kuban. Haupt has quite an unusual writing style, in which he quotes often lengthy passages from personal memoirs to describe small engagements, with a series of these passages being combined to provide a "bigger picture" of major operations. This, combined with a rather unwieldy translation, makes reading the book quite laborious. There is no bibliography, although secondary sources are cited in the text, along with a small number of primary sources, typically military communications.

All three books, despite their considerable flaws, are generally accurate with regards to the overall sequences of events they describe. They have attracted some criticism for their sanitised portrayal of the war and obvious pro-German viewpoint. Carell has been the subject of particular controversy due to his wartime service record, most notably his involvement in, or at the very least advance knowledge of, the deportation of Jews from Budapest.¹²

The opposing viewpoint of the battles in the Caucasus is represented by a small number of Soviet-era books that have been translated into English. The most useful of these is Andrei Grechko's *Battle for the Caucasus* (Hawaii, 2001), which was originally published in Russian in 1971. Grechko commanded several armies under the North Caucasus Front through 1942 and 1943 and after the war he rose through the ranks to serve as Minister for Defence from 1967 until his death in 1976.¹³ As with the German books, Grechko presents a generally accurate account of events, once the reader has overcome the ever-present propaganda, which is even more overt than in the German books. The description on the book's jacket gives a good indication of what is contained within: "Like a mighty mountain torrent the entire mass of Soviet troops swept the Germans out

¹¹ Feldgrau.net: Interesting fact on Werner Haupt:
<http://www.feldgrau.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=24&t=33998> (8 Jan. 2014).

¹² Wigbert Benz, *Paul Karl Schmidts (alias Paul Carell) propagandistische Vorschläge zur Ermöglichung und Rechtfertigung der Ermordung der Budapester Juden 1944*. Available at <http://www.historisches-centrum.de/forum/benz03-2.html> (8 Jan. 2014).

¹³ Geroi strany: Grechko, Andrei Antonovich:
http://www.warheroes.ru/hero/hero.asp?Hero_id=1225 (9 June 2014).

of the North Caucasus. It was a magnificent display of the power of Soviet arms, and the fraternity and friendship of the Soviet peoples.” The next sentence, apparently without irony, is: “The author objectively examines every phase of the great battle and reinforces his conclusions with documents.”

A thoroughly unreliable account of events in the Kuban region comes from Leonid Brezhnev: the future General Secretary of the Communist Party and leader of the Soviet Union served as a political officer with 18th Army at Novorossiysk during 1943. He later devoted the first volume of his ghost-written *Trilogy* of memoirs, entitled *Malaya Zemlya (The Small Land)* (Moscow, 1978), to the events. Between eulogies to the mass heroism of the Soviet people, Brezhnev spends much of the book highlighting the importance of the speeches that he delivered and the pamphlets that he produced and claiming that the military commanders were keen to listen to and act on his advice.¹⁴ *Malaya Zemlya* and its sequels *Vozrozhdenie (Rebirth)* and *Tselina (Virgin Lands)* were published to rapturous official acclaim and Brezhnev was quickly awarded the Lenin Prize for Literature. The three books were just one element of the personality cult that exaggerated and glorified Brezhnev’s wartime service in an effort to place him within the Great Patriotic War myth, which had become a key facet of the Soviet regime’s legitimacy. Ultimately, however, the increasingly overblown nature of this war hero image led merely to ridicule that undermined the cult and Brezhnev’s public standing.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, the memoirs have faded into obscurity today,¹⁶ although a recent poll revealed Brezhnev’s rehabilitation in Russian public opinion by naming him the country’s most popular 20th-century leader.¹⁷

A rare original English-language account of events in the Kuban is provided by David Middleworth’s ‘The Evacuation of the Kuban Bridgehead, A Model Retrograde

¹⁴ Daniel Kalder, ‘Dictator-lit: Comrade Brezhnev goes to war’ in *The Guardian*, 9 October 2009. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/oct/09/dictator-lit-leonid-brezhnev-malaya-zemlya> (6 Jan. 2014).

¹⁵ Adrienne Nolan, ‘“Shitting Medals”: L. I. Brezhnev, the Great Patriotic War, and the failure of the personality cult, 1965-1982’ (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2008), p. ii.

¹⁶ Kalder, ‘Dictator-lit’

¹⁷ Alexander Kolyandr, ‘Brezhnev tops list of most popular 20th-Century Moscow rulers’ in *Wall Street Journal*, 22 May 2013. Available at <http://blogs.wsj.com/emerging europe/2013/05/22/brezhnev-tops-list-of-most-popular-20th-century-moscow-rulers/> (6 Jan. 2014).

Movement,' which is contained in *War, Revolution and Peace* (Maryland, 1987), a collection of essays edited by Joachim Remak and published in honour of Charles B. Burdick of San Jose State University in California. Middleworth draws from a combination of archive documents, personal memoirs and secondary sources to vividly describe the withdrawal through the series of prepared defensive lines and the amphibious evacuation across the Kerch Strait, although he does not provide any detail on the battles of the spring and summer.

This survey illustrates that the English-language literature on the actions in the Kuban bridgehead during 1943 is extremely limited, in common with many other lesser-known events on the Eastern Front. A wealth of new material on the war is now being published, and there are many opportunities for historians who are able to overcome the obstacles discussed earlier to produce valuable work that sheds light on the most destructive war in history.

Thesis Outline

After a short first chapter describing the operations of the Army Group South and Army Group A from the launch of Operation Blue in late June 1942 until the isolation of Seventeenth Army in the Kuban in the early weeks of 1943, the main body of this thesis comprises three chapters.

Chapter Two examines two Soviet amphibious landing operations at Novorossiysk at the start of February 1942. The main landing at Yuzhnaya Ozereika was a disastrous failure, whereas a diversionary landing at Stanichka in the southern suburbs of Novorossiysk gained a beachhead, which was quickly strengthened by diverting forces intended for the main landing and was held until Novorossiysk was recaptured in September.

Chapter Three examines Operation Neptune, an unsuccessful German attempt to destroy the Soviet beachhead at Novorossiysk in April 1943, before briefly discussing the Soviet offensives against the bridgehead through the late spring and summer months.

Finally, Chapter Four examines the withdrawal of the Seventeenth Army through a series of prepared defensive positions and then across the Kerch Strait to the Crimea. In total, almost a quarter of a million men, over 70,000 horses, almost 50,000 vehicles and over

100,000 tons of supplies were evacuated by sea, and another 15,000 men were airlifted out, with very light losses.¹⁸

The subsequent analysis suggests some possible reasons why a region of the front that was of vital strategic importance to both sides in the early part of the war quickly became a secondary concern and subsequently slipped into obscurity. It also argues that the failure of the landing operation at Yuzhnaya Ozereika denied the Soviets an opportunity to quickly clear the German forces from the Kuban region, despite the success of the diversionary landing at Stanichka. This failure was subsequently compounded by the complete inability of Soviet air and naval forces to implement a sea blockade, which enabled the Germans to maintain a continuous supply route across the Kerch Strait and allowed Seventeenth Army to hold the bridgehead for eight months.

¹⁸ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, pp 379-80.

Chapter I: The Operations of Seventeenth Army, June 1941 – January 1943

Seventeenth Army was established on 13 December 1940, under the command of General Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel.¹⁹ For the offensive against the Soviet Union, it was assigned to Army Group South, which was commanded by Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt. Because of the huge extent of this sector, the army group was split into two parts: to the north of the Carpathian Mountains, Seventeenth was joined by Sixth and First Panzer Armies, while the southern grouping comprised the German Eleventh and Romanian Third and Fourth Armies.²⁰ Seventeenth Army struck at the junction between the Rava-Russkaya and Przemysl fortified districts, aiming initially to break through to Lvov, but met the relatively well-organised and prepared defences of General Mikhail Kirponos's Southwestern Front and faced a much tougher fight through the first Soviet positions than in many other sectors of the front. On the second day of the offensive, however, the infantry located a weak spot between the two fortified districts and tore a wide gap between the defending 6th and 26th Armies, opening the path to Lvov, which fell on the night of 29 – 30 June.²¹

As the offensive tore eastwards, Stavka believed that the entire northern grouping of Army Group Centre was headed directly for Kiev and ordered Kirponos to launch attacks against the spearheads of First Panzer Group, but this proved unsuccessful. Only after von Rundstedt launched the whole of the northern group against 5th Army did Kirponos belatedly realise that the German aim was to encircle large Soviet forces before the drive on Kiev was launched.²² On 19 July, Führer Directive No. 33 described the encirclement of Muzychenko's 6th and Ponedelin's 12th Armies, and on 2 August, troops of Seventeenth Army's 1st Mountain Division and First Panzer Group's 9th Panzer Division linked up on the Sinyucha River, closing what became known as the Uman Pocket.²³ After a last attempt to break out of the encirclement, the two Soviet armies capitulated

¹⁹ Lexikon der Wehrmacht: 17. Armee:

<http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Gliederungen/Armeen/17Armee.htm> (13 May 2014).

²⁰ Chris Bellamy, *Absolute war: Soviet Russia in the Second World War* (London, 2008), p. 181.

²¹ John Erickson, *The road to Stalingrad: Stalin's war with Germany volume one* (London, 2000), p. 166.

²² Bellamy, *Absolute war*, p. 257.

²³ Haupt, *Army Group South*, p. 36.

three days later, yielding a haul of 107,000 prisoners that included both army commanders, four corps commanders and eleven division commanders.²⁴

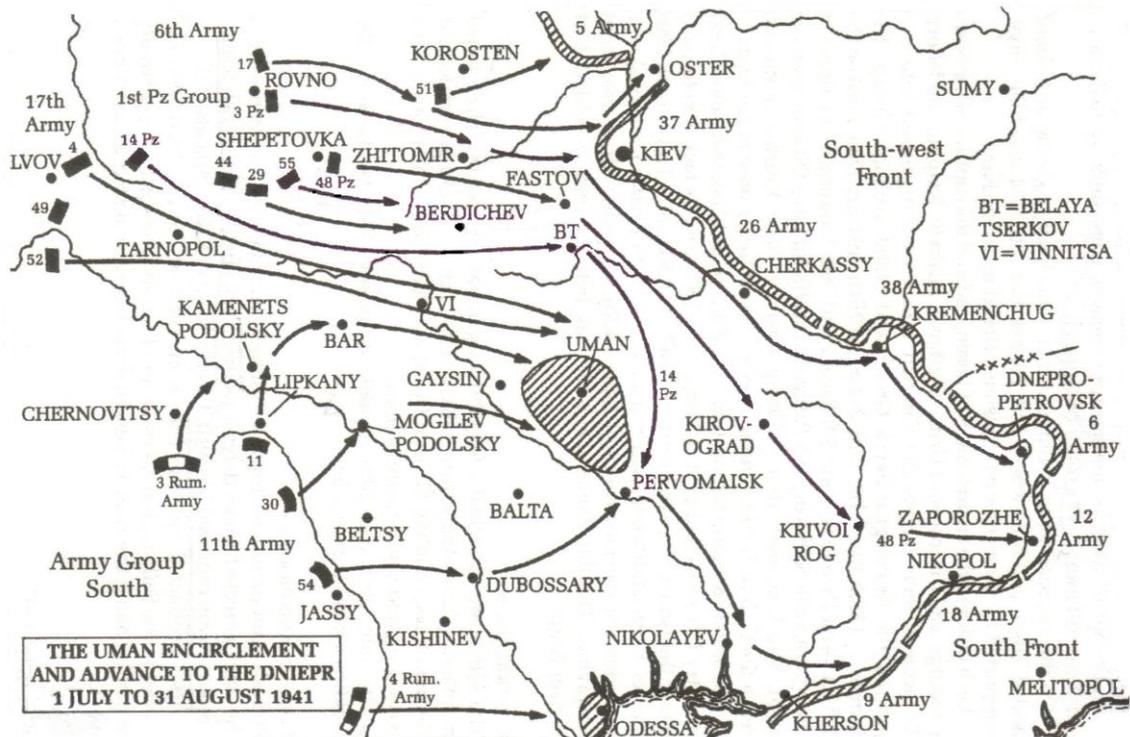


Figure 2: The Uman Pocket²⁵

Following the conclusion of the fighting at Uman, the commanders of Seventeenth and First Panzer Armies received orders to regroup and continue the advance eastwards towards the Dnieper River, and by mid-August, most of the western bank of the river as far south as Dnepropetrovsk was in German hands.²⁶ On 29 August, Seventeenth Army's LII Corps and Eleventh Army's XI Corps forced a crossing over the river at Derievka, just south of Kremenchug, and by the next morning, they had established a 4-kilometre wide bridgehead that was significantly expanded over the following days.²⁷ The breakout of First Panzer Group from the bridgehead was one of the keys to the massive encirclement at Kiev in which Southwestern Front was virtually erased from the map,

²⁴ Bellamy, *Absolute war*, p. 257.

²⁵ Brian Taylor, *Barbarossa to Berlin, a chronology of the campaigns on the eastern front 1941-45: volume one: The Long Drive East, 22 June 1941 to November 1942* (Kent, 2003), p. 106.

²⁶ Haupt, *Army Group South*, pp 41, 51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

with over 600,000 prisoners being taken by the Germans. As this was occurring, Seventeenth Army was again forging eastward, taking Poltava on 19 September.²⁸

On 6 October, Colonel-General Hermann Hoth took over command of Seventeenth Army from von Stülpnagel.²⁹ Kramatorsk was taken on 27 October,³⁰ but III Panzer Corps' sweep south to take Rostov-on-Don on 20 November opened a significant gap between First Panzer and Seventeenth Armies. Marshal Timoshenko and Colonel-General Cherechivenko, the Southern Front Commander, launched a furious counter-attack that retook Rostov and threatened the flanks and rear of III Panzer Corps. When von Rundstedt proposed a withdrawal behind the Mius River, Hitler replaced him with Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau, who had been in command of Sixth Army, only to eventually authorise the proposed withdrawal. Additional units were transferred from Kharkov to stabilise the position, meaning they could not be used to support the drive on Moscow.³¹

In January 1942, Marshal Timoshenko launched an attack that aimed to cut off 1st Panzer Army on the Middle Don by advancing across the Middle Donets and on towards the towns of Barvenkovo and Lozovaya, between Kharkov and Stalino (Donetsk). These objectives were not achieved, but a significant salient was created around Barvenkovo, around 80 miles southeast of Kharkov. This bulge played a major role in subsequent plans for an attack on Kharkov, which was launched on 12 May by three armies attacking from the east and General Gorodiansky's 6th Army attacking out of the salient. In response, the Germans launched Operation Fridericus on 17 May, with First Panzer Army and Seventeenth Army moving from the south against the neck of the salient. Gorodiansky was forced to turn 180° to meet the threat. Sixth Army then joined the attack from the north, and the salient was cut off on 23 May, thus trapping Gorodiansky's forces. The Kharkov offensive was a disaster for the Soviets, who lost between 18 and 20 divisions and a huge quantity of equipment.³²

²⁸ David Stahel, *Kiev 1941: Hitler's battle for supremacy in the east* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 246.

²⁹ Lexikon der Wehrmacht: 17. Armee:

<http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Gliederungen/Armeen/17Armee.htm> (13 May 2014).

³⁰ Haupt, *Army Group South*, p. 95.

³¹ Erickson, *The road to Stalingrad*, pp 265-6.

³² Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East* (London, 2005), p. 143.

On 1 June, General Richard Ruoff assumed command of Seventeenth Army.³³ On 28 June the first phase of Operation Blue, the German summer offensive in the south was launched. The initial phase of the plan called for a pincer operation extending from Kursk on the left wing to the Black Sea on the right to encircle and destroy the Soviet armies that remained on the western side of the Don, with the pincers meeting at Kalach. The advance into the Caucasus would then be launched.³⁴ Timoshenko's Southwestern Front, which was severely weakened after the Kharkov disaster, soon began to collapse under the weight of Sixth Army's assault, and in the south, Seventeenth and First Panzer Armies hit Southern Front.³⁵ Despite these early successes, however, the anticipated encirclements did not occur, as on 13 July Stavka ordered Soviet formations on the western side of the Don to withdraw over the river to regroup.³⁶

Army Group South was split in two on 10 July. Army Group A was commanded by Field Marshal Wilhelm List and comprised the Seventeenth, First Panzer and (after 14 July) Fourth Panzer Armies. Army Group B, under Fedor von Bock, was made up of the German Sixth, Hungarian Second, Italian Eighth and Romanian Third Armies. Seventeenth, along with First and Fourth Panzer, was committed to an attack on Rostov, which fell on 23 July. On the same day, Hitler issued Directive no. 45, which ordered Seventeenth, along with the Romanian Third Army to take the entire eastern coast of the Black Sea down to Batumi, while First and Fourth Panzer Armies would take the oilfields of Maikop before striking east towards the Caspian Sea.³⁷

The attacking formations made rapid progress across the flat steppe region between the Don and Kuban Rivers, achieving breakthroughs of up to 40 miles in the first two days, but again the Soviets pulled back to avoid encirclements.³⁸ On 10 August, 9th and 73rd Infantry Divisions and 1st Mountain Division broke into Krasnodar, the largest city of the Kuban region, completing its capture two days later.³⁹ It was around this time, however, that the situation began to change. Fourth Panzer Army was transferred north to bolster

³³ Lexikon der Wehrmacht: 17. Armee:

<http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Gliederungen/Armeen/17Armee.htm> (13 May 2014).

³⁴ Haupt, *Army Group South*, p. 144.

³⁵ Erickson, *The road to Stalingrad*, p. 362.

³⁶ Haupt, *Army Group South*, p. 154.

³⁷ Erickson, *The road to Stalingrad*, p. 362.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 377.

³⁹ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, p. 73.

the drive on Stalingrad, and was followed later by the Third Romanian Army. With the transfer of Eleventh Army to the Leningrad Front, the offensive against the Caucasus was ultimately reduced from the planned five armies to just two.⁴⁰

During the middle of August, Seventeenth Army crossed the Kuban on both sides of Krasnodar and began its push towards the ports of Novorossiysk and Tuapse. V Corps, with 73rd and 125th Infantry Divisions, reached the outskirts of Novorossiysk at the end of the month, and around the same time, XXXII Corps took the Taman Peninsula, but VII Panzer Corps and XXXIV Corps were unable to force their way through the mountains to Tuapse.⁴¹

V Corps took the city centre and port of Novorossiysk on 10 September, but the defending Soviet 47th Army regrouped and dug in around an industrial sector in the eastern suburbs of the city that guarded the coast road to the south. Between 12 and 24 September, 73rd Infantry Division attempted to force a way through these defences, but was unable to do so. An attempt by the Romanian 3rd Mountain Division to break through to the road was also repulsed with heavy losses. There was further indecisive fighting through October, before both sides began to dig in for the winter and major operations were halted.⁴²

⁴⁰ Robert M. Citino, *Death of the Wehrmacht: the German campaigns of 1942* (Kansas, 2007), pp 233-4.

⁴¹ Haupt, *Army Group South*, pp 187-93.

⁴² Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, pp 97-8.

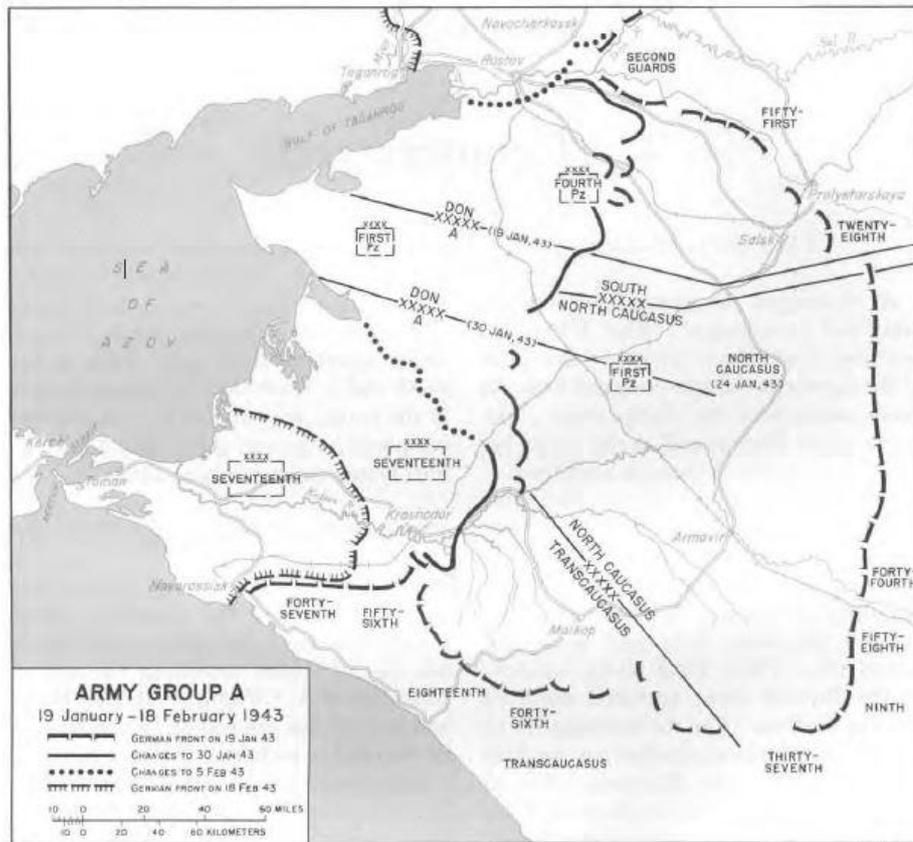


Figure 3: Army Group A's Withdrawal from the Caucasus⁴³

In late November, as the noose was closing around Sixth Army and much of Fourth Panzer Army at Stalingrad, the Soviet command was planning an even greater stroke. Operation Saturn would use three armies of Southwestern Front (1st Guards, 3rd Guards and 5th Tank) to smash the Italian Eighth Army on the Don and cross the Donets at Kamesnk before wheeling south, with 2nd Guards Army being added as a second echelon, to take Rostov and trap Army Group A in the Caucasus. Fortunately for the latter, if not for the encircled forces, the Stalingrad pocket was much larger than originally thought, and with 2nd Guards Army being committed to its reduction, the plan for an immediate drive to Rostov was removed from the downgraded Operation Little Saturn.⁴⁴

The threat to Army Group A remained serious, however, and over the New Year period, Hitler was finally persuaded to withdraw the two armies that remained in the Caucasus, before changing his mind and ordering them to pull back to the Kuban bridgehead.⁴⁵ On

⁴³ Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: the German defeat in the east* (Washington, D.C., 2002), p. 82.

⁴⁴ Robert M. Citino, *The Wehrmacht retreats: fighting a lost war, 1943* (Kansas, 2012), p. 56.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

29 December, the commander of the Transcaucasus Front, General Ivan Tyulenev, was ordered to prepare for an operation to encircle the whole of Army Group A.

Transcaucasus Front was to attack from the south through Krasnodar to Tikhoretsk, about 100 miles to the northeast, where it would link up with forces of Southern Front (which was renamed Stalingrad Front on New Year's Day) moving down from the north to cut off the retreat of First Panzer Army.⁴⁶ First Panzer Army began withdrawing from deep in the Caucasus on 1 January, and as it pulled back to the Kuma River over the next few days, the adjoining left wing of Seventeenth Army began pulling out of its positions in the mountains above Tuapse.⁴⁷ General Ivan Maslennikov, the commander of the Northern Group of Transcaucasus Front, failed dismally in his effort to cut off First Panzer from the south, allowing it to continue its withdrawal in relatively good order.⁴⁸

It was only on 24 January that Hitler finally agreed to bring the whole of First Panzer Group through Rostov and out of the Caucasus, meaning that Seventeenth Army alone would be withdrawn into the Kuban bridgehead, supposedly to act as a jump-off point for a future offensive into the Caucasus. Under huge pressure, Fourth Panzer Army was able to hold the Rostov corridor open for long enough to allow the passage of First Panzer Army.⁴⁹ The complete isolation of Seventeenth Army occurred on 6 February, when the port of Yeisk on the Sea of Azov was captured by the 276th Rifle Division of 58th Army.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Dana V. Sadarananda, *Beyond Stalingrad: Manstein and the operations of Army Group Don* (Pennsylvania, 2009), pp 54-5.

⁴⁷ Haupt, *Army Group South*, pp 240-2.

⁴⁸ Erickson, *The road to Berlin*, p. 30.

⁴⁹ Sadarananda, *Beyond Stalingrad*, pp 77-8.

⁵⁰ I. Ivanov, 'Osvobozhdenie Yeiska' in *Delovoi Yeisk*, 3 Mar. 2013 (<http://deleysk.ru/gazeta-delovoy-eysk/osvobozhdenie-eyska/>) (22 May 2014).

Chapter II: The Novorossiysk Landing Operations

Although Soviet attempts for a second huge encirclement had been thwarted, the German position in the southern sector was still perilous, and the eyes of the Soviet command turned to the isolated Seventeenth Army. Plans for a Soviet amphibious landing in the Novorossiysk area had first been drawn up in November 1942, and at a Stavka meeting on 24 January 1943, a combined amphibious and ground operation to encircle the German Seventeenth Army was proposed.⁵¹ On land, the Soviet 18th and 46th Armies would seize the Kuban River crossings in the Krasnodar region and then push west towards the Taman Peninsula while the 47th Army would launch a direct attack on Novorossiysk. Meanwhile, the amphibious landing would place forces into the rear of the German defences and move to link up with 47th Army. The combined operation would encircle Seventeenth Army and prevent it from withdrawing into the defensible Kuban Bridgehead.⁵² At this meeting, the forces in the area were also reorganised. Transcaucasus Front's Northern Group, under the command of General Ivan Maslennikov, was renamed North Caucasus Front, and the remainder of Ivan Tyulenev's Transcaucasus Front returned to its original role of guarding the southern frontiers with Iran and Turkey.⁵³

The location chosen for the landing operation was Yuzhnaya Ozereika, about thirty kilometres southwest of Novorossiysk, and the detailed plan was drawn up by Vice-Admiral Filipp Sergeyevich Oktyabrskiy, the commander of the Black Sea Fleet, and timed for 01:30 on 4 February.⁵⁴ The timetable was as follows:

00:45: A parachute force of eighty men would be dropped at Glebovka and Vasilevka, to the north of Yuzhnaya Ozereika, and bombing raids would be carried out on German defensive positions around the landing zones.

01:00: A naval bombardment would be launched by a Black Sea Fleet fire-support squadron commanded by Rear-Admiral Lev Anatolevich Vladimirskiy and comprising the cruisers *Krasniy Kavkaz* and *Krasniy Krym*, the destroyer leader *Kharkov* and the destroyers *Besposhchadniy* and *Soobrazitelniy*.

⁵¹ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, p. 242.

⁵² Carell, *Scorched Earth*, pp 154-7.

⁵³ Albert Seaton, *Stalin as warlord* (London, 1976), p. 173.

⁵⁴ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, p. 245.

01:30: The main landing at Yuzhnaya Ozereika, commanded by Rear-Admiral Nikolai Yefremovich Basistiy, would be launched, along with a simultaneous diversionary landing at Stanichka in the southern suburbs of Novorossiysk. Dummy landing operations would also be feigned at a number of locations along the southern coast of the Taman Peninsula: Anapa, Blagoveschenskiy, the Sukko River Valley and Cape Zhelezniy Rog.⁵⁵

The main landing force comprised two echelons. The first was formed up in Gelendzhik and was made up of 255th Independent Red Banner Naval Infantry Brigade, 563rd Independent Tank Brigade and a separate machine-gun battalion. The second echelon formed up in Tuapse and comprised 83rd Independent Red Banner Naval Infantry Brigade, 165th Infantry Brigade and 29th Anti-tank Artillery Regiment.⁵⁶ Both groupings underwent intensive training in landing operations throughout January.⁵⁷

Even during the earliest preparations for the operation, however, a number of officers expressed doubts over the selection of Yuzhnaya Ozereika as the site of the main landing, citing the unpredictable winter weather and sea conditions, the presence of numerous minefields in the area and the distance from the ultimate objective of Novorossiysk.⁵⁸

The operation ran into serious problems from the start. On 27 January, 47th Army began its offensive in the Verkhnebakanskaya and Krymskaya areas, but was unable to force a breakthrough at any point. Although the original plan stipulated that the landing operation would not begin until such a penetration had been achieved, the Transcaucasus Front command nevertheless gave the order for the landing to proceed, partly in the hope that it would divert German forces and help 47th Army to achieve its aim.⁵⁹

The first landing group was late setting out from Gelendzhik and made slower than expected progress in heavy seas, so Basistiy sent a request to Vladimirskiy on *Krasniy Kavkaz* and to Oktyabrskiy, requesting a 90-minute postponement. Without waiting for confirmation from Oktyabrskiy, Vladimirskiy ordered his ships to hold fire and Basistiy

⁵⁵ A. Chernyshev, 'Noch utrachennikh vozmozhnostei' in *Morskoi Sbornik*, no. 12 (2008), p. 67.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁵⁷ Iosif Kirin, *Chernomorsky Flot v bitve za Kavkaze* (Moscow, 1958), p. 156.

⁵⁸ Chernyshev, 'Noch utrachennikh vozmozhnostei', p. 70.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 71-2.

postponed the arrival of the second landing wave until 04:40, but the commanders overseeing the airborne, air-support and dummy landing operations did not receive this information and acted according to their original orders.⁶⁰



Figure 4: The Novorossiysk Landing Operations⁶¹

Oktyabrskiy, however, did not wish to delay the operation as doing so would deprive him of the cover of darkness. He ordered that the original plan should be adhered to, but this message did not reach Basistiy and Vladimirskiy until it was too late for them to revert to the original plan. Again, Oktyabrskiy did not communicate with the air-support,

⁶⁰ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, pp 246-7.

⁶¹ Armchair General: Novorossiysk Landing operation: http://www.armchairgeneral.com/rkkaww2/maps/1943S/Caucasus/Novorossiysk_Feb04-15_43.jpg (27 March 2014).

parachute and dummy landing groups, so they remained oblivious to the unfolding chaos.⁶²

The bombing raids and bombardment of the dummy landing sites were launched in accordance with the original timetable, as was the parachute drop, but one of the transport planes was unable to locate the drop zone and returned to base, reducing the strength of the parachute force by over 25 percent before the operation started. This disconnect between the different parts of the operation alerted the defending German and Romanian forces, allowing them to ascertain that a landing operation was imminent and also its likely location.⁶³ At 00:35, V Corps placed all its forces defending the southern coast of the Taman Peninsula on the highest alert.⁶⁴

At 02:30, the naval support ships began their 30-minute bombardment against the German and Romanian defences at Yuzhnaya Ozereika. The fire was poorly-directed, however, and although over 2,000 shells were fired, the gun emplacements and defensive positions were largely undamaged. At 03:00, the cruisers ceased firing and set course for port, although the destroyers continued firing. The landing craft of the first group approached the shore at around 03:30, but came under intense fire and suffered heavy losses. Many of the tanks in the first landing group were released too far from the shore so their engines flooded and they were immobilised in the surf.⁶⁵

A group of 1,427 men, with 10 tanks, was able to reach the shore. They quickly captured Yuzhnaya Ozereika and set out for Glebovka, a few miles to the north, but without support, they could not maintain the advance.⁶⁶ The bulk of the group, including the last two remaining tanks, was pushed back and isolated in an area about one kilometre west of Yuzhnaya Ozereika on the morning of 5 February.⁶⁷ Over the next few days, small groups tried to force their way through to Stanichka, and about 150 succeeded. Another group of 25, along with 18 paratroopers and 27 partisans, reached the coast to the east of Yuzhnaya Ozereika and were picked up by a motor boat on the evening of 9

⁶² Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, p. 247.

⁶³ Chernyshev, 'Noch utrachennikh vozmozhnostei', pp 73-4.

⁶⁴ Generalkommando V. Armeekorps, Abteilung Ia: Kriegstagebuch II Heft 10, 1. Jan. – 5. Feb. 1943 (BArch RH 24-5/52), p. 129.

⁶⁵ Chernyshev, 'Noch utrachennikh vozmozhnostei', pp 75-6.

⁶⁶ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, pp 248-9.

⁶⁷ Generalkommando V. Armeekorps, Abteilung Ia: Kriegstagebuch II Heft 11, 5. Feb. – 31. März 1943 (BArch RH 24-5/53), p. 5.

February.⁶⁸ Another 542 men of the landing group were captured.⁶⁹ On 6 February, Seventeenth Army reported that the landing force at Yuzhnaya Ozereika had essentially been destroyed, and the following day, reported that 300 enemy dead and 31 U.S.-built tanks lay on the beach.⁷⁰

The diversionary landing at Stanichka, in contrast, proceeded virtually exactly as planned. At 01:30, torpedo boats raised a smoke screen across the shore, and fire from support vessels and from batteries on the eastern coast of Tsemess Bay were much more successful in silencing German guns than had been the case at Yuzhnaya Ozereika. The first landing groups, under the command of Major Tsesar L. Kunikov, disembarked and were able to seize a beachhead. At 02:40, Kunikov signalled for the second and third echelons to be landed. The landing party seized several buildings on the southern edge of Stanichka and was able to hold the beachhead until it was further reinforced. The bridgehead quickly became known as “Malaya Zemlya” (The Small Land).⁷¹

The success against the Yuzhnaya Ozereika landing appears to have led to a degree of complacency among the German command regarding the Stanichka operation. At 00:15 on 6 February, General Ruoff sent a message of congratulations to all the commanding officers who had been involved in the defence against the two landings, and later in the day, V Corps’ war diary reported that the landing force at Stanichka was encircled and that its attempts to expand its beachhead would be defeated.⁷² A German offensive to throw the landing party back into the sea was planned, but was not scheduled to start until 7 February, when parts of 198th Infantry Division were due to arrive from Krasnodar to reinforce V Corps’ line in a number of locations around Novorossiysk.⁷³ Ivan Y. Petrov, the commander of the Black Sea Group of North Caucasus Front, displayed no such hesitation and quickly decided to divert all of the forces that had been intended for the main landing to reinforce the success of the Stanichka diversion.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Chernyshev, ‘Noch utrachennikh vozmozhnostei’, p. 77.

⁶⁹ Ilya Viktorovich Kiselev, ‘Poteri Krasnoi armii i Chernomorskogo flota v desantnykh operatsiyakh 1941-1945 gg.’ In *Bylye Gody: Rossiyskiy istoricheskaya zhurnal*, no. 22, (Dec. 2011), p. 41.

⁷⁰ Armeeoberkommando 17, Abteilung Ia: Kriegstagebuch Nr. 6, 1. Feb. – 30. Juni 1943 (BArch RH 20-17/178), pp 16, 18.

⁷¹ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, pp 249-51.

⁷² Kriegstagebuch V. A.K., Heft 11 (BArch RH 24/5/53), pp 8-9.

⁷³ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 6 (BArch RH 20-17/178), p. 10.

⁷⁴ Carell, *Scorched earth*, p. 170.

Within a few days, over 17,000 men, twenty-one guns, seventy-four mortars, eighty-six machine guns and 440 tons of supplies had been landed on the beachhead. Kunikov was fatally wounded by a shell splinter on the night of 11–12 March and was posthumously awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union.⁷⁵ He is buried in Heroes' Square, close to the waterfront in the centre of Novorossiysk.



Figure 5: Tsesar Kunikov's Grave in Novorossiysk (Photograph by Author)

The debacle at Yuzhnaya Ozereika has been largely overlooked in the Soviet history of the war, as attention focussed on the Malaya Zemlya landings. The *official History of the Great Patriotic War* describes the events at Yuzhnaya Ozereika in just two sentences while devoting several pages to the success of the auxiliary operation.⁷⁶ During this period, Leonid Brezhnev was serving as a political officer with 18th Army, and he made a number of trips by boat to Malaya Zemlya to encourage the troops. During his term as general secretary of the Communist Party (1964-82), the legend of Malaya Zemlya was taken to new heights. In 1973, Novorossiysk was awarded the title of Hero City, elevating it to the status of the likes of Stalingrad and Leningrad in terms of its

⁷⁵ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, p. 254.

⁷⁶ Ministry of Defence of the Soviet Union, *Istoriya Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny Sovetskogo Soyuzo 1941-45, tom tretii: korennoi perelom v khode Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny (Noyabr 1942 g. – Dekabr 1943 g.)* (Moscow, 1961), pp 93-6.

importance in the war. A series of massive memorial complexes were constructed, including one at the site of the Malaya Zemlya landings.⁷⁷



Figure 6: The Malaya Zemlya Memorial Complex in Novorossiysk (Photograph by Author)

The question of what the Malaya Zemlya landing actually achieved, beyond its propaganda value and tying down German forces, is worthy of further consideration. Grechko claims that the operation created favourable conditions for the liberation of Novorossiysk,⁷⁸ but this view is difficult to support, as the city was not recaptured until a full seven months after the landing operation and after the Germans had already decided to withdraw the whole of Seventeenth Army from the Kuban Bridgehead. Several writers, including Tieke, note that the presence of the Soviet forces at Malaya Zemlya prevented the Germans from using the port facilities at Novorossiysk.⁷⁹ This argument is also questionable. There were already significant Red Army forces on the high ground on the eastern side of Tsemess Bay, where the front line had been static since September 1942. These forces provided artillery support for the landing operation, so they would also have been able to threaten any German vessels attempting to enter or exit the port. In any case, the German-held ports and airfields farther to the rear were

⁷⁷ Raisa Mikhailovna Sokolova, *Memorialniy kompleks v gorode-geroe Novorossiyske* (Novorossiysk, 2010), pp 2-9.

⁷⁸ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, p. 258.

⁷⁹ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, p. 337.

sufficient for Seventeenth Army's supply needs. During March, for example, the supply and evacuation totals by sea and air were as follows.⁸⁰

<u>Withdrawals</u>	<u>Air</u>	<u>Sea</u>
Soldiers & Wounded	21,889	76,010
Civilians	2,887	17,806
Motor Vehicles		9,256
Horse-drawn Vehicles		12,442
Horses		48,624
Field Kitchens		444
Guns		253
<u>Supplies</u>		
Fuel	2827 m ³ *	1880 m ³
Flour	2248 t	1554 t
Rations	238 t	2318 t
Animal feed/roughage	5341 t	5793 t
Ammunition	262 t	3730 t

*Note: 1 m³ = 1,000 litres

To further supplement the supply system, a cable-car system across the Kerch Strait, with a capacity of 1,000 tons per day, went into operation in June.⁸¹

A second question that warrants further examination is that of what could have been achieved if the main landing at Yuzhnaya Ozereika had unfolded as planned. The landing forces at Malaya Zemlya were concentrated on a relatively narrow peninsula, so the opposing German defensive line remained quite short. Nevertheless, the quickly reinforced Soviet force put severe pressure on the German defences and created concern at Seventeenth Army headquarters. On 7 February, the army's war diary reported that it had been fully pushed onto the defensive by the reinforced enemy, and

⁸⁰ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 6 (BArch RH 20-17/178), p. 143.

⁸¹ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (London, 1995), pp 371-2. Speer also mentions that around this time, Hitler was persuaded against the idea of building a bridge over the Kerch Strait. Soviet engineers did construct a bridge over the Strait in the summer of 1944, but it was destroyed by ice floes the following winter (See: Kerch: most cherez proliv: <http://kerch.com.ua/articleview.aspx?id=1277>) (7 Apr 2014). Plans for a new bridge have been proposed on numerous occasions since, most recently following Russia's annexation of the Crimea in 2014. See: Steve Gutterman, 'Russia says it will build bridge to Crimea', Reuters, 3 Mar 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/03/03/uk-ukraine-crisis-crimea-bridge-idUKBREA221EM20140303> (1 April 2014).

on 21 February, it stated that the decrease in the combat strength of its forces in the Novorossiysk area was “particularly serious.”⁸²

The defences along the coast around Yuzhnaya Ozereika were weaker than at Stanichka, and the fact that the small landing party was able to force its way inland as far as Glebovka suggests that if it had been reinforced to a level approaching that at Stanichka, it could have represented a serious threat to the entire left wing of Seventeenth Army’s defensive line. Ultimately, the failures of the Yuzhnaya Ozereika landing and 47th Army’s offensive in the centre of Seventeenth Army’s line allowed the latter to hold a continuous defensive line through the spring and summer.



Figure 7: Leonid Brezhnev (seated, right) with a Group of Political Officers at Malaya Zemlya, 1943⁸³

⁸² Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 6 (BArch RH 20-17/178), pp 20, 62.

⁸³ Culture: “Malaya zemlya”, 1943:

<http://cultureru.com/malaya-zemlya-1943/> (27 March, 2014).

Chapter III: Operation Neptune & Soviet Summer Offensives

In late February and early March, poor weather prevented any significant operations and movements by either side.⁸⁴ Towards the end of March, the northern flank of Seventeenth Army was pulled back slightly to improve its positions in the marshy region along the coast of the Azov Sea.⁸⁵ Around this time, Army Group A and Seventeenth Army finalised plans for Operation Neptune, an offensive aimed at destroying the Soviet forces in the Malaya Zemlya beachhead and retaking the area.⁸⁶ The offensive was originally planned for 6 April, although this date was not definitively finalised, as clear weather was required to ensure that strong Luftwaffe forces could be used for close support of the attacking troops, suppression of enemy artillery batteries on the coast road between Novorossiysk and Kabardinka on the eastern shore of Tsemess Bay and prevention of reinforcement and supply of the beachhead by sea.⁸⁷ Aircraft were transferred from the Donbass and southern Ukraine to reinforce Luftflotte 4's forces for this effort.⁸⁸

The attacking forces would include:⁸⁹

- 4th Mountain Division: 5 battalions, with 2 mountain artillery battalions, strengthened by additional artillery and army combat engineers.
- 125th Infantry Division: all available forces, including reinforcement by one assault gun battalion and parts of another from army troops. The force was split into two groups, a northern group with 2 battalions and a southern group with 3 battalions.
- 73rd Infantry Division: a specially-formed attack group and all artillery.

In order to achieve maximum surprise, the concentration of 4th Mountain Division and the regrouping of 125th and 73rd Infantry Divisions were to take place at night and in small groups, to be completed by 18:00 on 5 April. Additional deception measures

⁸⁴ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 6 (BArch RH 20-17/178), pp 87, 92.

⁸⁵ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, p. 341.

⁸⁶ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 6 (BArch RH 20-17/178), p. 138.

⁸⁷ 'Korpsbefehl für die Versammlung und Bereitstellung des V. A.K. zum Angriff "Neptun"', Gen. Kdo. V. A.K. Abt Ia Nr. 131/43 g Kdos.' in Operationsakten 14. März – 25. Juni (BArch RH 20-17/181), fol. 71.

⁸⁸ V. Nikiforov, 'Sovetskaya aviatsiya v bitve za Kavkaz' in *Voенно-istoricheskiy zhurnal*, no. 8 (1971), p. 16.

⁸⁹ 'Anlage zu Gruppe Wetzels, Ia Nr. 134/43 g. Kdo 31.3.1943.' in Operationsakten 14. März – 25. Juni (BArch RH 20-17/181), fol. 71.

included strict traffic control and radio silence, the dissemination of false rumours about an imminent withdrawal from Novorossiysk and unchanged reconnaissance, combat patrol and artillery activity. The attack was to be launched without a preliminary artillery barrage, and if individual assault groups required artillery support, this would only be launched at the jump-off time.⁹⁰

The attack was divided into two phases. In the first phase, 4th Mountain Division and 125th Infantry Division would advance from their concentration areas around Fedotovka and Poklaba Farm, respectively, towards the Myskhako – Stegneyeva Farm road, with 4th Mountain Division taking Myskhako Berg and Myskhako village and 125th Infantry Division clearing the Myskhako Valley and a wooded area to the north of the village. In this first phase, 73rd Infantry Division's artillery would provide support for the left wing of 125th Infantry Division. Once the first phase had crossed a loop on the Myskhako – Stegneyeva Farm road, 73rd Infantry Division would join in the second phase by attacking south into Stanichka. It was envisaged that the attack would reach so far into the beachhead that the enemy forces would be split into many individual groups that could be destroyed piecemeal.⁹¹ In particular, the army commander General Ruoff stressed the importance of penetrating as far as possible into the beachhead on the first day to prevent the evacuation or reinforcement of the enemy by sea, although he expressly forbade the setting of specific daily goals.⁹²

On 1 April, radio intercepts and ground reconnaissance suggested that the Soviets would launch an attack against the east wing of XXXXIV Corps, perhaps as early as the following day. The army's war diary acknowledges that this could make the situation "uncomfortable," but concludes that it was not a reason for specific concern.⁹³ The intended start date of 6 April was postponed due to poor weather, as was the first rescheduled date of 10 April.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ 'Korpsbefehl für die Versammlung und Bereitstellung des V. A.K. zum Angriff "Neptun"'

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 6 (BArch RH 20-17/178), p. 144.

⁹³ Ibid., pp 144, 146.

⁹⁴ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, p. 338.

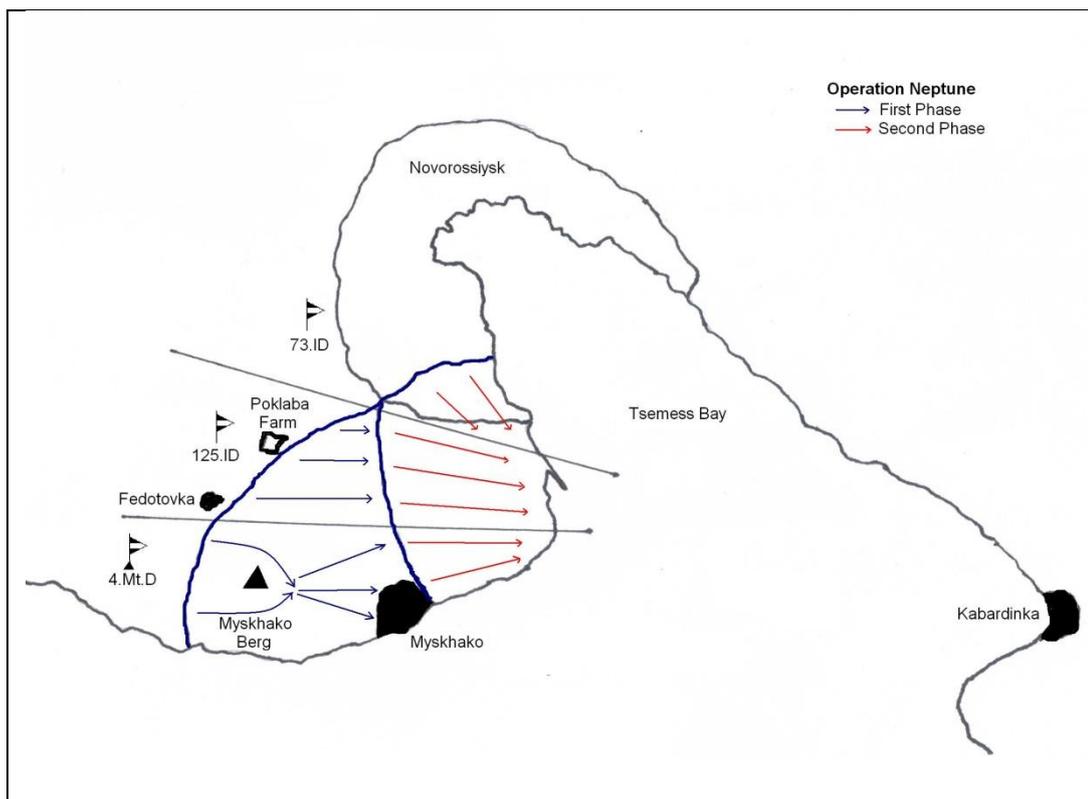


Figure 8: Operation Neptune

The offensive was eventually launched at 06:30 on 17 April, after a final one-hour delay caused by heavy fog that prevented air activity.⁹⁵ The 4th Mountain Division's attack initially broke through the forward positions to the slopes of Myskhako Berg and Teufels Berg, about 1.5 kilometres to the east, but was then held up by strong enemy resistance.⁹⁶ The attack by the northern group of 125th Infantry Division was initially focussed on the Myskhako Valley and high ground to the north and northwest of Myskhako village, and a penetration of about one kilometre was forced. Its left wing broke through the forward positions southwest of the road loop and became involved in heavy fighting in an area around one kilometre west and southeast of Stegneyeva Farm.⁹⁷

Despite the importance of suppressing the enemy artillery on the eastern shore of Tsemess Bay, fire from this area resumed in the early afternoon, aimed primarily at the

⁹⁵ 'Zwischenmeldung 17.4.1943, 15:45' in Meldungen der Korps, 21. März – 10. Mai (BArch RH 20-17/184).

⁹⁶ 'Tagesmeldung 17.4.1943, 23:30' in Meldungen an Heeresgruppe, 16. Apr. – 30. Juni (BArch RH 20-17/187).

⁹⁷ 'Tagesmeldung 17.4.1943 23:30' in Meldungen an Heeresgruppe, 16. Apr. – 30. Juni (BArch RH 20-17/187).

northern wing of 125th Infantry Division. Combat reports confirmed that the enemy had moved significant forces into the front line in anticipation of the attack, and the heavy fighting for strongly-fortified positions caused considerable losses among the attacking infantry.⁹⁸



Figure 9: Romanian Artillery Observers Using a Knocked-out T-34 as Shelter⁹⁹

In the afternoon, in a discussion among Generals Ruoff, Wetzel (V Corps) and Korten (Luftflotte 4), the possibility of transferring parts of 73rd Infantry Division to 125th Infantry Division to boost the latter's strength at the key breakthrough positions was discussed. This proposal was ultimately rejected because of the time that the regrouping would take and because it was considered that the most favourable force ratios were in 73rd Infantry Division's sector, as the Soviets had moved significant forces from the southern parts of Novorossiysk to the Myskhako – Stegneyeva area.¹⁰⁰

During the night of 17 – 18 April, a Soviet convoy that approached the beachhead was brought under artillery fire, and two vessels were reported to have been set on fire.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ 'Zwischenmeldung 17.4.1943, 15:45' in Meldungen der Korps, 21. März – 10. Mai (BArch RH 20-17/184).

⁹⁹ <http://www.worldwar2.ro/foto/?id=233§ion=3&article=13> (22 May 2014).

¹⁰⁰ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 6 *(BArch RH 20-17/178), p. 174.

¹⁰¹ 'Morgenmeldung 18.4.1943 06:15' in Meldungen der Korps, 21. März – 10. Mai (BArch RH 20-17/184).

The offensive was renewed at 05:30 on 18 April after harassing fire by all available artillery, but again quickly became bogged down by the tenacious Soviet defence and the difficult terrain and did not achieve a decisive early penetration at any point.¹⁰² During the night, the Soviets had moved up the 83rd Marine Infantry Brigade, one of the units that had originally participated in the Malaya Zemlya landing, from the rear to reinforce the defences in the Myskhako Valley.¹⁰³



Figure 10: Soviet Marines in the Malaya Zemlya Beachhead, Spring 1943¹⁰⁴

During the course of the morning, however, 125th Infantry Division succeeded in breaking through in an area to the southeast of Poklaba Farm and taking the north-eastern slope of a small hill about one kilometre north of Myskhako village. The attacks by 73rd Infantry Division and 4th Mountain Division, which had not achieved any significant results in the face of the strong Soviet resistance, were halted to allow additional forces to be thrown against the *schwerpunkt* north of Myskhako.¹⁰⁵ One

¹⁰² Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 6 (BArch RH 20-17/178), p. 179.

¹⁰³ 'Zwischenmeldung 18.4.1943, 15:50' in Meldungen der Korps, 21. März – 10. Mai (BArch RH 20-17/184).

¹⁰⁴ Flot: Vitse-admiral Zhdanov Leonid Ivanovich. Soslyzhvttsy, odnokashniki, komandiry, uchitelny. Chast 3:

http://flot.com/blog/historyofNVMU/1258.php?sphrase_id=7163983 (11 June 2014).

¹⁰⁵ 'Tagesmeldung 18.4.1943, 24:00' in Meldungen an Heeresgruppe, 16. Apr. – 30. Juni (BArch RH 20-17/187).

regiment was transferred from 6th Romanian Cavalry Division, two regiments from 4th Mountain Division and two battalions, along with mortar and assault gun units, from 73rd Infantry Division.¹⁰⁶

In spite of poor weather, the first Soviet counter-attacks were launched early on the morning of 19 April, in the area of the road loop, preceded by heavy artillery and mortar fire, and through the day further localised counter-thrusts were launched.¹⁰⁷ On the German side, the bad weather delayed the redeployment of troops to 125th Infantry Division, but at 11:20 it launched an attack aimed at linking up with a group that had already reached the slopes of Teufels Berg.¹⁰⁸ After seven hours of bitter fighting, the linkup was finally achieved, but the united assault groups were almost immediately put on the defensive by Soviet counter-attacks from the south and east, supported by artillery fire of an unprecedented intensity.¹⁰⁹

After defending against numerous local Soviet counterattacks through the night of 19 – 20 April, 125th Infantry Division launched another attempt to take the high ground at 10:30, but this was stopped by further fortified Soviet defensive positions after gains of just a few hundred metres.¹¹⁰ Later in the day, General Jaenecke visited the headquarters of both V Corps and 125th Infantry Division. A review of the operation so far revealed that the air and artillery support had not been able to eliminate the Soviet defensive systems, resulting in high casualties among the attacking German infantry. Although 125th Division was urgently calling for new reserves, an expected Soviet attack on XXXIV Corps' sector meant that no forces could be pulled from here to support 125th Division's attack. It was agreed to postpone further attacks until 22 April, so that new reserves could be created by a regrouping of forces.¹¹¹

On 21 April, there were numerous discussions between army and corps commands about the possibility of resuming the attack. The lack of available infantry forces was a

¹⁰⁶ 'Tagesmeldung 18.4.1943, 20:50' in Meldungen der Korps, 21. März – 10. Mai (BArch RH 20-17/184).

¹⁰⁷ 'Morgenmeldung 19.4.1943, 06:40' in Meldungen der Korps, 21. März – 10. Mai (BArch RH 20-17/184).

¹⁰⁸ 'Zwischenmeldung 19.4.1943, 15:00' in Meldungen der Korps, 21. März – 10. Mai (BArch RH 20-17/184).

¹⁰⁹ 'Tagesmeldung 19.4.1943, 21:00' in Meldungen der Korps, 21. März – 10. Mai (BArch RH 20-17/184).

¹¹⁰ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 6 (BArch RH 20-17/178), p. 186.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

constant theme, with losses since the start of the offensive being estimated at 2,741 men. The Chief of the Army General Staff, General Kurt Zeitzler, requested reports from 125th Infantry and 4th Mountain Divisions in order to present them to Hitler that evening. These reports again maintained that a continuation of the attack would only be possible if fresh forces were made available. Another report to Army Group A noted the declining quality of the divisions as a consequence of the shortage of NCOs and a complete lack of any opportunities for training since early 1942.¹¹² Another increasing problem for the German command was the situation in the air. In the first few days of the offensive, the Luftwaffe had largely enjoyed air superiority,¹¹³ but by 21 April, aircraft from three newly arriving Soviet air corps were committed, shifting the balance towards the defenders.¹¹⁴

On 22 April, V Corps submitted a situation report that concluded that it did not have sufficient forces to continue a concentrated attack against the beachhead, citing the loss of surprise, strengthening enemy air activity and the continuous resupply and reinforcement of the defenders by sea, as well as the lack of its own forces. The total strength of the attacking group was just 13,541 men, out of a combat strength of the whole army of 57,590.¹¹⁵ Following a visit by Field Marshal von Kleist, the commander-in-chief of Army Group A on 23 April,¹¹⁶ Operation Neptune was finally called off two days later.¹¹⁷

Even accounting for the benefit of hindsight, it appears clear that Operation Neptune was doomed to failure from the outset. The relatively small, worn-out and poorly-trained assault groups faced a numerically superior defending force that had significantly strengthened its positions in the difficult terrain and was able to continually resupply itself by sea. The increasing Soviet air strength over the area increased the pressure on the attacking Germans infantry, both directly and by allowing the Soviet artillery in the beachhead and on the opposite side of Tsemess Bay to play an increasing role. The war diaries of Seventeenth Army and V Corps around this time make an

¹¹² Ibid., pp 187-9.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp 177, 184.

¹¹⁴ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, p. 292.

¹¹⁵ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 6 (BArch RH 20-17/178), p. 190. The ration strength of the whole army was 178,912.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 191.

¹¹⁷ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, p. 339.

uncharacteristically high number of references to the weakened state of their forces. The growing disconnect between the plans of the German High Command and the forces in the field is graphically illustrated by an entry in Seventeenth Army's diary for 21 April. It records, perhaps with a hint of sarcasm, a visit by General of Railway Troops Otto Will, who reported on the "grand" plans for the construction of road and railway bridges across the Kerch Strait, with a planned completion date of the railway bridge of 1 August 1944.¹¹⁸



Figure 11: German Infantry in Novorossiysk¹¹⁹

The pulling back of Seventeenth Army's northern flank, noted at the start of this chapter, meant that this sector was protected by impassable reed beds along the coast and by rivers and marshes further inland. The heavily-forested mountains of the southern sector also offered easily defensible positions, as the assault groups of Operation Neptune had found to their cost. Only the central sector, around the town of Krymskaya, offered any realistic possibilities for large-scale operations. The town was also an important communications centre, with roads and railways to Novorossiysk, Anapa, Taman and Temryuk passing through it.¹²⁰ This area therefore became the key to the

¹¹⁸ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 6 (BArch RH 20-17/178), p. 187.

¹¹⁹ Panzerworld: Signal gallery, Novorossiysk: <http://www.panzerworld.com/signal-gallery-novorossiysk-1943> (20 June 2014).

¹²⁰ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, p. 285.

entire German defence and the focus of Soviet attacks through the spring and summer months.¹²¹

The first offensive was launched in early April. The plan called for 56th Army to break through on either side of the Krasnodar – Krymskaya railroad to encircle the town, while 37th Army pushed through the German defences and moved west. The attack began at 08:00 on 4 April, and 55th Guards Rifle Division and 383rd and 61st Rifle Divisions quickly forced a penetration between 97th Jäger Division and 9th Infantry Division that was expanded to a width of 1.5 kilometres by the afternoon, before a counter-attack by assault groups formed by 97th Jäger Division, with support from an assault gun battery, restored the original front line.¹²²

To the defenders' surprise, the assault was not strongly renewed on the following day, although some fighting continued until 6 April. Heavy rain had severely hampered the movement of Soviet supplies and reinforcements, and an almost ten-day pause for refitting and reinforcement was required.¹²³ After heavy air raids on Krymskaya on the night of 13 – 14 April, the second attack was launched at 05:00. The three attack wedges again forced an early breakthrough, reaching the southern edge of Krymskaya by noon. The German counter-attack in the afternoon held up the advance, but could not seal off the penetrations. Overnight, reserves were moved from other sections of the front, and on 15 April, the fighting ebbed and flowed, with a height known by the Germans as Hill 68.8 and a nearby dairy being the focal points. More German reinforcements were moved up on the following night, and by the evening of 16 April, the front line had been stabilised, although the Germans had been pushed back slightly in the area to the south of Krymskaya.¹²⁴ Another pause in the fighting occurred, during which a high-powered delegation arrived from Moscow to oversee the next effort. It included Marshal Georgiy Zhukov, Air Force commander General Aleksandr A. Novikov, Admiral Nikolai Kuznetsov of Navy command and Stavka representative Sergei Shtemenko.¹²⁵

The 56th Army renewed its attack on 29 April, initially against the northern wing of 97th Jäger Division's sector. This achieved little, and the focus of the attack was switched to

¹²¹ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, p. 341.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 341.

¹²³ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, p. 288.

¹²⁴ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, pp 343-5.

¹²⁵ Seaton, *Stalin as warlord*, p. 173.

the south of Krymskaya. By the evening of 3 May the spearheads, including 20 tanks, had reached the Krymskaya – Neberdzhhevskaya road, threatening to encircle Krymskaya from the south. That night, the Germans abandoned Krymskaya and pulled back to the D-Line, a deeply-echeloned defensive system a few miles to the west of the town.¹²⁶ The Soviets were unable to make any further progress, and the fighting died down again over the next few weeks as both sides regrouped and reorganised. Zhukov's party returned to Moscow on 17 May, with Shtemenko noting that they were in low spirits and preparing for a rebuke from Stalin for their failure to achieve a decisive success. Ultimately, however, it was Maslennikov who paid the price, being replaced as commander of North Caucasus Front by Ivan Petrov.¹²⁷

The next attack plan called for 56th and 9th Armies to break through the German defences in the Kievskoe – Moldavanskoe area, to the northwest of Krymskaya, after which 18th Army's forces at Malaya Zemlya would break out of the beachhead to outflank Novorossiysk.¹²⁸ The attack opened with an artillery barrage and airstrike at 05:00 on 26 May, and after six hours the leading tank units had made advances of three to five kilometres, but were forced to withdraw by German counter-attacks and a lack of infantry support.¹²⁹ Over the next few days, the focus of the fighting was Hill 121.4, approximately midway between Kievskoe and Moldavanskoe. It changed hands several times, but was taken for good by the Soviets on 29 May and held against several German counter-attacks. The intensity of the fighting subsided in the first days of June. The Soviets had taken a small patch of territory, but had failed to breach the German defences.¹³⁰

June and early July were relatively quiet, as both sides improved their positions and refitted their troops and also as a likely consequence of the focus of both sides on the upcoming Battle of Kursk.¹³¹ On 7 June, Seventeenth Army received a new commander, when General Erwin Jaenecke arrived to replace Ruoff.¹³² It also received some much-needed reinforcement when 98th Infantry Division was transported from Bryansk, about

¹²⁶ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, pp 346-7.

¹²⁷ Seaton, *Stalin as warlord*, p. 173.

¹²⁸ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, p. 351.

¹²⁹ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, p. 301.

¹³⁰ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, pp 354-8.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

¹³² 'Der Oberbefehlshaber der 17. Armee (7.6.43)' in Befehle und Meldungen des OB der 17. Armee, Gen. d. Pioniere Jaenecke (BArch RH 20-17/773).

200 miles south-west of Moscow, to the Crimea at the start of June, from where it was shipped across the Kerch Strait from 15 – 26 June and inserted into the sector that had been occupied by 101st Jäger Division.¹³³

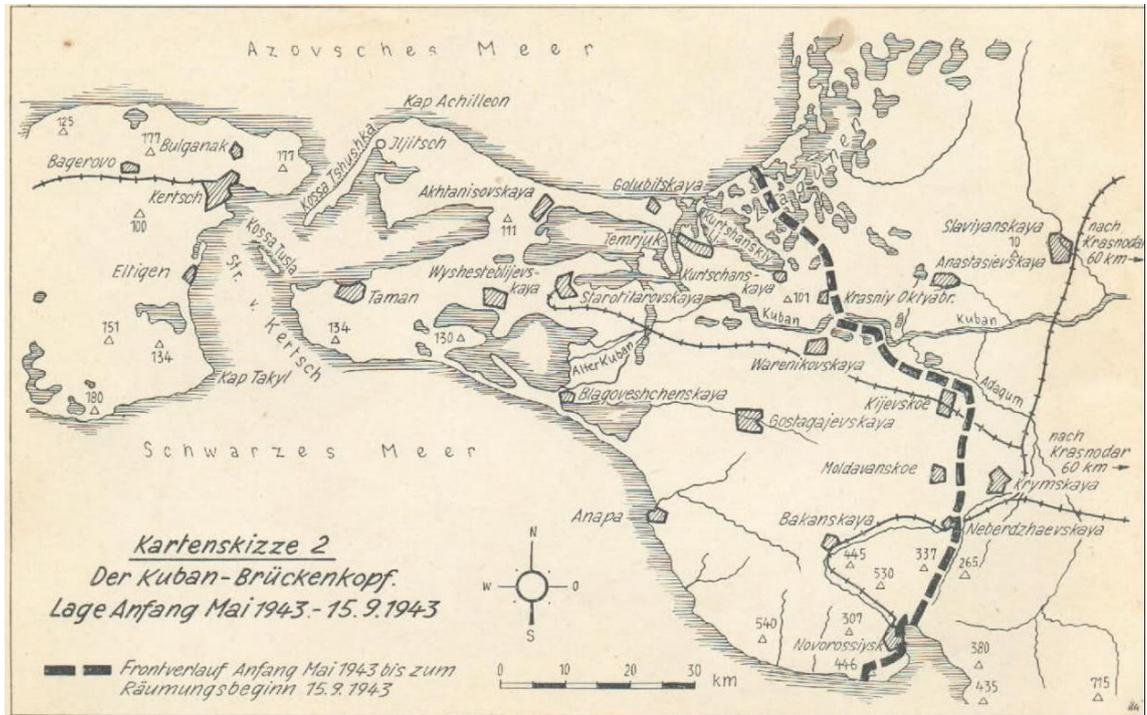


Figure 12: Frontline, May-September 1943¹³⁴

On 15 July, prisoner interrogations and observations of Soviet activity, such as mine clearance, reconnaissance patrols and traffic movements, suggested that an attack against XXXIV Corps in the hills around Moldavanskoe and Krymskaya was imminent.¹³⁵ Both sides fully understood that this sector was the key to the German defence of the whole Taman Peninsula.¹³⁶ The expected attack was launched at 04:00 the following morning and was concentrated against 97th Jäger Division and a hill known by the Germans as Hill 114.1. After a heavy artillery bombardment, the attack was launched with at least two rifle brigades, parts of two rifle divisions and one tank brigade, with significant air and artillery support.¹³⁷ Two penetrations of the German defensive line were initially made, on both sides of the main Krymskaya – Moldavanskoe road. The

¹³³ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, p. 359.

¹³⁴ http://tinypic.com/view.php?pic=987j1v&s=3#.U2zcVbko_Gg

¹³⁵ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7 (BArch RH 20-17/198), p. 27.

¹³⁶ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, p. 359.

¹³⁷ Armeekommando 17, Abteilung Ia: Kriegstagebuch Nr. 7, 1. Juli – 9. Okt. 1943 (BArch RH 20-17/198), p. 27.

northern penetration was thrown back by a counter-attack in the afternoon, but the southern breakthrough area was only partially regained, despite counter-attack efforts during the night and on the following day.¹³⁸ Further attacks by both sides over the next few days achieved little and sustained heavy losses.¹³⁹ Soviet reinforcements were brought forward for a renewed offensive that was launched at 05:30 on 22 July. On the following day, a breach was briefly forced between 97th Jäger Division and 98th Infantry Division, but an assault group formed by the latter counter-attacked and restored the connection. Further Soviet attacks in the last days of July and into August failed to achieve any significant breakthroughs.¹⁴⁰

On 24 July, as the fighting around Krymskaya was at its peak, the Soviets launched a separate attack against V Corps in the Neberdzhavskaya area to the southwest, with the aim of breaking through to Novorossiysk. This effort continued until 10 August, without success.¹⁴¹ In the second half of August, the intensity of the fighting in all sectors subsided considerably, and by mid-September, the Soviets had suspended all major offensive operations and were taking up positions to threaten the imminent German withdrawal.¹⁴² This was finally authorised by Hitler on 8 September.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Ibid., pp 28-32.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁴⁰ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, pp 360-2.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 362.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 363.

¹⁴³ Citino, *The Wehrmacht retreats*, p. 242.

Chapter IV: The Evacuation of the Kuban Bridgehead

Seventeenth Army's command had in fact been preparing for the withdrawal for some time and issued the order to begin Operation Kriemhild, the withdrawal of all German and Romanian forces from the Kuban Bridgehead to the Kerch Peninsula on the eastern tip of the Crimea, at 12:00 on 4 September.¹⁴⁴ The operation was to be carried out in three phases. First, an outer defensive line called the Large Gothic Position would be held. Next, the withdrawal to a second line, the Small Gothic Position, would be conducted through a series of intermediate positions, with the shortening of the line allowing divisions to be removed from the line in sequence and sent back to harbours in the western part of the Taman Peninsula. Finally, the remaining divisions would pull back through a second set of intermediate positions to the north-western tip of the Taman Peninsula, from where they would be ferried across the narrow Kerch Strait to the Crimea. Two alternate plans for the withdrawal had been drawn up: Kriemhild, which envisaged the withdrawal of all of the army's manpower and equipment, as well as everything of economic or military value, including most of the civilian population, over a 10 – 12-week period; and Brunhild, which proposed a 6 – 7-week plan in which the army and its equipment would be withdrawn, but infrastructure and goods would be destroyed.¹⁴⁵ Once the order to initiate Kriemhild was issued, a decision to switch to Brunhild would be decided mainly by the activity of the Soviet forces in this and other sectors of the front.¹⁴⁶

A number of measures were taken to facilitate the smooth transport of men, supplies and equipment during the operation: a "Forwarding Staff East" was set up in Starotitarovskaya to control the transport to the harbours and airfields on the Taman side of the Kerch Straits; a corresponding "Forwarding Staff West" was established in Kerch to oversee the onward transport of evacuated units, supplies and equipment; and a Roads Command section was set up in XXXIX Mountain Corps to implement traffic control.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7, (BArch RH 20-17/198), p. 129.

¹⁴⁵ Tieke, *The Caucasus and the oil*, p. 365.

¹⁴⁶ 'Aktennotiz über besprechung bei Armeechef am 4.9.43, 12:00 Uhr' in Sonderband Kriemhild (Bd. 3), 4. Sept. – 7. Okt. 1943 (BArch RH 20-17/214), fol. 17.

¹⁴⁷ Generalkommando XXXIX. Gebirgs-Armee Korps: Gefechtsbericht über den letzten Abschnitt der Räumung des Kuban-Brückenkopfes, 26. Sept. – 9. Okt. 1943 (BArch RH 24-49/123), p. 4.

The first division to be withdrawn was 125th Infantry, which was transported by sea to Kerch and by air from Gostagaevskaya on 8 – 9 September.¹⁴⁸ It and several of the other divisions that were withdrawn in the early part of the operation were transferred to Sixth Army (a new army that was formed after the loss of the original at Stalingrad), which was attempting to hold back the advance of 4th Ukrainian Front along the northern coast of the Azov Sea.¹⁴⁹ This advance would isolate the German forces in the Crimea when it swept beyond the Perekop Isthmus, the narrow bridge linking the peninsula to the mainland. Mindful of the supply complications that this would create, Seventeenth Army issued an order on 22 September encouraging soldiers to conserve ammunition whenever possible.¹⁵⁰

On 8 September, the order to go over from Operation Kriemhild to Operation Brunhild was issued.¹⁵¹ The withdrawal from the Large Gothic Position would begin on 20 September (X-Day) at the earliest, with the precise timing to be communicated by the army at least 3½ days before the jump-off. Ultimately, this date was brought forward to 15 September, by order of the commander of Army Group A, Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist.¹⁵² Each of the intermediate defensive positions was intended to be held for a maximum of three days, but the Small Gothic Position was to be prepared so that it could be defended for about three weeks.

The shortening of the defensive line would allow for the withdrawal of significant forces¹⁵³:

- V Corps: 9th and 73rd Infantry Divisions, 1st and 4th Romanian Mountain Divisions, with 19th Romanian Infantry Division being transferred to XXXIX Mountain Corps
- XXXIV Corps: 79th Infantry Division and 10th Romanian Infantry Division
- XXXIX Mountain Corps: 101 Jäger Division, possibly before X-Day.

¹⁴⁸ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7 (BArch RH 20-17/198), p. 138.

¹⁴⁹ Lexikon der Wehrmacht: 6. Armee:

<http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Gliederungen/Armeen/6Armee.htm> (18 June 2014).

¹⁵⁰ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7 (BArch RH 20-17/198), p. 169.

¹⁵¹ 'Zusatzbefehl Nr. 1 zu Unternehmen „Kriemhild“ bzw. „Brunhild“. AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 44/43' in Sonderband Kriemhild (Bd. 3), 4. Sept. – 7. Okt. 1943 (BArch. RH 20-17/214), fol. 30.

¹⁵² Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7 (BArch RH 20-17/198), p. 152.

¹⁵³ 'Zusatzbefehl Nr. 1 zu Unternehmen „Kriemhild“ bzw. „Brunhild“. AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 44/43' in Sonderband Kriemhild (Bd. 3), 4. Sept. – 7. Okt. 1943 (BArch. RH 20-17/214), fol. 30.

Each withdrawing division was assigned a specific march route and timetable:¹⁵⁴

Division	Assembly Area	March Route	Arrival	
			First Units	Final Units
10 th Romanian Infantry	Iliych	Dsghiginskoe – Starotitarovskaya – Vyshesteblievskaya	22 Sept.	26 Sept.
1 st Romanian Mountain	Taman	Westtrakt*	25 Sept.	27 Sept.
4 th Romanian Mountain	Taman	Westtrakt*	27 Sept.	28 Sept.
9 th Infantry	Iliych	Mittelweg*	27 Sept.	28 Sept.
79 th Infantry	Iliych	Schilfweg*	30 Sept.	1 Oct.
73 rd Infantry	Taman	Westtrakt*	30 Sept.	1 Oct.
9 th Romanian Cavalry	Taman	Mittelweg*	30 Sept.	1 Oct.

*: Westtrakt, Mittelweg and Schilfweg were three routes through the swampy region between the Kuban River and Kiziltashkiy Liman.

This would leave XXXIX Mountain Corps to defend the Small Gothic Position with the following divisions: 4th Mountain, 50th Infantry, 97th Jäger, 98th Infantry, 370th Infantry, and 19th Romanian Infantry.

On the night of 9 – 10 September, the Soviet 18th Army launched another landing operation at Novorossiysk. This time, they feigned a landing at Yuzhnaya Ozereika but launched the actual attack in the northern and western parts of Novorossiysk harbour.¹⁵⁵ Several beachheads were taken and were reinforced over the following two nights, allowing the group at the northern part of the harbour to break through the positions of the Romanian 20th Mountain Battalion on the coast road and link up with 47th Army.¹⁵⁶ Contrary to the Germans command's expectations, however, further reinforcements were not landed, and V Corps was able to pull out of the city in good

¹⁵⁴ 'Einzelheiten für Brunhild III, Anlage zu Gen. Kdo. XXXIX Geb. AK Ia Nr. 726/43, 5 Sept.' in Sonderband Kriemhild (Bd. 3), 4. Sept. – 7. Okt. 1943 (BArch RH 20-17/214), fol. 55.

¹⁵⁵ N. Khovrin and G. Morozov, 'Dostizhenie vnezapnosti v boevykh deistviyakh Chernomorskogo flota' in *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal*, no. 1 (1979), p. 41.

¹⁵⁶ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7 (BArch RH 20-17/198), pp 144-5.

order on the night of 15 – 16 September, having destroyed much of the port infrastructure.¹⁵⁷

At 19:00 on 15 September, the withdrawal from the Large to the Small Gothic Position began, with elements of V Corps pulling back to the Siegfried Checkpoint and XXXIV Corps to the Völker Checkpoint,¹⁵⁸ and on 17 September, the 10th Romanian Infantry Division and parts of the 1st Romanian Mountain Division (V Corps) were detached from the line and began their march back to the embarkation area at Taman. Both of these divisions had been completely transferred to the Crimea by 23 September.¹⁵⁹ Meanwhile the XXXIV Corps began moving back from the short Gernot Checkpoint into the Siegfried Checkpoint, forced back a day ahead of schedule by a Soviet attack against the centre of its positions.¹⁶⁰



Figure 13: Intermediate Positions during Seventeenth Army's Withdrawal¹⁶¹

On 18 September, the withdrawal of XXXIV Corps to the Siegfried Checkpoint was proceeding as planned, and the disengagement of divisions was accelerated when the

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., pp 158, 140.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 157.

¹⁵⁹ Romanian armed forces in the Second World War: the Taman bridgehead – 1943: (<http://www.worldwar2.ro/operatii/?article=13>) (28 May 2014).

¹⁶⁰ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7 (BArch RH 20-17/198), p. 161.

¹⁶¹ http://tinypic.com/view.php?pic=987j1v&s=3#.U2zcVbko_Gg.

order to remove 9th Infantry Division and 1st & 4th Romanian Mountain Divisions (all V Corps) from the line was issued. At 21:00, XXXIX Mountain Corps began its movement to the Harz Checkpoint and V Corps began pulling back into to the Völker Checkpoint.¹⁶²

On 20 September, the withdrawal of V Corps and XXXIV Corps into the Hagen Checkpoint and XXXIX Mountain Corps into the Rhone Checkpoint began¹⁶³. The move from the Völker to the Hagen Checkpoint meant that the harbour at Anapa was abandoned, and early on the morning of 21 September, a landing party of Soviet marines and parts of 5th Guards Tank Brigade took possession of the shattered town.¹⁶⁴

In an effort to disrupt the withdrawal operations on both flanks, the Soviets launched two landing operations on the night of 24 – 25 September.¹⁶⁵ On the Azov coast, a landing force made up of units from 389th Rifle Division and 369th Naval Infantry Battalion¹⁶⁶ was put ashore between the Kuban River Estuary and Golubitskaya, but was wiped out by noon, with 187 of 200 of the marines who landed being killed.¹⁶⁷ On the German right wing, elements of 55th Guards Infantry Division, 143rd Naval Infantry Battalion and 83rd Naval Infantry Brigade were landed in the vicinity of Lake Solenoye to the west of Blagoveshchenskaya. The defending Romanian 9th Cavalry Division was unable to eliminate this beachhead, but was able to seal it off and prevent it from expanding its position. The Romanians began their planned withdrawal from the Small Gothic position during the night of 25 – 26 September, and had been fully withdrawn over the Kerch Strait by 28 September.¹⁶⁸

The army's general staff section was flown out to Mariental in the Crimea on 26 September, with XXXIX Mountain Corps taking over command of all the forces remaining in the Small Gothic Position and V Corps assuming responsibility for the

¹⁶² Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7 (BArch RH 20-17/198), pp 163-4.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 166.

¹⁶⁴ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, pp 342-3.

¹⁶⁵ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7, p. 175.

¹⁶⁶ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, p. 347.

¹⁶⁷ Ilya V. Kiselev, 'Poteri Krasnoi armii i Chernomorskogo flota v desantnykh operatsiyakh 1941-1944 gg.' in *Bylye Gody*, no. 4 (2011), pp 39-43.

¹⁶⁸ Romanian armed forces in the Second World War: the Taman bridgehead – 1943: (<http://www.worldwar2.ro/operatii/?article=13>) (28 May 2014).

defence of the Kerch Peninsula.¹⁶⁹ At this point, Seventeenth Army's force remaining in the Kuban bridgehead amounted to:¹⁷⁰

- 65,000 men
- 800 motorcycles
- 1,100 cars
- 2,000 trucks
- 600 tracked vehicles
- 600 trailers
- 5,400 horse-drawn vehicles
- 15,000 horses
- 900 guns of all calibres

The beginning of the movement to the Vienna Position would leave no doubt that a full withdrawal from the Kuban was underway, so the time leading up to the start of this part of the operation was particularly tense, as the German commanders waited to see if the Soviets would launch a serious attack.¹⁷¹ During the night of 30 September – 1 October, an attack against the junction of 97th Jäger Division and 98th Infantry Division was repulsed with heavy enemy casualties.¹⁷²

At 20:00 on 1 October, the first withdrawal out of the Small Gothic Position began, with 98th Infantry Division and 97th Jäger Division moving back towards the Vienna Position, and on 3 October, the withdrawal of 19th Romanian Infantry Division from the right flank of the Small Gothic Position into the Bucharest position followed.¹⁷³ This gave up the last remaining major harbour at Taman. The 19th Infantry was the last Romanian division to be withdrawn. It reached its embarkation point on the morning of 3 October and had been completely transferred to the Crimea by the afternoon of 5 October.¹⁷⁴

At 20:00 on 4 October, the withdrawal from the Bucharest and Vienna Positions to the Berlin Position began, unhindered by the Soviets, and by 6 October, the whole of 370th Infantry Division had reached this position. The bulk of the division continued through

¹⁶⁹ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7 (BArch RH 20-17/198), p. 176.

¹⁷⁰ Generalkommando XXXIX. Gebirgs-Armee Korps: Gefechtsbericht über den letzten Abschnitt der Räumung des Kuban-Brückenkopfes, 26. Sept. – 9. Okt. 1943 (BArch RH 24-49/123), p. 22.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁷³ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7 (BArch RH 20-17/198), pp 186-8.

¹⁷⁴ Romanian armed forces in the Second World War: the Taman bridgehead – 1943: (<http://www.worldwar2.ro/operatii/?article=13>) (28 May 2014).

the Munich Position and on to the coast for evacuation, thus leaving 97th Jäger Division holding the Munich position.¹⁷⁵

Kriegsmarine forces in the Black Sea, under the command of Vice-Admiral Gustav Kieseritzky, had a number of tasks during the final stages of the withdrawal operation. These included securing the Kerch Strait and the Taman Peninsula coast along both flanks of the withdrawing army, providing smokescreen cover, bombarding enemy positions on the Taman peninsula, providing cargo space as part of the withdrawal operation, preparing the withdrawal of the last units and laying mines to protect the crossing transports from attack by the Soviet Black Sea Fleet.¹⁷⁶

The plan for the final transport was issued by the Kerch Straits Command on 6 October.¹⁷⁷ This order listed the last units to be withdrawn on as 97th Jäger Division and parts of 4th Mountain Division and 370th Infantry Division, along with the final elements of the Seventeenth Army troops, supporting flak troops and the garrison on Kosa Tuzla island. The specified embarkation points were Ilych, both sides of Maliy Kut and the south side of Kosa Tuzla. Most of the transports were to sail to Cape Yenikale and Zhukovka, to the east of Kerch, with some docking at Kerch Harbour's south mole and fishing port and at Cape Ak Burun and Kamysh Burun Bay, to the south of the harbour.

¹⁷⁵ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7 (BArch RH 20-17/198), p. 199.

¹⁷⁶ 'Brunhild Unternehmen. Admiral Schwarzes Meer Nr. 243/43 AI, 3.Oct. 1943' in Sonderband Kriemhild (Bd. 3), 4. Sept. – 7. Okt. 1943 (BArch RH 20-17/214), fol. 62.

¹⁷⁷ 'Einzelordnung für den übersetzverkehr, Nr. 15. Befehlshaber Straße Kertsch Ia/Org. Nr. 859/43 g. Kdos.' in Sonderband Kriemhild (Bd. 3), 4. Sept. – 7. Okt. 1943 (BArch RH 20-17/214), fol. 63.



Figure 14: Kerch Harbour (Photograph by Author)

Early on the morning of the 6 October, the Soviets landed about two companies from 83rd Marine Infantry Brigade on Kosa Tuzla, potentially representing a threat to the withdrawing transports and providing a springboard for a larger operation against the Crimea. The landing was reinforced the following afternoon, under the cover of a heavy fog.¹⁷⁸

On the night of 7 – 8 October, the withdrawal from the Munich to the Breslau Position began, with the final rearguards withdrawing at 03:00, undetected by the enemy, who brought the positions in the Munich position under heavy artillery fire until 05:00.¹⁷⁹ The Breslau Position split the remaining units in two, with Dinskoy Bay separating 13th Mountain Jäger Regiment, which would be transported from Maliy Kut on the southern side of the bay, from the remaining forces, which would board their transports at Ilych and the Kosa Chushka Spit. The final defensive lines, the Ulm and Stuttgart Positions, covered the landing stages at Ilych and Kosa Chushka, respectively.

During the day, the necessary transports were assembled at the three embarkation points, and loading began at 17:00. All the vehicles and artillery were successfully loaded after about 1½ hours, with the troops following. By 22:30, the last boats were pulling away from the shore, and the fifteen landing stages that had been constructed at Ilych

¹⁷⁸ Kiselev, 'Poteri Krasnoi armii i Chernomorskogo flota', pp 41-2.

¹⁷⁹ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7 (BArch RH 20-17/198), p. 201.

were blown up after the last boat pulled away.¹⁸⁰ At around the same time, the evacuation of Kosa Tuzla began, unhindered by the Soviet troops that remained on the island.¹⁸¹

At 00:10 on 9 October, the commander-in-chief of the Kerch Strait, Generalleutnant Walther Lucht, reported that all boats had left from Iliyeh, Kosa Chushka and Maliy Kut, and by 02:00, the last of these boats had reached the mainland. The final boat from Kosa Tuzla reached Cape Ak Burun at 04:00.¹⁸² At 07:30 that morning, Seventeenth Army's Chief of General Staff, Generalmajor Wolfdietrich Ritter von Xylander, transmitted a lengthy communiqué reviewing the campaign in the Kuban, including the defensive battles, the withdrawal and cooperation among the army, Luftwaffe and navy.¹⁸³ Stalin's order of the day commended all of the Soviet troops who took part in the battles on the Taman Peninsula, and the liberation was marked in Moscow that evening by an artillery salute of 20 salvos from 224 guns.¹⁸⁴

The respite for the soldiers of Seventeenth Army who were evacuated to the Crimea proved to be brief. As stated earlier, some divisions were transferred to Sixth Army, which was attempting in vain to halt the Soviet advance in southern Ukraine. Those that remained in the Crimea became isolated for a second time within a few weeks of their arrival, when the Soviets captured Perekop and sealed off the land corridor to the peninsula on 3 November. In early November, North Caucasus Front launched a landing operation at Kerch and Eltigen, a few miles to the south. An earlier operation here, in December 1941, had been a disaster, but this time, units of 18th and 56th Armies seized a beachhead and held it through the winter.¹⁸⁵

The offensive to recapture the Crimea was launched by 4th Ukrainian Front from Perekop and the forces in the Kerch Peninsula on 8 April 1944, and Seventeenth Army was

¹⁸⁰ Martin Krieger, 'Im letzten boot: Der sprung über der Straße von Kertsch' in M. Hartmann (ed.), *Jäger am Kuban: ausstellung einer Oberbayr. jäger division in verbindung mit dem stellv. Gen. Kdo. VII. A.K. Bad Tölz 26.3-16.4.1944* (Bad Tölz, 1944), p. 22.

¹⁸¹ Kriegstagebuch AOK 17 Ia, Nr. 7 (BArch RH 20-17/198), pp 202-3.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁸³ 'Morgenmeldung 9.10.1943. 07:30' in Befehle und Meldungen des OB der 17. Armee, Gen. d. Pioniere Jaenecke (BArch RH 20-17/773).

¹⁸⁴ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, pp 352-3.

¹⁸⁵ Erickson, *The road to Berlin*, pp 139-40.

quickly pushed back into Sevastopol.¹⁸⁶ The final assault on the city was launched on 5 May and it was recaptured on 9 May. A second evacuation by sea, to the Romanian Black Sea ports, was less successful than the Kuban operation. Rather than the short hop over the Kerch Strait, this operation involved a voyage of over 200 miles. Soviet bombers sank a significant number of ships, including the *Teja* and *Totila*, which were destroyed on 10 May with losses estimated as high as 10,000.¹⁸⁷ Fewer than 40,000 of Seventeenth Army's force of 150,000 in the Crimea were safely evacuated.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *When titans clashed: how the Red Army stopped Hitler* (Kansas, 1995), p. 191.

¹⁸⁷ Romanian armed forces in the Second World War: Operation "60,000" – 1944 (<http://worldwar2.ro/operatii/?article=776>) (5 June 2014).

¹⁸⁸ Glantz and House, *When titans clashed*, p. 191.

Chapter V: Conclusions

The failure of the landing operation at Yuzhnaya Ozereika and the simultaneous attack by 47th Army to the northeast of Novorossiysk denied the Soviets the possibility of quickly clearing the German and Romanian forces from the Kuban region. Seventeenth Army's subsequent defence of the Kuban bridgehead can be compared in some respects with a similar campaign that occurred at the opposite end of the Eastern Front between the autumn of 1944 and the end of the war. In early August 1944, the Soviet advance in the Baltic region cut the link between the German Army Group North and the rest of the front.¹⁸⁹ When the Soviet 51st Army reached Lithuanian port of Palanga on the Baltic coast on 10 October, the German Sixteenth and Eighteenth Armies were completely isolated in the Kurland Peninsula. Of the thirty-three divisions that were originally encircled, twelve were gradually evacuated by sea, leaving twenty-one that were renamed as Army Group Kurland and eventually surrendered at the end of the war after successfully defending against six major Soviet attacks.¹⁹⁰

As with the Kuban, Hitler refused to countenance any withdrawal from Kurland, and a number of increasingly heated arguments with Heinz Guderian over the matter were a factor in Guderian's dismissal as Chief of Staff of the Army on 28 March 1945.¹⁹¹ The reasons given for retaining the forces on the Baltic coast had been to secure the withdrawal of German forces from Norway and Finland after the Finns agreed an armistice with the Soviets in September 1944, to protect the shipments of Swedish and Norwegian ore and minerals that were so vital to the German war industries and to enable the evacuation of as many German civilians as possible from East Prussia.¹⁹² The bulk of the German forces in Norway and Finland remained in place until the end of the war,¹⁹³ and the Swedish government halted all trade with Germany at the end of 1944.¹⁹⁴ The evacuation of civilians under the codename Operation Hannibal, however, continued until the very last days of the war, as an array of merchant and naval vessels,

¹⁸⁹ Franz Kurowski, *Bridgehead Kurland: the six epic battles of Heeresgruppe Kurland* (Winnipeg, 2002), p. 10.

¹⁹⁰ Erickson, *The road to Berlin*, p. 420.

¹⁹¹ Antony Beevor, *Berlin: the downfall 1945* (London, 2002), pp 89, 152.

¹⁹² Kurowski, *Bridgehead Kurland*, pp 2-3.

¹⁹³ John Keegan, *The Second World War* (London, 1989), pp 311, 426.

¹⁹⁴ Gunnar M. Hägglöf, 'A test of neutrality: Sweden in the Second World War' in *International Affairs*, xxxvi, no. 2, (Apr. 1960), p. 165.

under the command of Generaladmiral Oskar Kummetz transported over two million people from ports along the Baltic coast to the German heartland.¹⁹⁵

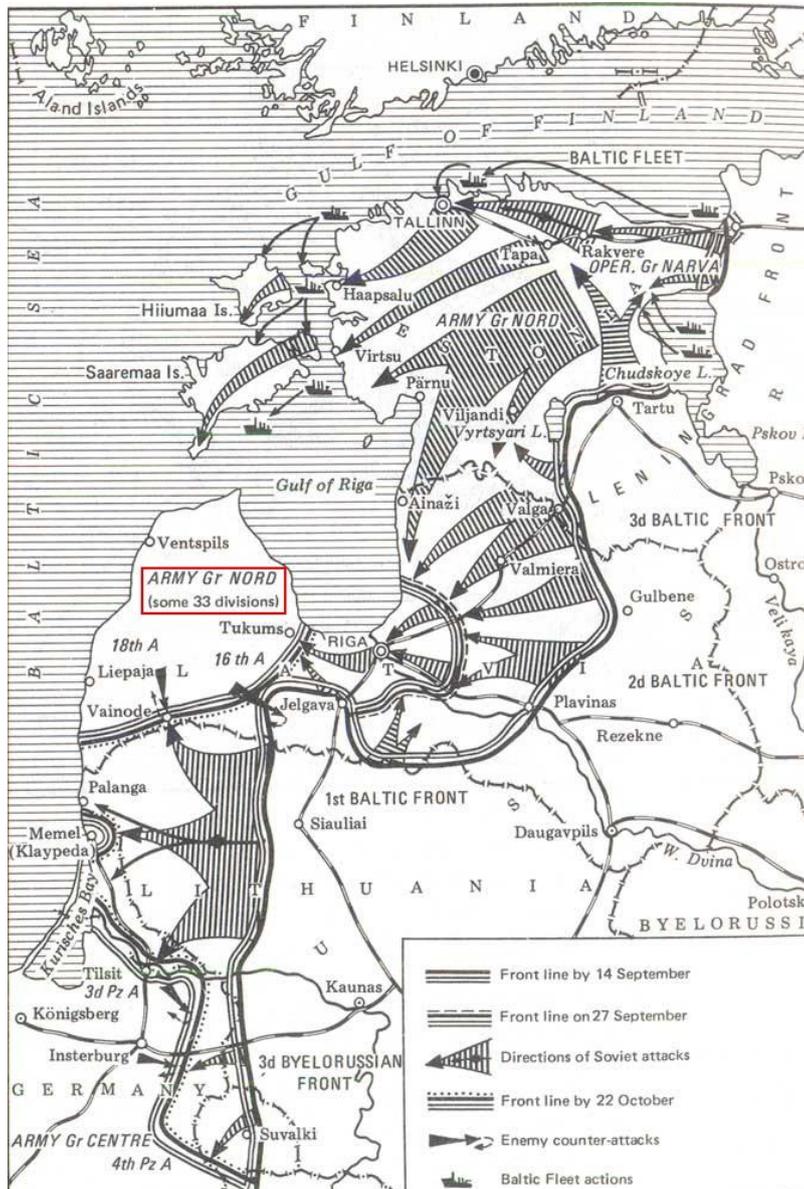


Figure 15: The Baltic Offensive Operation and the Kurland Bridgehead¹⁹⁶

In contrast, the rationale for the retention of the Kuban Bridgehead was ostensibly offensive, as a springboard for a renewed offensive into the Caucasus. The possibility of this occurring was small from the start and became increasingly implausible as Soviet offensives pushed westwards along large sections of the front. The complete failure of

¹⁹⁵ Max Hastings, *Armageddon: the battle for Germany 1944-45* (London, 2004), p. 328.

¹⁹⁶ Culture.ru: Baltic Offensive Operation. 14 September-22 October 1944: (<http://cultureru.com/baltic-offensive-operation-14-september-22-october-1944/>) (28 May 2014).

Operation Neptune showed with absolute certainty that Seventeenth Army had lost any offensive capacity or purpose in the Kuban. At the very most, it could be argued that it provided a buffer against an attack against the Crimea across the Kerch Strait, although given that the Soviets were content to wait six months after the land connection to the Crimea was severed before they launched a concerted attack on the peninsula, even after the Kerch–Eltigen Operation had gained a reasonably significant foothold, this appears not to have been a major priority. Ultimately, Seventeenth Army was one of many German units and formations that fell victim to Hitler’s “stand fast” orders. The first such order was issued in January 1942 to a series of German pockets in the northern and central parts of the front that had been bypassed and isolated by the Soviet winter counter-offensive. The successful defence and relief of pockets at Demyansk, Rzhev, and Mozhaisk, among others, was ultimately due to a combination of the tenacity and skill of the defending troops and the Luftwaffe crews that supplied some of them by air and the Soviet command’s over-ambitious aims for their offensives. Unsurprisingly, Hitler saw only the former and from then on became increasingly obsessive about holding ground, regardless of the ability of the forces to do so or of the resulting, often disastrous, consequences.¹⁹⁷

The failure of the Soviet spring and summer offensives to force a decisive breakthrough and push the Germans from the Kuban can be attributed to a number of factors, including a lack of forces. Through 1943, North Caucasus fielded four combined-armies and one air army, far below the strengths of some other Fronts at key locations and times. In early 1943, for example, Western Front, which was deployed on the vital Moscow axis, contained eleven armies, one air army and three independent tank corps. As the focus switched to Kursk in the summer, Central and Voronezh Fronts each had six armies, including one tank army, one air army and two tank corps. Armour in particular was concentrated at these key sectors: North Caucasus Front did not field any tank or mechanised unit larger than a brigade, meaning that strong armoured second-echelon forces were rarely available to exploit the penetrations that were forced in the German lines on a number of occasions.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Glantz and House, *When titans clashed*, p. 91.

¹⁹⁸ Glantz, *Colossus reborn*, pp 142-3.

Supplying the forces in the Caucasus was another major difficulty. At the extreme southern end of the front, the Kuban was far from the two main production areas in the Upper Volga and Ural regions. Much of the equipment coming from these areas had to be shipped across the Caspian Sea, as did lend-lease supplies coming through the Persian corridor. The poor road and rail network meant that many supplies were then brought to the southern Black Sea ports and transported by ship to the ports closer to the front line, particularly during the early months of 1943, when heavy rains washed away many roads.¹⁹⁹ Food was also often in short supply, even though the Kuban Steppe is a rich agricultural area. In 1937, 409,800 hectares in the Krasnodar Krai administrative region had been given over to cereal farming, but even before the German occupation, the effects of the war had caused production to plummet, with the July 1942 harvest delivering only about ten percent of the expected yield. In 1943, although a large part of the agricultural region had been recaptured, the poor weather took a further toll on the harvest and the yields at most of the state farms remained well below expectations.²⁰⁰ Sniper Maria Galyskhina of the 57th Marine Infantry Brigade recalled that in March 1943, rations could consist of a handful of mouldy corn and that soldiers resorted to throwing grenades into rivers to try to catch a few fish. She also described how ammunition supplies were virtually exhausted.²⁰¹

Finally, the performance of and quality of the Red Army must be examined. The Kuban campaign took place in what Soviet and Russian historians have termed the second period of the Great Patriotic War, which began with the counter-offensive at Stalingrad in November 1942 and lasted until the end of 1943. This was the transitional phase between the first period, in which the Red Army and the Soviet state were struggling for survival, and the third period, in which the Red Army had decisively seized the strategic initiative. It was during the second period of the war that the Red Army restructured itself into a modern force that was capable of matching and eventually defeating the Wehrmacht, but this transition was not straightforward and there were many painful lessons.²⁰² In a rare candid passage in his book, Grechko briefly discusses some of the failings during the campaign in the Caucasus, notably the shambles of the Yuzhnaya

¹⁹⁹ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, p. 305.

²⁰⁰ Dmitry Andreevich Panarin, 'Zernovoe khozyaistvo sovkhozov Kubani v gody Velikoi otechestvennoi voiny' in *Bylye Gody: Rossiyskiy istoricheskaya zhurnal*, no. 1, (2012), pp 50-2.

²⁰¹ Michael Jones, *Total war: from Stalingrad to Berlin* (London, 2011), p. 78.

²⁰² Glantz, *Colossus reborn*, pp 3-5.

Ozereika landing and the Krasnodar offensive operation in February 1943, in which he claims that the overly cautious approach of the North Caucasus Front command allowed the retreating Germans time to reorganise their forces and establish new defensive positions. Cooperation between armour and infantry was often poor, with tanks frequently becoming isolated from the supporting infantry.²⁰³

The greatest failing, however, was arguably the complete inability of the Soviet forces to disrupt German shipping between the Crimea and Kuban. On 5 February, the People's Commissar of the Navy Nikolai Kuznetsov issued a decree ordering that a blockade of all German-held ports between Anapa and Feodosiya be implemented using aircraft, surface ships and submarines. After about a month, during which these forces failed to sink even a single German vessel (a few barges and small boats sank after hitting mines), the effort was abandoned. Through the spring and summer, sporadic attempts to attack German shipping from the air and with torpedo boats were launched. This did force the Germans to restrict their use of the port at Anapa and to increase convoy protection, but the volume of traffic between the Crimea and Kuban was barely affected. As Seventeenth Army began its withdrawal, the Black Sea Fleet was given the task of attacking the convoys, but a series of attempted torpedo-boat raids into the Kerch Strait achieved nothing. Air attacks succeeded in sinking one German torpedo boat, two minelayers, two landing barges and three lighters, but this was just a tiny fraction of the 240 vessels of various types and sizes that were used in the evacuation. The final phase of the withdrawal was completely unhindered after the destroyer leader *Kharkov* and the destroyers *Besposchadnyi* and *Baikiy* were sunk by a Stuka attack on 6 February, with the loss of over 650 lives. After this disaster, Stavka suspended all operations by large ships in the Black Sea.²⁰⁴ The Luftwaffe played a valuable role in the supply and evacuation operations, but it had lost almost 500 transport aircraft as well as many fighters, bombers and Stukas at Stalingrad and it is implausible that it would have been able to maintain supplies to Seventeenth Army if the Soviet blockade effort had been able to significantly disrupt sea transport.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, pp 304-5.

²⁰⁴ Ilya Viktorovich Kiselev, 'Operatsii Chernomorskogo flota po blokada Tamanskogo poluostrova v 1943 g.' in *Bylye Gody: Rossiyskiy istoricheskaya zhurnal*, no. 4, (Dec. 2009), pp 66-8.

²⁰⁵ Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad* (London, 1998), p. 398.

The resources of the Caucasus, particularly its oil, were vital to the Soviet economy in the early years of the war. In 1940, for example, the Baku fields supplied just over seventy percent of all the oil extracted in the Soviet Union. These oil reserves also lay behind the planning for Operation Blue, as Germany had no reserves of its own. Ironically, before the war, the Western powers had briefly considered bombing the Baku fields, using British and French aircraft based in Iraq and Syria, respectively, as a means of ensuring that oil could not be transferred to Germany under the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. As the German advance began to present a serious threat in the summer of 1942, however, production was dramatically scaled back and many wells were capped. In October over 10,000 oil workers were transferred to regions including the Volga, the Urals and Central Asia to develop new fields. This enterprise was so successful that even as the threat to the Caucasus receded and production was restarted, the relative importance of the Baku fields to the Soviet war effort and economy had already begun to decrease.²⁰⁶ In a relatively short period of time, therefore, the combination of the declining strength of the Wehrmacht to the point where offensive operations were no longer possible and the Soviet focus on other sectors of the front as the threat to the Caucasus receded and new oil reserves were opened saw the Kuban and North Caucasus region decline from being of vital strategic importance to both sides to a secondary, almost forgotten, front that is now merely a footnote in many histories of the war.

²⁰⁶ Vagif Agayev, Fuad Akhundov, Fikrat T. Aliyev and Mikhail Agarunov, 'World War II and Azerbaijan' in *Azerbaijan International*, iii, no. 2 (Summer 1995), pp 50-55, 78.

Appendix I: Orders of Battle

Seventeenth Army, 5 February 1943²⁰⁷

Armeoberkommando 17

LII Army Corps

13th Panzer Division
2nd Romanian Mountain Division
50th Infantry Division
370th Infantry Division

XXXXIX Mountain Corps

46th Infantry Division
1st Mountain Division
4th Mountain Division

XXXXIV Army Corps (Gruppe de Angelis)

198th Infantry Division
125th Infantry Division
101st Jäger Division
97th Jäger Division

Romanian Cavalry Corps

9th Romanian Cavalry Division
6th Romanian Cavalry Division

V Army Corps

5th Luftwaffe Field Division
19th Romanian Infantry Division
3rd Romanian Mountain Division
9th Infantry Division
73rd Infantry Division
10th Romanian Infantry Division

The Slovakian Mobile Division was being transported out of the Kuban Bridgehead on this date.

²⁰⁷ 'Gliederung der Armee (Stand von 5.2.1943), AOK 17, Ia Nr. 10640/43 g. Kdos.' in Kriegsgliederung der Armee, 5. Feb. – 25. Juni 1943 (BArch RH 20-17/179).

Seventeenth Army, 8 March 1943²⁰⁸

Armeoberkommando 17

XXXXIX Mountain Corps

13th Panzer Division
2nd Romanian Mountain Division
50th Infantry Division
370th Infantry Division
4th Mountain Division
1st Mountain Division

XXXXIV Corps

19th Romanian Infantry Division
101st Jäger Division
97th Jäger Division
3rd Romanian Mountain Division
9th Infantry Division

V Corps (Gruppe Wetzel)

73rd Infantry Division
125th Infantry Division

Romanian Cavalry Corps

9th Romanian Cavalry Division
6th Romanian Cavalry Division

The 46th Infantry Division was being transported out of the Kuban Bridgehead on this date.

²⁰⁸ 'Gliederung der Armee (Stand von 8.3.43), AOK 17, Ia Nr. 11120/43 g. Kdos.' in Kriegsgliederung der Armee, 5. Feb. – 25. Juni 1943 (BArch RH 20-17/179).

Seventeenth Army, 25 June 1943²⁰⁹

Armeeoberkommando 17

XXXXIX Mountain Corps

125th Infantry Division
Kampfgruppe Brücker
50th Infantry Division
370th Infantry Division

XXXXIV Army Corps

3rd Romanian Mountain Division
10th Romanian Infantry Division
79th Infantry Division
101st Jäger Division
97th Jäger Division

V Army Corps (Gruppe Wetzel)

9th Infantry Division
Kampfgruppe von Bünau (73rd Infantry Division + 1st Romanian Mountain Division)
Kampfgruppe Kress (4th Mountain Division + 6th Romanian Cavalry Division)
19th Romanian Infantry Division
9th Romanian Infantry Division

Romanian Cavalry Corps

9th Romanian Cavalry Division
19th Romanian Infantry Division

Army Reserve

98th Infantry Division
13th Panzer Division

²⁰⁹ 'Gliederung der Armee (Stand von 25.6.43), AOK 17, Ia Nr. 12820/43 g. Kdos.' in Kriegsgliederung der Armee, 5. Feb. – 25. Juni 1943 (BArch RH 20-17/179).

North Caucasus Front, 1 May 1943²¹⁰

9th Army

9th Rifle Corps

34th Rifle Brigade
43rd Rifle Brigade
157th Rifle Brigade
256th Rifle Brigade

11th Rifle Corps

19th Rifle Brigade
84th Rifle Brigade
131st Rifle Brigade

276th Rifle Division
351st Rifle Division
57th Rifle Brigade

18th Army

16th Rifle Corps

51st Rifle Brigade
107th Rifle Brigade
165th Rifle Brigade

20th Rifle Corps

8th Guards Rifle Brigade
83rd Rifle Brigade
255th Rifle Brigade

22nd Rifle Corps

103rd Rifle Brigade
111th Rifle Brigade

176th Rifle Division
318th Rifle Division

37th Army

295th Rifle Division
389th Rifle Division
395th Rifle Division

56th Army

3rd Rifle Corps

9th Guards Rifle Brigade
83rd Guards Rifle Brigade
9th Rifle Brigade
60th Rifle Brigade
155th Rifle Brigade

10th Guards Rifle Corps

4th Guards Rifle Brigade
5th Guards Rifle Brigade
6th Guards Rifle Brigade
7th Guards Rifle Brigade
9th Guards Rifle Brigade
10th Guards Rifle Brigade

11th Guards Rifle Corps

2nd Guards Rifle Division
32nd Guards Rifle Division

20th Mechanised Brigade
242nd Mechanised Brigade
61st Rifle Division
216th Rifle Division
317th Rifle Division
383rd Rifle Division
92nd Tank Brigade
151st Tank Brigade

58th Army

77th Rifle Division
89th Rifle Division
414th Rifle Division
417th Rifle Division

²¹⁰ Russian Military Forum: Kuban 1943:

<http://www.network54.com/Forum/116312/message/1104548561/Kuban+194> (30 May 2014).

North Caucasus Front, July 1943²¹¹

108th Guards Rifle Division
109th Guards Rifle Division
124th Heavy Howitzer Brigade
125th Heavy Howitzer Brigade
255th Naval Infantry Brigade
5th Guards Tank Brigade
63rd Tank Brigade
83rd Naval Infantry Brigade

18th Army

10th Guards Corps

5th Guards Rifle Brigade
6th Guards Rifle Brigade
7th Guards Rifle brigade
77th Mountain Division

16th Rifle Corps

2nd Guards Rifle Division
32nd Guards Rifle Division

20th Rifle Corps

22nd Rifle Corps

318th Rifle Division
417th Rifle Division

132nd Tank Battalion
176th Rifle Division
216th Rifle Division
8th Guards Rifle Brigade
81st Naval Infantry Brigade
107th Rifle Brigade

58th Army

295th Rifle Division
414th Rifle Division
77th Rifle Division
89th Rifle Division

56th Army

3rd Mountain Corps

242nd Mountain Division
83rd Mountain Division
9th Mountain Division

20th Mountain Division
257th Rifle Division
317th Rifle Division
328th Rifle Division
339th Rifle Division
353rd Rifle Division
383rd Rifle Division
61st Rifle Division
62nd Artillery Brigade

9th Army

11th Rifle Corps

131st Rifle Brigade
19th Rifle Brigade
57th Rifle Brigade
84th Naval Rifle Brigade

11th Guards Corps

55th Guards Rifle Division
10th Guards Rifle Brigade
9th Guards Rifle Brigade
133rd Rifle Brigade
43rd Rifle Brigade

9th Independent Corps

301st Rifle Division
157th Rifle Brigade
256th Rifle Brigade
34th Rifle Brigade

276th Rifle Division
351st Rifle Division

²¹¹ Kursk – Russian OB – North Caucasus Front:

<http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/town/avenue/vy75/rusobnc.htm> (28 May 2014).

Appendix II: Biographical Sketches

	<p>Allmendinger, Karl²¹² 3 February 1891 (Abtsgmünd, Württemberg) – 2 October 1965 (Ellwangen, Baden-Württemberg)</p> <p>Allmendinger served in a fusilier regiment during the First World War and was retained in the 100,000-strong Reichswehr after the war. During the campaign in France, he was on the staff of V Corps, and in October 1940, he took command of 5th Infantry Division, which was part of Army Group Centre during Barbarossa. He spent the first half of 1943 as an instructor on divisional command courses in Berlin, before taking command of V Corps on 1 July. In July 1944, after the loss of the Crimea, he was placed on the Fuhrer Reserve list. He was arrested by U.S. forces at the end of the war, but was released in late 1947.</p> <p>Awards: Knight's Cross (17 Jul. 1941), Oak Leaves (13 Dec. 1942)</p>
	<p>de Angelis, Maximilian²¹³ 2 October 1889 (Budapest) – 6. December 1974 (Graz)</p> <p>De Angelis served in the Austrian Army during the First World War, and played a major role in the integration of Austrian forces into the Wehrmacht. In the summer of 1939, he commanded 76th Infantry Division in the French campaign before being transferred to Poland and then to southern Russia. He took command of XXXXIV Corps in January 1942 and held this position almost continuously until April 1944, when he was moved to Sixth Army and then Second Panzer Army. After the war, he was imprisoned in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union and was released in 1955. Awards: Knight's Cross (9 Feb. 1942), Oak Leaves (12 Nov. 1943).</p>
	<p>Brezhnev, Leonid Ilich²¹⁴ 19 December 1906 (Kamenskoe, now Dniprodzerzhinsk, Ukraine) – 10 November 1982 (Moscow)</p> <p>Brezhnev spent his early career as a land surveyor and metallurgical engineer. He joined the Communist Party in 1931, and in 1939 he was appointed Secretary of the Dnepropetrovsk Regional Committee. During the war, he held senior positions in the political departments of Southern Front, the Black Sea Group, 18th Army and 4th Ukrainian Front. After the war, he rose through the party ranks, and on 14 October 1964, he was elected as First Secretary of the Central Committee, effectively becoming the leader of the country until his death in 1982. Awards: Hero of the Soviet Union (four times), Order of Lenin (eight times), numerous others.</p>

²¹² <http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/A/Allmendinger-R.htm> (5 June 2014).

²¹³ <http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/A/AngelisM-R.htm> (22 May 2014).

²¹⁴ http://www.warheroes.ru/hero/hero.asp?Hero_id=1614 (9 June 2014).

	<p>Grechko, Andrei Antonovich²¹⁵ 17 Oct. 1903 (Golodaevka, Rostov Oblast) – 26 Apr. 1976 (Moscow)</p> <p>Grechko served in the 11th Cavalry Division in the Civil War and participated in counter-insurgency operations in Chechnya and Dagestan in the mid-1920s. He graduated from the Frunze Military Academy in Moscow in 1936. During the Caucasus campaign, he commanded 12th, 47th and 18th Armies, and was subsequently appointed Deputy Commander of 1st Ukrainian Front. After the war, he commanded the Kiev Military District and Soviet forces in Germany. He was appointed Deputy Defence Minister in November 1957 and Defence Minister in April 1967, holding this position until his death. Awards: Hero of the Soviet Union (twice).</p>
	<p>Jaenecke, Erwin²¹⁶ 22 April 1890 (Freren, Lower Saxony) – 3 July 1960 (Cologne)</p> <p>Jaenecke served as an engineer in the First World War. In the inter-war years he took up a wide range of positions, including a posting to the Condor Legion in the Spanish Civil War. After several quartermaster posts, he took command of 389th Infantry Division on 1 February 1942. The division took part in some of the bloodiest fighting in Stalingrad, and Jaenecke was wounded on 17 January 1943 and was one of the last senior officers to be flown out of the pocket. After a short spell with LXXXII Corps in France, he took command of Seventeenth Army in June 1943. He was court-martialled and forced into retirement after the loss of the Crimea. He was held as a prisoner of war in the Soviet Union until 1955. Awards: Knight's Cross (9 October 1942).</p>
	<p>Konrad, Rudolf²¹⁷ 7 March 1891 (Kulmbach, Bavaria) – 10 June 1964 (Munich)</p> <p>Konrad served as an artillery officer in the First World War, and on the staff of the 7th Division in the post-war Reichswehr. After several regimental command positions, he held staff positions in the XVIII Corps, with which he took part in the Polish Campaign in 1939, and then with Second Army in the French Campaign. He was appointed to command 7th Mountain Division in the autumn of 1941, but had not taken up the position before he was promoted to command XXXIX Mountain Corps. After the destruction of the corps in the Crimea, he was transferred to the Führer Reserve. In January 1945, he took command of LXVIII Corps, which fought in Hungary and surrendered in southern Austria. Awards: Knights Cross (1 Aug. 1942).</p>

²¹⁵ http://www.warheroes.ru/hero/hero.asp?Hero_id=1225 (9 June 2014).

²¹⁶ <http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/J/JaeneckeE-R.htm> (9 June 2014).

²¹⁷ Picture: <http://www.wwii-photos-maps.com/generalofficers/slides/Rudolf%20Konrad.html>,
Text: <http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/K/KonradRudolf-R.htm> (27 May 2014).

	<p>Kunikov, Tsesar Lvovich²¹⁸ 23 June 1909 (Rostov-on-Don) – 14 February 1943 (Gelendzhik)</p> <p>Kunikov worked as a mechanic in Moscow before he joined the Frunze Naval Academy in Leningrad, but left after a few months due to ill-health. He held a number of military engineering positions in Moscow before being transferred south, where he became a patrol boat battalion commander in the Azov Flotilla. In July 1942, he was appointed commander of the Black Sea Fleet's 305th Independent Marine Infantry Battalion. After leading the landing operation at Stanichka on the night of 3 – 4 February 1943, he was wounded by a mine explosion on 12 February and died in hospital two days later. Awards: Hero of the Soviet Union and Orders of Lenin, Red Banner and Alexander Nevsky (all posthumous).</p>
	<p>Oktyabrskiy, Filipp Sergeevich²¹⁹ 23 October 1899 (Lukshino, Kalinin Oblast) – 8 July 1969 (Sevastopol)</p> <p>Oktyabrskiy joined the Red Navy in 1918. He graduated from Petrograd University in 1922 and briefly worked in the Red Army's propaganda department, before undertaking further study at the Frunze Naval Academy. Through the 1930s, he attained increasingly senior commands in the Baltic and Pacific Fleets and the Amur Flotilla. He was appointed commander of the Black Sea Fleet in March 1939. He was removed from this command after the Yuzhnaya Ozereika debacle, but reinstated a year later. After the war, he served as Deputy Commander of the Navy and headed the Nakhimov Naval Academy in Sevastopol. Awards: Hero of the Soviet Union (20 Feb. 1958).</p>
	<p>Ruoff, Richard²²⁰ 18 August 1883 (Meesbach, Württemberg) – 30 March 1967 (Tübingen, Baden-Württemberg)</p> <p>Ruoff served in the infantry in the First World War, winning the Iron Cross. After the war, he held battalion and regimental commands, before taking up a number of staff positions in the expanding Wehrmacht. In May 1939, he was appointed commander of V Corps, which participated in the French campaign and in the Netherlands, before moving east. In early 1942, he commanded Fourth Panzer Army, before taking over Seventeenth Army on 1 June. On his replacement by Jaenecke just over a year later, he was transferred to the Führer Reserve. Awards: Knights Cross (29 June 1941).</p>

²¹⁸ http://www.warheroes.ru/hero/hero.asp?Hero_id=258 (22 May 2014).

²¹⁹ http://www.warheroes.ru/hero/hero.asp?Hero_id=1733 (29 May 2014).

²²⁰ Picture: <http://www.wwii-photos-maps.com/battle-of-stalingrad/slides/Richard%20Ruoff.html>

Text: <http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/R/RuoffRichard-R.htm> (28 May 2014).



Vladimirskiy, Lev Anatolevich²²¹

27 September 1903 (Guryev, now Atyrau, Kazakhstan) – 7 September 1973 (Moscow)

Vladimirskiy joined the Red Army during the Civil War and the Black Sea Fleet in 1932. During the Spanish Civil War, he served on a French ship that supplied weapons to Communist forces. He was appointed Rear-Admiral just before the German invasion, and participated in the evacuations of Odessa and Sevastopol. He took command of the fleet (replacing Oktyabrskiy) in May 1943, overseeing the Kerch-Eltigen operation. He was transferred to the Baltic Fleet as a squadron commander in May 1944. In 1954 he was appointed chief of the General Staff of the Navy. Awards: Order of Lenin (twice), Order of the red Banner (three times).



Wetzel, Wilhelm²²²

17 July 1888 (Sarbke, Pomerania) – 4 July 1964 (Hamburg)

Wetzel served with distinction in the First World War and remained in the Reichswehr after the war. In the summer of 1939, he was appointed to command the newly-formed 255th Infantry Division, which he led in France and in Army Group Centre in the initial stages of the attack on the Soviet Union. In January 1942, he was promoted to command V Corps, holding this position until July 1943. After a spell in the Führer Reserve, he held a number of administrative commands, including LXVI Reserve Corps and Wahrkreis (Military District) X.

Awards: Knight's Cross (7 Aug. 1942)

²²¹ http://flot.com/blog/historyofNVMU/1258.php?sphrase_id=7163983 (11 June 2014).

²²² Picture: <http://www.wwii-photos-maps.com/generalofficers/slides/Wilhelm%20Wetzel.html>,
Text: <http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/W/WetzelWilhelm.htm> (22 May 2014).

Appendix III: Awards

 A gold-colored shield-shaped award. At the top is an eagle with spread wings. Below the eagle are the numbers '19' and '43' flanking a central emblem. The word 'KUBAN' is embossed across the middle, with 'LAGUNEN' below it. At the bottom, there is a map of the Kuban region with the word 'KRYMSKAYA' and '1943'.	<p>Kuban Shield²²³</p> <p>The Kuban Shield was instituted on 21 September 1943. For army and auxiliary forces, the following criteria were required for an award:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To have served in the bridgehead for at least 60 days• To have been wounded in the bridgehead• To have served during one of twelve specific major operations <p>Awards to Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine personnel were assessed using a points system. The shield is made from sheet metal or zinc, treated with a bronzed wash.</p>
 A circular gold medal hanging from a ribbon with blue, green, and red stripes. The medal features a landscape scene with a mountain and a river. The text 'ЗА ОБОРОНУ КАВКАЗА' is visible around the edge.	<p>Medal for the Defence of the Caucasus²²⁴</p> <p>This award was established on 1 May 1944 and was awarded to all military personnel and civilians who took part in the defence of the Caucasus. Confirmation of at least 3 months service in the Caucasus between July 1942 and October 1943 was required. The medal is made of brass, and about 870,000 were issued.</p>

²²³ Picture: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kubanschild.jpg>. Text: http://www.wehrmacht-awards.com/campaign_awards/shields/kuban.htm (29 May 2014).

²²⁴ Picture: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Defense_of_the_caucasus_OBVERSE.jpg. Text: <http://soviet-awards.com/medals13.htm> (29 May 2014).

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