THE CAUCASUS
1942–43
Kleist’s race for oil

ROBERT FORCZYK
ILLUSTRATED BY STEVE NOON
THE CAUCASUS 1942–43

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Series editor Marcus Cowper
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The strategic situation on 25 July 1942: German objectives.

1. Heeresgruppe A has three primary objectives: Maikop, Grozny and Baku. It is expected to reach these within 15-60 days.
2. Heeresgruppe B's objective is Stalingrad.
3. Panzerarmee was originally intended to support both army groups, but is shifted to support Heeresgruppe B exclusively.
4. Heeresgruppe A's secondary objectives include clearing the Kuban.
5. Heeresgruppe A's secondary objectives also include crossing the Caucasus Mountains to occupy the Transcaucasia.
6. Potential follow-on German objectives include an advance into northern Iran.
7. After the loss of the Stalingrad–Tikhoretsk rail link, the North Caucasus Front is heavily dependent upon the sea route across the Caspian Sea for reinforcements.
8. Allied lend-lease equipment arrives via the Persian Corridor.
9. Although the Soviets are concerned that Turkey could intervene on the German side, the Turkish 3rd Army (12 divisions) is in no position to threaten the Caucasus.
10. The Soviets are rushing to complete the Astrakhan–Gudermes rail line, which will be ready by 4 August.
ORIGINS OF THE CAMPAIGN

If I don’t get the oil of Maikop and Grozny, then I must liquidate the war.
Adolf Hitler, 1 June 1942

Traditionally, Germany preferred to fight its wars with Bewegungskrieg (manoeuvre warfare) and by the early 20th century this required considerable quantities of oil both to power a mechanised military machine and to operate the war industries at home. Hitler’s Third Reich developed powerful Panzer-Divisionen and a strong Luftwaffe in order to conduct its wars of aggression, but these tools were particularly dependent upon assured access to large stockpiles of fuel. The problem was that Germany was an oil-poor nation and had to import about 70 per cent of its petroleum products in 1939. The unlikely solution was to import oil from the Third Reich’s primary enemy – the Soviet Union. By signing the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939, Hitler was able to thwart the British blockade initiated at the outset of World War II and to gain access to the Soviet Union’s huge oil reserves, in return for German financial credits and industrial technology. By 1940, Germany was receiving about 51,000 tons of oil per month from the Soviet Union, mostly from the oil-rich Caucasus region. Over the course of the 18-month economic pact, Germany received 912,000 tons of oil from the Soviet Union, which gave the Wehrmacht the ability to mount the lightning campaigns of 1939–41.

Slovak troops entering Rostov, July 1942. Although the 1st (Slovak) Mobile Infantry Division (or Fast Division) was an integral part of 1. Panzerarmee, it was misused in the Caucasus as a second-echelon unit, which reduced its contribution.
(Author’s collection)

Yet Hitler was not sanguine about maintaining a trading relationship with his arch-enemy Stalin, particularly since it meant transferring technology that would make the Soviet Union’s armed forces stronger in the long run. After France was defeated, Hitler issued Führer Directive 21 in December 1940, which outlined his intent to ‘crush Soviet Russia in a rapid campaign’ known as Operation Barbarossa. Although this betrayal would cost Germany its steady supply of oil from the Soviet Union, Hitler believed that his military could seize the Soviet Union’s main oil-producing areas before the cut-off
could impair German operational capabilities. Ironically, the Wehrmacht had only managed to stockpile adequate fuel reserves for *Barbarossa* due to the economic treaty with the Soviet Union; without Stalin’s oil, Hitler would have been forced to adopt a defensive strategy. It was a huge gamble, based more on optimistic ignorance, rather than sound military analysis – and it failed. Despite inflicting enormous losses upon the Red Army and conquering huge swathes of territory during the summer 1941 campaign, German panzer spearheads outran their logistical support and Germany’s industrial base proved incapable of replacing their own losses. Heeresgruppe Süd captured Rostov on 20 November 1941, but the idea of pushing on into the Caucasus proved well beyond the grasp of its exhausted troops and worn-out tanks. Just as the German offensive culminated, the resurgent Red Army was able to launch a series of counteroffensives that recovered Rostov and then repulsed the German panzer spearheads from the outskirts of Moscow.

While the Red Army was able to recover some territory during the 1941/42 Winter Counteroffensive and inflict some painful losses on the German Army, it lacked the expertise or resources to permanently regain the strategic initiative. Stalin hoped to roll up the weakened German armies with a series of massive counteroffensives stretching from Leningrad to the Crimea, but they did not prove decisive. Instead, Stalin’s hubris was capped off by a disastrous offensive directed at Kharkov in May 1942, which greatly weakened the Red Army in the southern Ukraine. By spring 1942, the Wehrmacht was beginning to recover its strength and Hitler knew that he would have one more chance to finish off the Soviet Union before the Western Allies could seriously intervene in the war. Yet the question in Berlin was, where to strike?

While the German Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH) planning staff looked at campaigns in terms of geographical objectives such as Moscow, Hitler looked at the war in the East primarily in racial and economic terms. His long-term intent was to decimate the Slavic population in the Soviet Union in order to pave the way for German colonisation of the East, but in order to do that he needed to eliminate the Red Army – and in order to do that, he needed the raw materials to feed his war effort. Since German forces had not seized any significant Soviet oil-producing areas in 1941, the consequences of abrogating the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact were making it increasingly difficult for the Wehrmacht to conduct large-scale protracted operations, as oil stocks began to decline. Rather than engage in another attritional death-struggle at the gates of Moscow with the Red Army – which Hitler believed would offer no decisive advantage – the Führer reasoned that oil was both his centre of gravity and Stalin’s, and that the side that controlled the most oil resources would eventually prevail in a protracted war. Consequently, Hitler decided that the 1942 German summer offensive would not make another attempt to conquer geographic objectives like Moscow or simply destroy large formations of the Red Army, since these methods had not proven decisive in 1941. Instead, he decided that the principal aim of the summer 1942 offensive should be to conquer economic objectives that would permanently swing the strategic balance in Germany’s favour. German intelligence estimated that about 70 per cent of Soviet oil production was centred in the Caucasus region, which appeared to be within striking range of Heeresgruppe Süd. If Germany could seize the Caucasus oilfields, the Wehrmacht would no longer be constrained to fight a pauper’s war with inadequate fuel reserves.
Furthermore, the Red Army would also suffer from the loss of the Caucasian oilfields and Hitler hoped that fuel shortages would constrain Soviet offensive capabilities.

Another factor in Hitler’s zero-sum calculus that redirected the war in the East towards the Caucasus was the Allied–Soviet occupation of Iran in August–September 1941. Soon afterwards, the British began establishing a land route through Iran known as the Persian Corridor to supply Lend Lease aid to the Soviet Union. By November 1941, the first British-built aircraft and tanks began arriving at Baku in the Caucasus and by early 1942 the US Army also joined in the effort. Since Soviet industry was still unable to replace all the material losses of 1941, Allied Lend Lease helped to bridge the gap until Soviet domestic production could outstrip Germany’s. Consequently, cutting off the Persian Corridor was an important secondary objective that could be fulfilled by a German occupation of the Transcaucasus region. Deprived of both oil and Allied materiel, Hitler expected the Soviet war effort to wither. More quixotically, he believed that once the Caucasus was occupied, it might be possible to send German expeditionary forces into Iraq and Iran to threaten the British position in the Middle East.

Thus, the German invasion of the Caucasus was intended to be an all-out effort to inflict a crippling blow upon the Soviet Union before the Western Allies could mount any large-scale operations in the West. However, Heeresgruppe Süd could not move into the Caucasus without exposing its left flank to Soviet counterattacks from the region between Voronezh and Stalingrad. Thus, the invasion of the Caucasus would necessitate a significant supporting offensive toward Stalingrad and the Volga to prevent the Red Army’s reserves from interfering with Hitler’s master strategy. It seemed to be a simple concept that would assure ultimate victory: a main effort into the Caucasus to seize the oil and cut Lend Lease routes, with just a supporting effort on the northern flank to keep the Red Army off-balance. However, as Clausewitz once wrote, everything in war is simple, but actually doing it is difficult.

A destroyed Soviet Matilda tank, summer 1942. The Red Army’s Southern Front lost most of its armour in the retreat to the Don, leaving the North Caucasus Front critically short of tanks for most of the campaign. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<td>25 August</td>
<td>Soviet and Commonwealth forces invade Iran in order to open a southern route for Lend Lease aid to reach the USSR.</td>
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<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>US and Commonwealth personnel begin establishing the Persian Corridor to allow Lend Lease aid to flow to the USSR.</td>
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<td>1942</td>
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<td>5 April</td>
<td>Hitler issues Führer Directive 41, specifying the Caucasus as the primary objective of the German summer offensive.</td>
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<td>9 July</td>
<td>As part of Operation <em>Fall Blau (Case Blue)</em>, Heeresgruppe A attacks the Soviet Southern Front west of Rostov.</td>
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<td>23 July</td>
<td>Rostov is captured after heavy fighting. Führer Directive 45 outlines objectives of Operation <em>Edelweiss</em> in the Caucasus.</td>
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<td>24/25 July</td>
<td>Germans capture the vital bridge over the Don at Bataysk by a <em>coup de main</em>.</td>
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<td>25 July</td>
<td>Von Kleist begins his advance into the Caucasus.</td>
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<td>28 July</td>
<td>The Soviet Southern Front and North Caucasus Front are reorganised.</td>
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<td>28/29 July</td>
<td>NKO Order No. 227 is issued: ‘Not a Step Back!’</td>
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<td>3 August</td>
<td>13. Panzer-Division captures Armavir.</td>
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<td>9 August</td>
<td>Armeeoberkommando (AOK) 17 captures Krasnodar.</td>
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<td>10 August</td>
<td>The first German objective is captured: the Maikop oilfields.</td>
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<td>15 August</td>
<td>23. Panzer-Division captures Georgiyevsk.</td>
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<td>17 August</td>
<td>1. Gebirgs-Division captures the Klukhor Pass.</td>
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<td>AOK 17 captures Krymskaya.</td>
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<td>21 August</td>
<td>1. Gebirgs-Division raises the Nazi flag on Mount Elbrus.</td>
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<td>22–23 August</td>
<td>Most of the Azov Flotilla is scuttled in Temryuk.</td>
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<td>31 August</td>
<td>German Kampfgruppe Bodenhausen interrupts rail traffic from Baku.</td>
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<td>Romanian cavalry capture the port of Anapa.</td>
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<td>2 September</td>
<td>Operation <em>Blücher II</em>: German forces cross the Kerch Strait.</td>
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<td>Von Kleist’s forces succeed in crossing the Terek River.</td>
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<td>10 September</td>
<td>List is relieved of command; Hitler/OKH takes direct control of Heeresgruppe A.</td>
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<td>AOK 17 captures Novorossiysk.</td>
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<td>10/12 October</td>
<td>Fliegerkorps IV raids on Grozny oilfields.</td>
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<td>6–11 November</td>
<td>A Soviet counterattack near Ordzhonikidze encircles 13. Panzer-Division, which suffers heavy losses in its breakout effort.</td>
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<td>21 November</td>
<td>The Germans begin restoring oil production at Maikop.</td>
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<td>22 November</td>
<td>Von Kleist takes command of Heeresgruppe A.</td>
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<td>23 November</td>
<td>The Soviets complete the encirclement of AOK 6 at Stalingrad.</td>
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<tr>
<td>24 November</td>
<td>23. Panzer-Division is transferred to 4. Panzerarmee to participate in the Stalingrad relief effort, Operation <em>Wintergewitter</em>.</td>
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<td>26–29 November</td>
<td>The Soviets launch a major counterattack near Ordzhonikidze.</td>
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<td>24 December</td>
<td>The SS-Division ‘Wiking’ is transferred to 4. Panzerarmee.</td>
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<td>1943</td>
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<td>1 January</td>
<td>Heeresgruppe A begins to retreat from its gains across the Terek River.</td>
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<td>9 January</td>
<td>The Red Army liberates Mozdok.</td>
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<td>24 January</td>
<td>Hitler orders 1. Panzerarmee to retreat to Rostov and AOK 17 to withdraw into the Kuban bridgehead.</td>
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<tr>
<td>29 January</td>
<td>Germans abandon Maikop.</td>
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<td>31 January</td>
<td>German AOK 17 retreats into Kuban bridgehead.</td>
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<td>4 February</td>
<td>Soviet amphibious landing near Novorossiysk.</td>
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<td>12 February</td>
<td>The Red Army liberates Krasnodar.</td>
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<td>12 September</td>
<td>The German Kriegsmarine begins Operation <em>Brunhild</em> to evacuate AOK 17 from the Kuban.</td>
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<td>16 September</td>
<td>The Red Army liberates Novorossiysk.</td>
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<td>9 October</td>
<td>Germans complete their evacuation of the Caucasus.</td>
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OPPOSING COMMANDERS

GERMAN

The German military leadership in the Caucasus campaign started with a simple chain of command, with Heeresgruppe A and its two subordinate armies reporting to the Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH). However, when List was relieved in September 1942, Hitler attempted to take direct command over the army group in the Caucasus, which led to an ambiguous command structure.

Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm List (1880–1971), commander of Heeresgruppe A from July to 9 September 1942, was an experienced senior commander who had led 14. Armee in Poland in 1939 and 12. Armee in France in 1940 and against Greece in 1941. He had missed the entire first year of warfare on the Eastern Front. Furthermore, List had limited direct experience with mechanised warfare, even though the advance into the Caucasus was intended to be a classic blitzkrieg-style operation. Instead, List hamstrung his field commanders with a World War I-era mentality about not advancing with open flanks and mopping up every centre of Soviet resistance. He also was unable to appreciate the effect of mountainous terrain upon mobile operations. Hitler’s selection of List to lead Heeresgruppe A was every bit as disastrous as his decision to place Generaloberst Friedrich Paulus in charge of AOK 6 at Stalingrad.

Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm List, commander of Heeresgruppe A. List thought in terms of occupying an entire region, not just specific objectives, and failed to concentrate decisive force at any point once he crossed the Don. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-S36487)

Generaloberst Ewald von Kleist (1881–1954), commander of 1. Panzerarmee, was a cavalry officer with a great deal of command experience in both world wars. In August 1939 he was given command of one of the first German motorised corps, which he led into Poland. Panzergruppe Kleist made the decisive breakthrough at Sedan in June 1940, leading to the collapse of France in a matter of weeks. In 1941, von Kleist successfully led
Panzergruppe 1 in its blitz across the Ukraine and captured Rostov, before losing it to the Soviet winter counteroffensive. In May 1942, von Kleist led 1. Panzerarmee during the Second Battle of Kharkov, which cut off and annihilated the bulk of three Soviet armies in a bold pincer operation. Von Kleist was the most experienced senior panzer officer in the German Army and a skilled practitioner of fast-moving manoeuvre warfare, but he was handicapped in the Caucasus with insufficient resources and conflicting guidance on objectives.

Generaloberst Ewald von Kleist (left), commander of 1. Panzerarmee, inspecting a captured steel plant in the Ukraine, late 1941. Von Kleist was already familiar with Hitler’s intent to use his panzer forces to seize key economic facilities and understood that the primary focus of the Caucasus campaign was the oilfields. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-2005-1017-521; photo by Friedrich Gehrmann)

Generaloberst Richard Ruoff, commander of 17. Armee. Ruoff was a ‘by the book’ commander who conducted a series of costly, set-piece battles for secondary objectives. (Author’s collection)

**Generaloberst Richard Ruoff** (1883–1967) took command of 17. Armee on 1 June 1942 after commanding 4. Panzerarmee between January and May 1942. Ruoff was a career infantry officer with extensive command and staff experience in both world wars.
He led V. Armeekorps during the critical campaigns of 1939–41. However, his performance in the Caucasus and Kuban campaigns of 1942–43 was sub-par; Hitler permanently assigned him to the Führer Reserve in June 1943 and gave him no further assignments.

**SOVIET**

Military decision-making authority within both the North Caucasus and Transcaucasus fronts resided in their respective Military Councils. Stalin ensured that these councils – which had to approve all important plans and decisions – included Communist Party hardliners in order to ensure compliance with his orders. Lazar M. Kaganovich, known as ‘Iron Lazar’ for his role in forced collectivisation that resulted in the Ukrainian famine of 1932–33, was one of the most trusted and vicious members of Stalin’s inner circle. Kaganovich had no military experience or training, but he was an old-school Bolshevik who acted as the dominant voice in the Military Council and Marshal Budyonny could not act without his support. Commissar Leonid R. Korniets, a former manual labourer who boasted a fifth-grade education, also towed the party line on the North Caucasus Front’s Military Council. In Moscow, Stavka provided some quality control over planning and recommended actions, but otherwise could only exercise indirect control over operations in the Caucasus.

Marshal Semyon M. Budyonny (1883–1973) was made commander of the North Caucasus Front (Severo-Kavkazskiy Front, or CKF) in May 1942. Budyonny was an icon of the Red Army, having famously led the 1st Cavalry Army (Konarmia) during the Russian Civil War (1917–22) and Russo-Polish War (1919–21). He was also a close personal crony of Stalin and was promoted to Marshal of the Soviet Union in 1935. Budyonny easily dodged the military purges of the 1930s but failed to adapt to the conditions of modern warfare, which resulted in disaster when Stalin assigned him to lead
the defence of the Ukraine against the German invasion in 1941. Von Kleist’s panzers ran rings around Budyonny’s armies, eventually resulting in a catastrophic battle of encirclement at Kiev, which resulted in Budyonny being assigned to the backwater North Caucasus military district. Budyonny did have considerable experience and knowledge of this region, but he lacked the imagination or skill to counter the German blitzkrieg-style offensive into the region in the summer of 1942. He ended up being a figurehead, leaving the actual command decisions to more capable subordinates such as Malinovsky, Antonov and Cherevichenko, as well as his commissars.

**General-polkovnik Rodion I. Malinovsky** (1898–1967) was commander of the Southern Front (Yuzhny Front) and then deputy commander of the North Caucasus Front. Malinovsky was tasked by Stalin with preventing the Germans from occupying the oilfields of the Caucasus. Although lacking a formal education, the Ukrainian-born Malinovsky had gained considerable military experience during World War I, when he served on both the Eastern Front and in France with the Russian Expeditionary Corps. Afterwards, he served in the Russian Civil War and then as an advisor in Spain in 1936 and 1937. At the start of Operation *Barbarossa*, Malinovsky was fortunate to command a rifle corps on the Romanian border and succeeded in escaping the German spearheads to retreat towards Rostov. By late 1941, Malinovsky had demonstrated enough competence to be put in charge of the Southern Front. He proved to be a tough, practical commander with a good hands-on approach. In August 1942, he was transferred to Stalingrad and played a critical role in stopping the German relief operation in December 1942. Malinovsky played equally important roles as a front commander in liberating the Ukraine in 1943–44 as well as leading the Soviet conquest of Manchuria in 1945. After World War II, he served as Soviet Minister of Defence between 1957 and 1967.

General Ivan V. Tyulenev, commander of the Transcaucasus Front for much of World War II. Stalin doubted his command ability and preferred NKVD generals like Maslennikov to lead Tyulenev’s forces on the Terek. (Author’s collection)
General Ivan V. Tyulenev (1892–1978) commanded the Transcaucasus Front (Zakavkazskiy Front, ZKF) from February 1942 to July 1945. Like Budyonny, Cherevichenko and Grechko, Tyulenev was a cavalry officer and veteran of the Konarmia. His cavalry credentials helped him survive the purges and he was promoted to general in 1940, along with Georgy Zhukov. However, Tyulenev’s performance as commander of the Southern Front during the German invasion in June 1941 was criticised by Stalin; after he was badly wounded in August, Stalin had him assigned to the Transcaucasus Military District for the rest of the war.

General-polkovnik Ivan T. Cherevichenko (1894–1976) was a Ukrainian cavalry officer who served with Budyonny’s Konarmia during the Russian Civil War and who had commanded two armies in the Southern Front during the 1941 campaign. During the Winter Counteroffensive, he was given command of the Bryansk Front. When the Caucasus campaign began, Cherevichenko was made Budyonny’s deputy and given authority over the Black Sea Group during September–October 1942.

General-leytenant Aleksei I. Antonov (1896–1962) was Chief of Staff of the North Caucasus Front, before commanding the Black Sea Operational Group and then the Transcaucasus Front. He was a career staff officer who spent the period 1938–41 as a senior instructor at the Frunze Military Academy (teaching classes on German offensive tactics and use of armour in Spain). He was the son of a Tsarist artillery officer and had been brought up in an intellectual environment and was fluent in French – the complete opposite of the uncultured cavalry officers he served. Antonov was well trained at the General Staff Academy in 1936 and he would prove to be the key Soviet operational-level planner in the Caucasus campaign. By 1943, Antonov had become the head of the Soviet General Staff’s Operations Directorate, responsible for planning all front-level offensives.

General-mayor Andrei A. Grechko (1903–1976) was a Ukrainian cavalry officer who also served with Budyonny’s Konarmia during the Russian Civil War and was then
trained as a General Staff officer during the interwar period. Grechko was an ardent communist and a ‘political’-type general who used his party contacts to further his career. During the Caucasus campaign, Grechko had a penchant for replacing commanders who had been relieved, enabling him to lead the 12th, 18th, 47th and 56th armies. Like Malinovsky, Grechko had a very successful military career and served as Minister of Defence between 1967 and 1976. He also wrote the best-known Soviet history of the campaign.

Captain 1st Rank Georgii N. Kholostyakov (1902–1983) was a Belarusian naval officer who commanded the Novorossiysk defensive area in August. Kholostyakov was one of the best submarine officers in the Soviet Navy and well connected politically; he was awarded the Order of Lenin in 1935. However, he was arrested during the Stalinist purges in May 1938, accused of being a spy, and spent two years in forced labour camps. Two years later, Kholostyakov was returned to service with the Black Sea Fleet and once war broke out, he was involved with providing naval support to army operations in the Crimea. After the war, he played a major role in fielding the first-generation nuclear submarines in the Soviet Navy.
OPPOSING FORCES

GERMAN

Mechanised forces

The spearhead of the German invasion of the Caucasus was provided by three Panzer-Divisionen (3, 13 and 23) and two motorised infantry divisions (16 and SS-Division ‘Wiking’). All three Panzer-Divisionen started the campaign at close to full strength, each with three Panzer-Abteilungen. This was a remarkably small mechanised force to conquer an area that was larger than Germany itself, and Heeresgruppe A’s armoured component consisted of a total of 11 Panzer-Abteilungen with just 500 tanks. Two-thirds of the German armour sent into the Caucasus consisted of PzKpfw III medium tanks, evenly split between the older models equipped with the short 5cm KwK 38 L/42 gun and the newer models with the long 5cm KwK 39 L/60 gun. Although the PzKpfw III was clearly inferior to the Soviet T-34 medium tank, there were few T-34 tanks in the Caucasus in mid-1942 and the PzKpfw III was superior to the ubiquitous Soviet light tanks and Allied Lend Lease models. The small number of German PzKpfw IV medium tanks equipped with the long-barrelled 7.5cm KwK 40 L/43 gun were the most capable German tanks committed into the Caucasus. Rather unusually, the isolation of the Caucasus enabled the German panzer forces in the region to maintain both quantitative and qualitative superiority over their Soviet opponents until January 1943.

Each of the three Panzer-Divisionen had one Panzergrenadier-Bataillon mounted in Schützenpanzerwagen (SPW) half-tracks; these were extremely powerful, combined-arms battalions that included three 5cm Pak guns, four 7.5cm infantry guns, six 8.1cm mortars and about 900 troops. In addition, each of von Kleist’s Panzer-Divisionen had a Kradschützen-Bataillon, which had been greatly strengthened since the 1941 campaign. Instead of just being a motorcycle infantry unit, the Kradschützen-Bataillone had been provided with 24 armoured cars and 37 half-tracks and their overall strength had been raised to 1,280 men. During Operation Edelweiss, the Kradschützen-Bataillone led the way, acting as Vorausabteilung (advanced guard) for their divisions.

In order to increase the firepower of German non-motorised units, Heeresgruppe A was provided with four Sturmgeschütz-Abteilungen, each with 28 Sturmgeschütz (StuG) III assault guns. The new StuG III Ausf. F, armed with the long-barrelled 7.5cm Sturmkanone (StuK) 40 L/43 cannon, was just being introduced in June 1942, which gave the assault-gun units a much-improved anti-tank capability. In addition to German mechanised forces, Heeresgruppe A was assigned the 1st Slovak (Mobile) Infantry Division (also known as the Slovak Fast Division), a motorised infantry formation which possessed an organic tank battalion with about 40 LT-35/LT-38 light tanks, still useful in the Caucasus.

Mountain troops

The Germans committed two of their Gebirgs-Divisionen, specially trained for mountain
warfare, with AOK 17 in the Caucasus; meanwhile, four other high-quality Gebirgs-Divisionen sat on their hands in the backwater theatre of Finland–Norway. Both 1. and 4. Gebirgs-Division were elite veteran outfits, comprising a total of 12 mountain infantry battalions. In order to supplement them, on 20 July 1942 the German Army organised two special high-altitude alpine units for the upcoming campaign in the Caucasus – the Hochgebirgs-Jäger-Bataillon 1 and 2 – which were attached to 1. Gebirgs-Division in late August. Although well trained in mountaineering, the Caucasus Mountains were an order of magnitude more challenging than the mountain warfare schools in Bavaria or Austria. Whereas the tallest peak in Germany was 2,962m in elevation and the tallest in Austria was 3,798m, the Caucasus Mountains had over a dozen peaks that ranged between 4,000 and 5,642m. Mount Elbrus was the tallest mountain in Europe – most previous German experience in mountain warfare was at elevations below 2,000m.

Although the high-quality Gebirgsjäger put in an inspired performance in the Caucasus Mountains, they were spread too thinly across a wide front and the lack of adequate off-road logistic support greatly reduced their ability to operate in this environment. The OKH had advised von List that Heeresgruppe A would be reinforced with the three mountain divisions from the Italian Corpo degli Alpini (Alpine Corps), but this formation was instead sent to reinforce Heeresgruppe B. Eventually, von List received the Romanian 2nd and 3rd Mountain divisions in compensation, with a total of 12 more mountain infantry (Vanatori de Munte) battalions.

Special forces

Although the German Army had employed special forces in the opening phase of Operation Barbarossa in 1941, little use had been made of them since. The Caucasus campaign was a departure from this pattern, as Heeresgruppe A employed special forces again and again to unlock tough Soviet defensive positions or seize key terrain. The Abwehr (military intelligence) provided a three-company battalion from Lehr-Regiment Brandenburg z.b.V. 800 under Oberstleutnant Paul Haehling von Lanzenauer to support Heeresgruppe A’s advance into the Caucasus. These Brandenburgers were trained as infiltrators and often provided with Soviet uniforms, weapons and vehicles; a large number of their members were ethnic Georgians and other Caucasian minorities who spoke Russian. In the Caucasus, the Brandenburgers were tasked with a very wide variety of missions, including long-range reconnaissance, covert seizure of oilfields and important bridges, behind-the-lines raids, amphibious raids and working with local Chechen insurgents to sever Soviet lines of communications. Although the Brandenburgers suffered heavy casualties in the Caucasus, their daring and imaginative tactics set a new standard for the integration of special forces within a conventional campaign.
Ju-87 Stuka dive-bombers from StG 77 heading towards a coastal target. Plentiful Luftwaffe close air support in the opening stages of the campaign greatly assisted the ground advance of Heeresgruppe A. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

**Air support**

The German Army’s ability to achieve decisive results on the ground was directly tied to the amount of available air support. Von Richthofen’s Luftflotte 4 supported the advance into the Caucasus with 260 aircraft from Fliegerkorps IV and VIII. Initially, German tactical air superiority was decisive but it quickly dwindled as forces were siphoned off to reinforce Heeresgruppe B’s advance upon Stalingrad. By September 1942, only Fliegerkorps IV remained to support Heeresgruppe A and it had too few fighters to maintain control over the airspace and too few ground attack aircraft to support offensive action, which led to a trench warfare-style stalemate on the ground.

**Pioneers**

For the Germans, the key tactical enabler in the Caucasus was the bridging capabilities of their *Pionier-Bataillone*. In order to gain access to the Caucasus oilfields, Heeresgruppe A had to cross numerous rivers and there were only limited engineer bridge-building capabilities available. At division/corps level, each *Pionier-Bataillon* had a company-size *Brückenkolonne B*, which was supposed to have sufficient pontoons to build either a 20-ton tactical bridge across a 50m-wide gap or to create one 20-ton ferry. However, since many rivers in the Caucasus were wider than 50m and a PzKpfw III tank weighed 23 tons, supplemental engineering capabilities were often required from Army-level *Brücken-Bau-Bataillone* (bridge construction battalions); von Kleist’s 1. Panzerarmee had three such battalions (41, 560 and 699) and Ruoff’s AOK 17 had one (646). Nevertheless, Heeresgruppe A was short of bridging capability throughout the campaign and fuel shortages meant that the *pionier* units were often far to the rear, which meant that
relatively minor obstacles such as the Terek River proved to be show-stoppers.

**Logistical support**

Heeresgruppe A crossed the Don on a logistical shoestring and conducted the campaign with inadequate supplies – particularly of fuel – for the duration. Heeresgruppe A’s logistical lifeline depended entirely upon a single rail line: the track running from Rostov to Armavir and Pyatigorsk. Once the bridges over the Don were repaired, the German Reichsbahn was able to push trains fairly far down the track, but the tonnages delivered were grossly inadequate for the task. In August, the fuel shortage brought von Kleist’s 1. Panzerarmee’s pursuit to an abrupt halt short of the Terek River and even in early September, 1. Panzerarmee was only receiving 130–230 tons of supplies every other day. Although the amount of fuel delivered into the theatre was just enough to satisfy minimum needs, it was insufficient to conduct sustained offensive operations. German doctrine stipulated that units needed to stockpile fuel amounting to 4.0 VS (Verbrauchssatz – the load of fuel required to move all vehicles in a unit 100km) for an offensive, but on the Terek River III Panzerkorps only had 0.5 VS and the XXXX Panzerkorps had 0.8 VS – adequate only for defensive operations.

Nor could air- or sea-lift make up the German logistical deficiencies. By mid-September 1942, the Kriegsmarine was able to establish a sea supply route from the Crimea to the small port of Anapa, but this was barely sufficient even to meet part of AOK 17’s needs. The Luftwaffe also provided occasional logistical support in the Caucasus, but the Stalingrad airlift diverted most resources northward until the Heeresgruppe A retreat began.

**SOVIET**

Once von Kleist’s panzers severed the Tikhoretsk–Stalingrad rail line, the North Caucasus Front (CKF) found that it was partly isolated from the main Soviet war industries in the hinterland. In consequence, the Red Army in the Caucasus was forced to fight without its customary advantages in materiel and numerical superiority. In addition to directing ground and air forces, Budyonny’s North Caucasus Front also exercised command authority over the Black Sea Fleet and Azov Flotilla.

**Infantry**

Initially, the North Caucasus Front did not have a great deal of infantry to oppose the German advance into the Caucasus. Most rifle divisions inherited from the shattered Southern Front and the earlier fighting in the Crimea were reduced to anywhere between 300 and 1,200 troops each, and only the 12th, 18th and 37th armies had any remaining combat effectiveness. There were only two Guards rifle units located in the Caucasus – the 2nd and 32nd Guards Rifle divisions (GRD) – both of which played major roles in the campaign. While there were combat units in the Transcaucasus Military District, they were primarily training cadres or low-quality border defence units. The Black Sea Fleet’s naval infantry units played a major role in the defence of the Caucasus, but lacked the artillery support of army rifle units. The real game-changer occurred in early August when four airborne brigades were sent from Moscow by Stavka to provide the core of the 10th
and 11th Guards Rifle corps (GRC), which were hastily raised in Ordzhonikidze. These veteran troops were critical in providing a steady infantry force just as the Germans reached the Terek River.

**Tanks**

At the beginning of the Caucasus campaign, the battered remnants of Malinovsky’s Southern Front could barely muster 70–80 operational tanks to contribute to the North Caucasus Front. Nor was the Transcaucasus Front (ZKF) any better off, with only a single tank brigade still equipped with obsolete T-26 light tanks. Stavka gave priority of tank replacements to the Stalingrad Front and only sent two brigades that were quickly demolished in July; no further units were sent to the Caucasus until November 1942. Furthermore, the German interdiction of the Tikhoretsk–Stalingrad rail line meant that T-34 tanks built in the Urals could only be sent to the North Caucasus Front across the Caspian Sea.

Lacking a steady supply of Soviet-built medium tanks, Budyonny’s CKF was initially dependent upon American and British Lend Lease tanks, delivered through the Persian Corridor. By mid-August 1942, the CKF was able to begin fielding a few independent tank battalions (*otdel’nyy tankovyy batal’on*, OTB), equipped with M3 Lee and Mk III Valentine tanks. By 1 October 1942, the CKF had five tank brigades and four independent battalions with a total of 313 tanks, including 7 KV-1 and 64 T-34s; Lend Lease tanks comprised 42 per cent of this total. Even though the Germans had three *Panzerkorps* in the Caucasus, the CKF did not have any large tank formations until it formed Tank Group Lobanov (with 106 tanks) on 31 December 1942 and Tank Group Fillipov (123 tanks) on 5 January 1943; both were ersatz tank corps that lacked supporting infantry and artillery. Only one-third of the tanks in these two groups were T-34s, the rest being either light tanks or Allied Lend Lease.

**Armoured trains**

The North Caucasus Front had five separate Armoured Train divisions (*otdel’nykh divizionov bronepoyezdov*, ODBP), each with two trains at the start of the Caucasus campaign: four with the 18th Army on the main Rostov–Tikhoretsk line and one with the 51st Army on the Tikhoretsk–Stalingrad line. The armoured trains provided the Red Army with mobile firepower, usually being equipped with two to four 75mm or 76.2mm guns. Yet despite being equipped with anti-aircraft machine guns, they were very vulnerable to air attack and their level of armoured protection was modest.

**Air support**

The Voyenno-Vozdushnye Sily (Military Air Forces, VVS) had two air armies in the Caucasus, the 4th Vozdushnaya Armiya (Air Army, VA) and 5th VA, as well as the Black Sea Fleet’s air arm, the VVS-ChF. However, these formations were badly battered by heavy losses suffered between May and July 1942 and were not of much help in the initial phase of the German invasion. The 4th VA, which provided primary air support to Malinovsky’s armies south of the Don, started the campaign with only 126 operational aircraft, of which almost half were obsolete Po-2 or R-5 biplanes. The 5th VA was deployed in the Taman Peninsula with 94 operational aircraft and the VVS-ChF was
deployed to defend the Black Sea ports like Novorossiysk – which meant that less than one-third of Soviet aircraft in the Caucasus were even in a position to oppose the initial German invasion. The VVS-ChF focused most of its air assets on defending Novorossiysk. During the campaign, Stavka was able to dispatch considerable VVS reinforcements to the Caucasus and Allied Lend Lease aircraft arrived from Iran, enabling the VVS to gain local air superiority over parts of the Caucasus by mid-September 1942.

**Naval support**

Although the Black Sea Fleet was much weakened by losses suffered during the Crimea campaign, it was still able to play a credible role in defending the coastline of the Caucasus. In particular, the convoys that carried Red Army troops from Poti to Tuapse – at great risk from Luftwaffe air attacks – were instrumental in saving that city. The Soviets were able to keep a small but capable surface action group, usually consisting of one cruiser and two to three destroyers, in play to provide naval gunfire support at Novorossiysk and Tuapse and evacuation when necessary, as from the Taman Peninsula.

**Logistical support**

The Anglo-American-operated Persian Corridor played an important role in sustaining Soviet forces in the Caucasus in 1942 and 1943. In particular, the US established a truck assembly plant in Iran, which supplied the Red Army with 1,070 cargo trucks in August 1942. During the course of the year, the US provided 721 light bombers and 21 fighters to the VVS through the Persian Corridor. Eventually, the US would supply high-octane aviation fuel from the Abadan refinery as well. By January 1943, there were almost 11,000 US Army personnel in Iran, supporting the Soviet war effort. Armoured vehicles and raw materials began to flow in through this route in the summer of 1942, easing the Soviet burden of sustaining their isolated forces in the Caucasus. Without the Persian Corridor, Budyonny’s North Caucasus Front would have had far fewer tanks, planes and trucks to oppose Heeresgruppe A’s advance.

**ORDER OF BATTLE, 1 AUGUST 1942**

**GERMAN FORCES IN THE CAUCASUS**

**HEERESGRUPPE A (GENERALFELDMARSCHALL WILHELM LIST)**

1. Panzerarmee (Generaloberst Ewald von Kleist)
   III Panzerkorps (Generaloberst Eberhard von Mackensen)
   16. Infanterie-Division (mot.) (Generalleutnant Sigfrid Henrici)
   Infanterie-Division Großdeutschland (Generalmajor Walter Hörnlein)
   Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung 203

   XXXX Panzerkorps (General der Panzertruppe Leo Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg)

2. Panzer-Division (Generalmajor Hermann Breith)

3. Panzer-Division (Generalmajor Erwin Mack)

LVII Panzerkorps (General der Panzertruppen Friedrich Kirchner)

3. Panzer-Division (Generalmajor Traugott Herr)
SS-Division ‘Wiking’ (SS-Gruppenführer Felix Steiner)
1st Slovak (Mobile) Infantry Division (Brigadier-General Jozef Turanec)

XXXXIV Armeekorps (General der Artillerie Maximilian de Angelis)
97. Jäger-Division (Generalmajor Ernst Rupp)
(Wallonische) Infanterie Battalion 373
101. Jäger-Division (Generalmajor Erich Diestel)

Army assets:
Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung 191
II./Regiment Brandenburg z.b.V. 800
Werfer-Regiment 52: Stab, I., II.

Armeegruppe Ruoff/17. Armee (Generaloberst Richard Ruoff)

XXXXIX Gebirgskorps (General der Gebirgstruppe Rudolf Konrad)
1. Gebirgs-Division (Generalmajor Hubert Lanz)
4. Gebirgs-Division (Generalmajor Karl Eglseer)
73. Infanterie-Division (Generalmajor Rudolf von Bünau)
298. Infanterie-Division (Generalleutnant Arnold Szelinski)

V Armeekorps (General der Infanterie Wilhelm Wetzel)
9. Infanterie-Division (Generalleutnant Siegmund Freiherr von Schleinitz)
125. Infanterie-Division (Generalleutnant Willi Schneckenburger)
198. Infanterie-Division (Generalmajor Albert Buck)

LI Armeekorps (General der Infanterie Eugen Ott)
111. Infanterie-Division (Generalmajor Hermann Recknagel)
370. Infanterie-Division (Generalmajor Dr. Ernst Klepp)
Infanterie-Battalion z.b.V. 500

Army Assets:
Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung 210
Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung 249
schwere Artillerie-Abteilungen II./AR 42, 154, 844 (15cm)
schwere Artillerie-Abteilungen (mot.) 151, 634 (10cm)
schwere Artillerie-Abteilung 732 (21cm Mörser)
17. Flak-Division (Luftwaffe)

Romanian 3rd Army (General Petre Dumitrescu)

Romanian Cavalry Corps (Lieutenant-General Mihail Racovita)
5th Cavalry Division (Colonel Vasile Mainescu)
6th Cavalry Division (Colonel Cristu Cantuniari)
9th Cavalry Division (Colonel Mihail Chiruacescu)

Romanian 1st Corps (Major-General Teodor Ionescu)
Romanian 2nd Mountain Division (Brigadier-General Ion Dumitrache)

LUFTWAFFE

Luftflotte 4 (Generalfeldmarschall Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen)
Stab, I., II./StG 77 (48 operational of 67 Ju-87Ds)
Stab, III., 15. (Kroat)/JG 52 (30 operational of 52 Bf-109E/F/Gs)
Fliegerkorps IV (General Kurt Pflugbeil) I./KG 100 (36 He-111H-6s)

Fliegerkorps VIII
- Stab, I., III./KG 51 (Ju-88A)
- Stab, II., III./KG 55 (He-111H)
- Total: 89 operational of 128 bombers
- Stab, I, IL./ZG 1 (71 operational of 108 Bf-110E/F)

Fliegerführer Süd (Oberst Wolfgang von Wild)
- III./LG 1 (32 Ju-88A)
- II./KG 26 (30 He-111H-6)
- Ergänzungsgruppe/StG 2 (20 Ju-87s)

Technical Brigade Mineralöl (Generalmajor Erich Homburg)

KRIEGSMARINE
1. Landungs-Flotille (Kapitänleutnant Max Giele): 24 Marinefährprahme (MFP)
2. Räumbootflotille (Korvettenkapitän Arnulf Hölzerkopf): R36, R37, R163, R165, R166

REINFORCEMENTS

German
2 September 1942: 46. Infanterie-Division (Generalmajor Ernst Haccius)
11 September 1942: Korps z.b.V. Felmy (General der Flieger Hellmuth Felmy)
November 1942: 50. Infanterie-Division
January 1943: 5. Luftwaffen-Feld-Division

Romanian
3rd Mountain Division (Brigadier-General Leonard Mociulschi)
10th Infantry Division (Brigadier-General Sava Caracas)
19th Infantry Division (Brigadier-General Carol Schmidt)

SOVIET FORCES IN THE CAUCASUS

NORTH CAUCASUS FRONT (SEVERO-KAVKAZSKII FRONT, CKF) (MARSHAL SEMYON M. BUDYONNY)
12th Army (General-mayor Andrei A. Grechko)
- 4th Rifle Division
- 31st Rifle Division
- 176th Rifle Division
- 261st Rifle Division
- 81st Naval Infantry Brigade

RVKG (Reserve of the Supreme High Command) units: 81st Guards, 374th Artillery regiments, 521st Anti-Tank Regiment

18th Army (General-leytenant Fedor V. Kamkov)
- 216th Rifle Division
- 236th Rifle Division
- 353rd Rifle Division
383rd Rifle Division
395th Rifle Division
16th Rifle Brigade
68th Naval Rifle Brigade
17th Kuban Cossack Cavalry Corps (General-mayor Nikolai Ia. Kirichenko)
  12th Cavalry Division
  13th Cavalry Division
  15th Cavalry Division
  116th Cavalry Division
64th Tank Brigade
16th Separate Division of Armoured Trains (16 ODBP)
51st Separate Division of Armoured Trains (51 ODBP)
53rd Separate Division of Armoured Trains (53 ODBP)
RVGK units: 368th, 377th, 880th Artillery regiments, 530th Anti-Tank Regiment

37th Army (General-mayor Petr M. Kozlov)
  2nd Guards Rifle Division
  74th Rifle Division
  230th Rifle Division
  275th Rifle Division
  295th Rifle Division
  347th Rifle Division
  41st Rifle Brigade (mot.)
RVGK units: 1230th Guards, 262nd, 268th, Artillery regiments

47th Army (General-mayor Grigorii P. Kotov)
  32nd Guards Rifle Division
  77th Mountain Rifle Division
  103rd Rifle Brigade
  126th Independent Tank Battalion (OTB, 36 T-26s)

56th Army (General-mayor Aleksandr. I. Ryzhov)
  30th Rifle Division
  339th Rifle Division
  349th Rifle Division
  76th Naval Rifle Brigade
RVGK units: 1195th Artillery Regiment [11x 152-mm]

1st Separate Rifle Corps (Polkovnik Mikhail M. Shapovalov)
  139th Rifle Brigade

CKF front-level forces
  5th Guards Tank Brigade
  15th, 63rd and 140th Tank brigades
  67th and 75th Independent Tank battalions (OTB)
  7th, 16th, 64th, 65th and 66th Separate Division of Armoured Trains (ODBP)
4th Air Army (VA, General-mayor Konstantin A. Vershinin)
216th Fighter Aviation Division: 16 GIAP (Yak-1s/MiG-3s), 45 IAP (Yak-1s), 88 IAP (I-16s)
229th Fighter Aviation Division
265th Fighter Aviation Division: 68 IAP, 483 IAP, 805 IAP (LaGG-3s)
230th Ground Attack Aviation Division: 7GShAP (Il-2s), 590 ShAP (I-15bis/I-153s), 805 ShAP (Il-2s)
219th Bomber Aviation Division: 8 GBAP (Pe-2s), 288 BAP (Su-2s), 366 BAP (SBs), 244 BAP (A-20s)
218th Night Bomber Division (U-2s)
8th Guards Short-Range Bomber Aviation Regiment
136th, 647th, 762nd, 889th Mixed Aviation regiments

5th Air Army (VA, General-leytenant Sergei K. Goriunov)
236th Fighter Aviation Division
237th Fighter Aviation Division
267th Fighter Aviation Regiment
132nd Bomber Aviation Division
238th Assault Aviation Division
742nd Reconnaissance Regiment (Pe-2)
763rd Long Range Bomber Regiment (U-2)

Azov Flotilla (Rear-Admiral Sergei Gorshkov)
Large gunboats Bug, Don, Dniester (840 tons each, two 130mm guns)
River gunboats Oktyabr, Rostov-Don
Monitor Zheleznyakov
144th and 305th Naval Infantry battalions

Black Sea Fleet (Vice-Admiral Filipp Oktyabrsky)
Heavy cruiser Voroshilov
Light cruiser Krasnyi Krym
Flotilla leader Kharkov
Destroyers Boiky, Bezposhchadny, Soobrazitel'ny, Nezamozhnik, Zhelezniakov
Guard ships Shstorm, Shkval

VVS-ChF (General-mayor Pavel P. Kvade) – Naval Aviation Group Novorossiysk Defensive Area
18th, 46th and 47th Ground Attack regiments (Il-2s/UT-1s)
62nd Fighter Brigade: 7th Fighter
   Regiment (Yak-1s/MiG-3s); 32nd
   Fighter Regiment (LaGG-3s); 62nd
   Fighter Regiment (I-16s/I-153s)
36th Fighter Regiment (I-16s)
805th Fighter Regiment (LaGG-3s)
119th Independent Reconnaissance
   Aviation Regiment (MBR-2s)
80th and 82nd Independent Reconnaissance Aviation squadrons (MBR-2s)

RECONSTITUTING

9th Army (General-mayor F. A. Parkhomenko)
Remnants of 51st, 81st, 106th, 140th, 242nd, 255th, 296th and 313th Rifle divisions, 30th Cavalry Division

24th Army (General-major Vladimir N. Martsinkevich)

TRANSCAUCASIAN FRONT (ZAKAVKAZKIY FRONT, ZKF) (GENERAL IVAN V. TYULENEV)

44th Army (General-major Andrei A. Khriashchev)

Three rifle divisions (223, 414, 416) and two rifle brigades (9, 10)

46th Army (General-major Vasily F. Sergatskov)

3rd Mountain Rifle Corps (General-major Konstantin N. Leselidze): 9th and 20th Mountain Rifle divisions

Four rifle divisions (389, 392, 394, 406), one rifle brigade (155), one cavalry division (63)

ZKF front-level forces

318th and 417th Rifle divisions

52nd and 191st Tank brigades

Special Motorised Brigade

Reinforcements to North Caucasus Front

2 August 1942: 11th Guards Rifle Corps (8, 9, 10 Guards Rifle brigades, 62nd Naval Infantry Brigade, 98th Guards Artillery Regiment [122/152]) (General-major Konstantin A. Koroteev)

4 August 1942: 31st Separate Division of Armoured Trains (ODBP)

Armoured Train 717 Orenburgskii Zheleznodorozhnik

Armored Train 731 Vpered, na Zapad! (Forward, to the West!)

13 August 1942: 10th Guards Rifle Corps (4, 5, 6, 7 Guards Rifle brigades, 92nd Guards Artillery Regiment) (General-major Ivan T. Zamertsev)

22 August 1942: 83rd Naval Infantry Brigade (formed in Novorossiysk)

3 September 1942: 200th Naval Infantry Regiment (raised in Poti)

1–6 September 1942: 255th Naval Rifle Brigade (formed in Novorossiysk)

1 October 1942: 52nd Tank Brigade (from Transcaucasus)

13 October 1942: 10th Rifle Corps (43rd, 59th and 106th Rifle brigades) (General-major Petr E. Loviagin)

1 November 1942: 2nd Tank Brigade (from RVGK, Stavka reserve)

29 November 1942: 207th Tank Brigade (from Transcaucasus)

1 XXXX Panzerkorps was transferred from 4. Panzerarmee to 1. Panzerarmee on 1 August 1942.

2 Killed by Soviet mortar fire, 26 August 1942.

3 Badly wounded by a shell splinter on 31 October 1942.

4 Killed in the retreat to the Kuban, 30 May 1943.

5 Killed in action at Novorossiysk, 6 September 1942.

6 A punishment unit, probably attached to LII Armeekorps.

7 Killed in action 11 February 1943.

8 Formed on 11 September 1942 from the German military mission to Iraq. Its primary sub-unit was a two-battalion ad-hoc motorised infantry regiment, with a handful of assault guns, Panzerjäger and flak attached.

9 Incorporated General-polkovnik Rodion I. Malinovsky’s Southern Front on 28 July 1942. On 1 September 1942, redesignated as Black Sea Group of Forces.

10 Not known for certain.

11 Disbanded 23 August 1942.

12 Captured near Armavir on 14 August 1942. He opted to join Andrei Vlasov’s anti-communist Russian Army of Liberation (Russkaya Osvoboditel’naya Armiya, ROA) in 1943 and commanded its 3rd Infantry Division. He was executed after capture in 1945.

13 Disbanded 8 September 1942. Re-formed on 3 February 1943.

14 All three scuttled in Temryuk, 23 August 1942.

15 Both scuttled in Temryuk, 22 August 1942.

16 Only operational vessels are listed.

17 The light cruiser Krasnyi Kavkaz was repaired and returned to operational status in October 1942.
18 Morskaya aviagruppa Novorossiyskogo oboronitel’nogo rayona (MAG NOR).
19 Replaced by General-major Vladimir N. Martsinkevich on 8 August, who was replaced by General-major Konstantin A. Koroteev on 4 September.
20 Relieved of command, 6 August 1942.
21 Relieved of command on 28 August 1942 by Lavrenti Beria.
22 Redesignated as 40th Motorised Rifle Brigade on 9 September 1942.
23 Formed in Ordzhonikidze from three airborne units, but committed before fully formed.
24 Replaced, 1 September 1942.
25 Destroyed at Ardon, 30 October 1942.
26 Destroyed at Ardon, 31 October 1942.
27 Formed in North Caucasus from three airborne brigades.
28 Corps disbanded 17 December 1942.
OPPOSING PLANS

GERMAN

The Germans were drawn to the Caucasus by the prospect of looting its oilfields. During Operation Barbarossa, the supplement to Führer Directive 33 in July 1941 specified that Heeresgruppe Süd would ‘thrust forward across the Don to the Caucasus’, but this proved impossible. When von Kleist’s 1. Panzerarmee limped into Rostov on the last of its fuel on 20 November 1941, Heeresgruppe Süd had the presumption to issue an order dubbed ‘Wintersport’ that called for a continued winter offensive to seize the Maikop oilfields 300km distant. In fact, von Kleist’s forces could not even hold onto Rostov and his exhausted army was unceremoniously booted out by the Red Army only a week after taking the city. Ignoring this defeat, Hitler issued Führer Directive 41 on 8 December 1941, which ordered Heeresgruppe Süd to maintain positions near the Don in order to provide ‘favourable conditions for operations against the Caucasus in the spring’, but even this proved over-optimistic.

Although the role of Generalfeldmarschall Hermann Göring in the Stalingrad catastrophe is well known, his equally important role in pushing the Wehrmacht toward the Caucasus is much less noticed. On his own authority, Göring had taken control over the German oil industry in November 1940 and he worked closely with Kontinentale Öl AG (abbreviated to Konti Öl) to determine where Germany could find the oil to sustain its
war machine, particularly his Luftwaffe. Thanks to his endorsement, Konti Öl was given exclusive rights to sell oil from captured territories. The experts at Konti Öl were particularly enthusiastic about the Caucasus oilfields and briefed Göring that within six months of capturing and restoring the oilfields, Maikop would be producing 30,000 tons of crude oil a month and Grozny 9,000 tons; furthermore, they confidently predicted that both captured oilfields would produce an annual total of over 1 million tons of crude oil by 1943. In order to transform the vision into reality, Göring ordered the formation of a special unit – under Luftwaffe command – known as the Technical Brigade Mineralöl (TBM) to restore oil production at captured fields. Generalmajor Erich Homburg was put in charge of the TBM, which consisted of 5,500 personnel, over 1,100 vehicles and 80,000 tons of oil-drilling equipment, mostly looted from the French oil industry. In Göring’s mind, once the German Army captured Maikop and Grozny, the TBM would quickly restore them and then the oil would begin flowing (and in the process, making him and his Konti Öl partners even richer). Göring and his Luftwaffe would get the credit for this strategic success. With visions of an oil cornucopia dancing in his mind, Göring sold the Caucasus oil strategy to Hitler, who was eager to find an exit strategy for the growing debacle in the east. Göring also knew that Hitler was looking for an easy victory to restore German prestige and the Caucasus was poorly protected compared to Moscow or other potential targets. Yet instead of examining the difficulty of conducting large-scale military operations in the distant Caucasus, Hitler instead focused on fanciful musings about turning the Caucasus into a special ‘military colony’ with German veterans remaining to guard the oil-production areas for decades.

Having been convinced by Göring that seizing the oil of the Caucasus was the solution to the War in the East, on 5 April 1942 Hitler issued Führer Directive 41, which specified that his aim was ‘to wipe out the entire defence potential remaining to the Soviets, and to cut them off, as far as possible, from their most important centres of war industry’. To wit, the directive ordered that ‘all available forces will be concentrated on the main operations in the Southern sector, with the aim of destroying the enemy before the Don, in order to secure the Caucasian oilfields and the passes through the Caucasus Mountains themselves’. Although the plan, which gelled into Operation Fall Blau, clearly made the Caucasus the main effort, it also specified that a major supporting effort would be made to destroy the Red Army between Voronezh and Stalingrad. This consideration required Heeresgruppe Süd to be split into two diverging groups: Heeresgruppe A to drive into the Caucasus and Heeresgruppe B to advance eastwards to capture Voronezh and neutralise Stalingrad as a staging area. While von Kleist’s 1. Panzerarmee was solely committed to the Caucasus, parts of General Hermann Hoth’s 4. Panzerarmee would be used to support both offensives. Furthermore, even Heeresgruppe A’s advance into the Caucasus was split between two distinct objectives – oilfields and mountain passes – which required completely different types of forces. To say that oil was uppermost as the objective in Hitler’s mind, it did not translate into a singular objective on paper.

One important item that Göring and the Konti Öl specialists failed to appreciate – or mention to Hitler – was the peculiar Soviet skill for sabotage and the possibility that the oilfields would be wrecked prior to German arrival. Heeresgruppe Süd had captured the small oilfield at Romny, 200km east of Kiev, in September 1941. The retreating Soviets had plugged all the wells with concrete and even a year later German technicians had only
restored a fraction of its capacity (the Germans held Romny for two years and extracted a total of just 4,000 tons of oil).

Operation *Fall Blau* commenced on 28 June 1942 with Heeresgruppe B making its push towards Voronezh and the Don, but it was not until 9 July that Heeresgruppe A joined in. Von Kleist’s 1. Panzerarmee attacked the right flank of General-polkovnik Rodion I. Malinovsky’s Southern Front and in short order, Generaloberst Eberhard von Mackensen’s III Panzerkorps smashed through the Soviet 12th and 37th armies and nearly encircled the 18th Army. Malinovsky’s forces were badly defeated by this avalanche of onrushing German armour and only survived by means of a pell-mell retreat. Hoth’s 4. Panzerarmee also pushed into the Don bend and by 20 July, the 3. and 23. Panzer divisions from XXXX Panzerkorps reached the Don east of Rostov. Malinovsky began evacuating much of his forces into the Caucasus, while leaving the 56th Army to conduct a rearguard at Rostov. Von Kleist converged on Rostov with the III Panzerkorps from the north and from the west with the LVII Panzerkorps and XXXXIX Gebirgskorps. With the assistance of Russian-speaking infiltrators from the II./Regiment Brandenburg z.b.V. 800, the 13. Panzer-Division and SS-Division ‘Wiking’ were able to fight their way into Rostov on 22/23 July, although heavy fighting continued for several days. By this point, it looked like the Germans would be able to shift considerable resources to support Heeresgruppe B’s intended advance into the Caucasus, since the lead elements of Heeresgruppe B were less than 80km from its objective: Stalingrad.
While von Kleist was advancing toward Rostov, Hitler issued Führer Directive 43 on 11 July 1942, which specified that Generalfeldmarschall Erich von Manstein’s 11. Armee – having completed the conquest of Sevastopol – would prepare to conduct an amphibious operation known as Blücher across the Kerch Strait by mid-August. Operation Blücher was a pet project of Hitler’s, enabling a dual advance into the Kuban region of the Caucasus from the west, with the objective being to secure the port of Novorossiysk. Yet the plan for how the Caucasus was to be conquered remained surprisingly vague until Heeresgruppe A actually reached Rostov and the Don River. Finally, on 23 July 1942, Hitler issued Führer Directive 45, which provided details on Operation Edelweiss – the conquest of the Caucasus. It was a wonderful plan, full of zeal and interesting sub-components. Once across the Don, von Kleist’s panzers and Ruoff’s 17. Armee would conduct a pincer-style advance toward the rail junction at Tikhoretsk in order to destroy Malinovsky’s remaining forces in a kesselschlacht (cauldron battle). Then, von Kleist would thrust rapidly towards the oilfields at Maikop and Grozny while 17. Armee cleared the Taman Peninsula with help from 11. Armee. Hitler promised that both the Romanian mountain corps and three Italian mountain divisions would be committed to reinforce Heeresgruppe A by mid-August, enabling an equally rapid thrust to seize the Caucasian mountain passes and begin clearing the Black Sea coast. Edelweiss also made extensive provision for the use of German special forces to seize or sabotage key targets and Hitler authorised Heeresgruppe A to consider using airborne troops if feasible. However, the plan did not detail how German forces would reach distant Baku or what the Luftwaffe was expected to accomplish beyond supporting the army and attacking coastal shipping. At best, Edelweiss was an unfinished sketch, vulnerable to diverging objectives, limited knowledge of the terrain and the Führer’s whimsy.

**Terrain and weather**

Von Kleist’s panzers raced into the Caucasus with only a hazy idea about the nature of the terrain and weather they would be up against. German maps of the region were decades out of date and many bridges or other critical terrain were not properly marked. Roads that appeared trafficable for vehicles often turned out to be mule paths. Indeed, the Germans were not even sure about the exact location of their primary objectives – the oilfields – and would be shocked to discover that most of the oil wells at Maikop were not actually in the city or even centralised in one location. Again and again, the Germans were forced to feel their way blindly ahead, looking for trafficable routes and river crossings in a land of which they were mainly ignorant. Furthermore, the amount of distance that needed to be covered to reach the oilfields was staggering: 330km to Maikop, 750km to Grozny and 1,285km to Baku. During Operation Barbarossa, some German panzer units had advanced over 1,000km in five months, but Hitler was asking Heeresgruppe A to accomplish a similar level of effort in just three months before winter weather arrived.

The Caucasus region consists of three distinct terrain areas: the open, desert-like steppe in the north; a subtropical and hilly area in the interior; and the rugged, mountainous area along the coastal strip, with peaks ranging between 4,200 and 5,600m in height. Despite the hot, arid nature of the Caucasus, there were marshy areas around its rivers and the Sea of Azov that could make off-road movement difficult. The road network in the Caucasus was even more primitive and undeveloped than in the western USSR.
Movement into or out of the Caucasus Mountains was completely dependent upon control of critical mountain passes, which were heavily wooded and easily defended. Prior to *Edelweiss*, the German mountain warfare school wrote a study on the Caucasus Mountains, including information from Soviet prisoners of war, but much of the information was outdated or inaccurate. There were three major rivers in the Caucasus that would figure prominently as obstacles in the 1942–43 campaign: the Kuban, Manych and Terek. These rivers were relatively narrow but fast-running, which made fording operations and bridge-building difficult. Aside from railway bridges, which were critical for mobility, most of the existing road bridges were light wooden affairs, with little ability to handle heavy military traffic.

The climate in the Caucasus was more extreme than in other parts of the Soviet Union and summer campaigning was more akin to desert warfare, while operations in the mountain areas were atypical at all times of year. Temperatures in the summer months could soar as high as 40° C (104° F), but drop to -6° C (20° F) in January. On the Kalmkyk Steppe, temperatures in August reached 52° C (125° F). The main rainy period was from May to July and the heaviest snowfall from December to February. In the Caucasus Mountains, the peaks were covered with snow for much of the year and the vital passes were closed with deep snow by late September; Heeresgruppe A would have to seize them within eight weeks or be shut out from the coastal region until spring 1943. In short, while the tabletop terrain of the interior of the Caucasus appeared to offer an excellent venue for fast-moving manoeuvre warfare, the restrictive nature of mountains, rivers and limited road networks combined to hinder manoeuvre options. This was not a land for *Bewegungskrieg*.

**SOVIET**

In June 1942, Stalin expected the Germans to make their main effort in another attempt to capture Moscow, so the best Red Army units were committed to the Western and Bryansk fronts. Stavka did not anticipate a major campaign in the Caucasus and the North Caucasus Military District (MD) was an area that was primarily used for raising formations to fight in the Crimea or the southern Ukraine. The best units in the district had already been sent to the Crimea, where they were demolished by the German offensives at Kerch in May and Sevastopol in June. Other units were sent to reinforce Malinovsky’s Southern Front, but these too were wrecked in the mid-July fighting. After the loss of Rostov, Malinovsky’s 12th, 18th and 37th armies were reduced to a total of about 54,000 troops and 17 operational tanks, which had to defend a 155km-wide sector south of the Don. The exhausted 56th Army was placed in second echelon behind these frontline armies, while the 9th and 24th armies were sent further to the rear to reconstitute. Malinovsky also had control over General-major Nikolai I. Trufanov’s 51st Army until the end of July, when this formation was transferred to the Stalingrad Front. Trufanov’s army was in better shape, with about 40,000 troops and 57 tanks, to hold a 171km-wide sector on Malinovsky’s right flank. By the time that Heeresgruppe A reached Rostov, it was apparent that the North Caucasus MD would have to be converted from a training command into an operational command, but it had very few combat troops or heavy equipment at its disposal. In spite of Stalin’s ‘No Retreat’ order issued on 28 July 1942,
the Red Army’s weakness in the region dictated a delaying strategy until reinforcements could arrive. Unlike the rest of the Eastern Front, the isolation of the Caucasus made it difficult for the Red Army to employ its traditional trump cards – a seemingly bottomless pit of rifle units, T-34 tanks and massed artillery – and instead would have to rely upon cunning use of its limited forces to delay the invaders.

General Ivan V. Tyulenev’s Transcaucasus Front, comprising the 44th and 46th armies, was tasked with defending the Black Sea coast, the Turkish border and contributing forces to the occupation of Iran. Although Tyulenev’s front was not directly involved in opposing the initial German invasion of the Caucasus, it was quickly assigned command responsibility over the coastal sector so the North Caucasus Front could concentrate upon the inland battles. Tyulenev’s command also represented a pool of fresh but untried units that would prove to be an important source of reinforcements for the North Caucasus Front. Although badly depleted in the Crimean campaign, the Black Sea Fleet still had an operationally significant capability to transfer division-size units along the coastline and to provide occasionally helpful naval gunfire support.

Soviet planning in the Caucasus was also affected much more by internal security threats than in other regions. Lavrenti Beria’s NKVD played a large role in the Caucasus, partly to protect critical infrastructure like oil pipelines and railroads, but in large part due to mounting ethnic insurgency problems. The Chechens had begun an anti-Soviet guerrilla campaign in the mountains near Grozny in 1940 and by 1941 this spread to the neighbouring Ingush, then the Dagestanis in early 1942. Soviet efforts at suppressing the insurgency were ineffective, but their heavy-handed tactics led to more Caucasian ethnic groups turning hostile. The German Abwehr (intelligence) was aware of these Soviet internal security problems and made a concerted effort to reach out to the Chechen rebels in mid-1942, promising military support in return for local assistance with Operation Edelweiss. This type of threat – foreigners working covertly with internal dissidents – was exactly the kind that the paranoid Soviet state feared most. Consequently, Beria’s NKVD deployed considerable numbers of security troops into the region prior to the German invasion. It is not clear if the Soviet leadership made plans to sabotage the oilfields in the Caucasus prior to the German invasion, but it is clear that local officials had the means in place to quickly render the oilfields unusable for an extended period if they chose.
CROSSING THE DON, 20–31 JULY, 1942

The point of the spear of von Kleist’s 1. Panzerarmee approaching the Don River was General der Panzertruppe Leo Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg’s XXXX Panzerkorps, with the 3. and 23. Panzer divisions. Generalmajor Erwin Mack’s 23. Panzer-Division’s Kampfgruppe Zejdlik reached the river at Nikolaevskaya before dusk on 20 July. Major Zejdlik was not a manoeuvre officer but an engineer, who had previously served in the Austrian Army before the 1938 Anschluss. His Kampfgruppe was built around Kradschützen-Bataillon 23, supported by a company of his own pioneers, two artillery batteries and a panzerjäger company. After catching the Soviets in Nikolaevskaya completely by surprise, two dismounted platoons were sent across the 150m-wide river while engineers established a pontoon ferry. The Soviet 51st Army was responsible for this sector but was in a state of disorganised confusion and unable to mount an immediate response; General-major Nikolai I. Trufanov was relieved of command on 22 July and his successor, General-major Trofim K. Kolomiets, did not take over for several critical days. Unmolested by the temporarily leaderless 51st Army, Zejdlik’s pioneers were able to establish a pontoon ferry by 2000 hours on 22 July and begin transporting light vehicles across the Don. Yet despite this stroke of good fortune, 23. Panzer-Division could not immediately exploit the bridgehead because it had exhausted its fuel supplies just reaching the Don River and its vehicles were virtually immobilised. The Luftwaffe was able to fly in enough fuel to replenish Generalmajor Hermann Breith’s 3. Panzer-Division, so Kampfgruppe Westhoven from 3. Panzer-Division was substituted and sent across into Major Zejdlik’s bridgehead. Before dawn on 23 July, the Vorausabteilung (advance guard) of Kampfgruppe Westhoven set out with two battalions and boldly advanced 40km south across open steppe to seize an intact bridge across the Sal River near Orlovka. On the same day, Infanterie-Division Großdeutschland reached the Don and seized a small bridgehead near Melikhovskaya, where a pontoon bridge was begun; the 37th Army did not oppose the crossing.
Reconnaissance troops from Infanterie-Division Großdeutschland cross the Don River on pontoon ferries, July 1942. This famous division only participated in the first week of the invasion; it was then withdrawn and sent to Rzhev. (Author’s collection)

It was not until 25 July that the Soviets made any effort to counterattack the two German bridgeheads across the Don, by which point it was too late. Malinovsky’s artillery had abandoned many guns and most of their ammunition north of the Don and now had little ability to bombard the German crossing sites. Kolomiets’ 51st Army committed three rifle divisions to contain the German bridgehead over the Sal River, while sending its limited armour to strike the open eastern flank of 3. Panzer-Division’s Nikolaevskaya bridgehead. A small ground counterattack with T-60 light tanks was easily repulsed, but Soviet bombers from General-major Konstantin A. Vershinin’s 4th Air Army (4 VA) gamely succeeded in destroying the pontoon bridge. While Heeresgruppe A had gained two tenuous bridgeheads across the Don even before Rostov fell, it was impossible to sustain a large-scale invasion of the Caucasus across a pair of flimsy, 16-ton-limit pontoon bridges. It was necessary to seize a railway bridge across the Don and the only one available was in Rostov.

When General der Panzertruppen Friedrich Kirchner’s LVII Panzerkorps fought its way into a burning Rostov on 23 July, the priority was to get to the bridges over the Don on the south side of the city. The first German soldiers to reach the main road bridge were lightly armed troops from Generalmajor Traugott Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division’s Kradschützen-Bataillon 43, who arrived at the river around 1600 hours. They found a scene of chaos reminiscent of Napoleon’s retreat across the Berezina, with mobs of Soviet troops fleeing across both bridges. While surveying the situation, troops from SS-Division
‘Wiking’ also arrived in the vicinity and decided to begin shelling the packed bridges with artillery – generally a good idea but on this occasion the standing order was to capture these vital bridges intact. German artillery rounds began impacting on and near the bridges and a lucky hit apparently found a Soviet vehicle laden with ammunition – which detonated and dropped the southern span of the railway bridge into the Don. The road bridge was also soon damaged and set afire, forcing the fleeing Soviet troops to take small boats and anything that floated to escape the approaching panzers.

While three German infantry divisions continued to mop up Soviet rearguards in the burning city of Rostov, Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division quickly moved to establish a bridgehead across the Don. Division-level pioneers worked on both bridges all through the night of 23/24 July and were able to restore the road bridge to foot traffic by morning, but even before then, German troops had already crossed the river. Around 2300 hours, Kradschützen-Bataillon 43 sent part of a company across the Don in rubber boats, and they were followed the next day by the rest of their battalion and Hauptmann Siegfried Grabert’s 8./Regiment Brandenburg z.b.V. 800. The 26-year-old Grabert was a veteran special operator; having been trained by the Abwehr he then led commando-style assaults in Holland, France, Greece and Crete, and was awarded the Knight’s Cross (Ritterkreuz) for capturing a bridge in Greece.

In order to get tanks and heavy equipment across the Don, the Germans needed to seize a 6,000m-long raised causeway, which consisted of five separate bridges, flanked by marshes on both sides. General-leytenant Fedor V. Kamkov’s 18th Army, tasked with defending the Bataysk sector, was disorganised after the retreat and lacked effective command and control over the 339th Rifle Division, which was the front-line unit in this crucial sector. The Soviet division had assigned mortars and machine guns to cover the causeway but, oddly, no effort was made to mine or crater the causeway. In the Red Army, engineers did not blow up state property without orders and apparently nobody thought to give them.

Although a direct assault across the causeway seemed suicidal, that is exactly what Grabert decided to do, counting on audacity to triumph over the Soviet lack of initiative. At 0230 hours on 25 July, Grabert’s 8. Kompanie of Brandenburgers began infiltrating forward and managed to reach the second bridge before encountering serious resistance. Then all the Soviet weapons in the area opened fire on the causeway, catching the Germans in the open. Nevertheless, Grabert pushed on and managed to seize the third bridge by about 0400 hours, before falling mortally wounded. Although the Brandenburgers were pinned down under heavy fire, when the sun rose at 0505 hours Stukas arrived overhead to suppress Soviet strongpoints and the first panzers arrived after crossing over the repaired railway bridge. Incredibly, Grabert’s Brandenburgers opened the causeway, but at the cost of 33 killed or missing and 54 wounded. Now that Heeresgruppe A had kicked open the doorway into the Caucasus, it was hopeless for Malinovsky’s weak forces to try and defend the area south of the Don.

While German pioneers repaired the damaged Don River bridges and began building a new pontoon bridge, von Kleist sent 73. and 125. Infanterie-Division across on the morning of 26 July to expand the bridgehead. A single regiment from 73. Infanterie-Division pushed south into Bataysk and then captured the suburbs of Koysug. Once
Kamkov’s 18th Army screening units were pushed back from the Bataysk bridgehead, the 4. Gebirgs-Division, and 198. and 298. Infanterie-Division also began constructing crossing sites across the river, in order to further widen the bridgehead and reduce dependence upon a single crossing site. After the Germans were across the Don in strength, Malinovsky’s battered units had no choice but to fall back toward the Kagalnik River, 35km south of Rostov. General-mayor Nikolai Ia. Kirichenko’s intact 17th Kuban Cossack Cavalry Corps served as a delaying force.

German troops were quick to erect signs claiming that they had crossed the border between Europe and Asia at the Manych River but this was strictly a propaganda ploy. The actual border of Asia lay in the Transcaucasus region, which they never reached. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)
East of Rostov, 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.) followed into the Großdeutschland’s bridgehead and quickly dispatched a Vorausabteilung toward the Manych River; the 37th Army units in this sector failed to prevent this token motorised force from seizing a crossing, which greatly reduced the river’s remaining defensive value. On 27 July, part of Breith’s 3. Panzer-Division advanced south from Orlovka with two small Kampfgruppen, while the rest of his division and 23. Panzer-Division continued to cross the Don. Kolomiets’ 51st Army was poorly deployed and equipped to stop a German armoured thrust, with only the 302nd Rifle Division in Breith’s path, which enabled Breith’s forces to advance 85km in a single day. Indeed, fuel shortages were proving a greater impediment to the Germans than Soviet resistance. Malinovsky’s forces were neither retreating nor defending, but merely milling around south of the Don, with little coordination. Soviet operational-level command and control was near collapse. Although his forces were weak, the Kagalnik and Manych rivers offered Malinovsky potential defensive lines, but the Soviets allowed the Germans to cross both rivers with little hindrance; on 28 July, 73. Infanterie-Division established a bridgehead across the Kagalnik River in spite of Kirichenko’s cavalry. On that same day, Stalin issued his infamous NKO Order No. 227 which commanded all Red Army units ‘Not a Step Back!’ Meanwhile, after nearly a week of engineer work to construct a large pontoon bridge across the Don north of Bataysk, Kirchner’s LVII Panzerkorps finally began to cross the river. Malinovsky’s threadbare armies were now in deadly peril and unprepared for the storm that was inevitable once Heeresgruppe A succeeded in deploying its armour across
Marshal Budyonny, headquartered in Armavir, ordered Kolomiets’ 51st Army to counterattack the German build-up near Orlovka and provided the fresh 135th and 155th Tank brigades, which were just arriving in Kuberle by rail from the Moscow Military District. These two brigades had a total of about 40 T-34 and 40 T-70 tanks, but had no combat experience. General-mayor Boris A. Pogrebov, a career cavalryman, was put in charge of an ad hoc cavalry/tank corps-sized group that also included his 110th and 115th Cavalry divisions. Budyonny had no understanding of combined-arms tactics or planning and ordered both tank brigades to proceed directly from the railhead into battle, after a 50km roadmarch. Pogrebov was able to occupy Martynovka on the Sal on the morning of 28 July without difficulty, but his forces were strung out and he made the mistake of assuming that the Germans would sit still in their Nesmeyanovka bridgehead. Unfortunately, Mack’s 23. Panzer-Division had just arrived at the Sal River and rather than await a Soviet armoured counterattack, the Germans cunningly decided to conduct a flanking effort of their own with Kampfgruppe Burmeister (two Panzer-Abteilungen from Panzer-Regiment 201) at dawn on 29 July. Pogrebov had moved into the town of Martynovka on the Sal with over 5,000 troops and the 155th Tank Brigade. He deployed two cavalry regiments to screen his left flank, supported by tanks from the 135th Tank Brigade, which was still moving from Kuberle. Burmeister’s panzers eliminated one cavalry regiment and scattered the 135th Tank Brigade, then got around Pogrebov’s open flanks and unexpectedly struck his massed troops from behind. Concerned about the unexpected threat, General Pogrebov moved with his staff to restore order on his shattered left flank but was killed by German tanks. Kampfgruppe Burmeister then fought its way into the town and methodically shot up the packed Soviet armour, claiming 77 Soviet tanks eliminated for the loss of only 3 German tanks. About 1,000 cornered Soviet troops in Martynovka surrendered. Kolomiets’ 51st Army was left with no mobile reserves and could not stop the XXXX Panzerkorps advance across the Sal.
At dawn on 29 July, Kirchner’s LVII Panzerkorps exploded out of the Bataysk bridgehead, with the SS-Division ‘Wiking’ slicing through the remnants of two Soviet rifle divisions and heading due south for Belaya Glina while Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division marched south-east towards Salsk. General-mayor Petr M. Kozlov’s 37th Army never had a chance to hold off this onslaught and was quickly faced with the threat of encirclement as Kirchner’s panzers crushed his left flank and von Schweppenburg’s XXXX Panzerkorps enveloped his right flank. Breith’s 3. Panzer-Division committed Kampfgruppe Westhoven and Kampfgruppe von Liebenstein – a mere three battalions – against the city of Proletarskaya, which caught the Soviets completely by surprise. After a brief fight, about 500 Soviet troops surrendered and the city was captured by 1500 hours, which achieved the objective of interdicting the Tikhoretsk–Stalingrad rail line – the only remaining rail link between the Caucasus and the rest of the Soviet Union. For some time, the Soviets remained unaware of the loss of Proletarskaya, which provided Breith’s panzers the opportunity to shoot up a number of Soviet trains attempting to pass through. The Soviet 8 ODBP (armoured train division) attempted to intervene but one armoured train was damaged by the Luftwaffe and retreated while the other found its escape cut off by the German advance, so the crew blew up their own train. However, the Soviets did manage to blow up the road bridge over the Cheprak River, a subsidiary of the Manych.

Von Schweppenburg finally managed to refuel 23. Panzer-Division and get most of it across the Sal, while 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.) crossed the Manych River and advanced to cover the space between XXXX and LVII Panzerkorps. Five German mechanised divisions were barrelling down upon the city of Salsk and the Soviets attempted to slow their advance by opening a dam on the Manych River, but the flooding had only local impact. Breith’s 3. Panzer-Division was able to establish a crossing over the
Manych and got a Panzergrenadier battalion across, but the full-strength 11th NKVD Rifle Division fiercely opposed the effort and inflicted painful losses. Simultaneously, General der Gebirgstruppe Rudolf Konrad’s XXXXIX Gebirgskorps was advancing south from the Kagalnik River with 73. Infanterie-Division and 4. Gebirgs-Division, while General der Infanterie Wilhelm Wetzel’s V Armeekorps covered their open flank with 125. Infanterie-Division. Von Kleist intended to use Salsk as a pivot point, then swing rapidly westward with his armour to link up with Konrad’s infantry and thereby envelop the 18th Army on the Yeya River. Despite Order No. 227, Malinovsky recognised that his weak and dispersed forces now faced annihilation if he tried to make a stand, so he ordered the 12th, 18th and 37th armies to retreat.

Kirichenko’s 17th Kuban Cossack Cavalry Corps played an important role in delaying Ruoff’s advance toward Krasnodar and Tuapse. Soviet cavalry was handy in the Caucasus, both for its operational mobility and tactical flexibility. Unlike mechanised forces, its logistical requirements were modest, and Stalin toyed with the idea of forming a cavalry army in the region. (Courtesy of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces, Moscow via Stavka)

On 30 July, Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division captured Salsk and LVII Panzerkorps bagged almost 10,000 prisoners and a large amount of equipment from the disintegrating 37th Army, which was now reduced to about 3,000 fugitives. On von Kleist’s right flank, 73. Infanterie-Division was able to push the 17th Kuban Cossack Cavalry Corps all the way back to Kushchevskaya and then managed to seize a tentative bridgehead across the Yeya River. However, Kirichenko’s 17th Kuban Cossack Cavalry Corps conducted a successful delaying operation with the 13th and 15th Cavalry divisions, which prevented Konrad’s XXXXIX Gebirgskorps from getting across the river in strength for several days. Soviet cavalry, reinforced with a small number of tanks, counterattacked the Kushchevskaya bridgehead and brought the German advance in this sector to a temporary halt.

At this point, Stavka ordered that all remaining remnants of the Southern Front would be absorbed into Marshal Semyon M. Budyonny’s North Caucasus Front. Budyonny was uncertain where Heeresgruppe A was heading, but he had to cover all possibilities, so he redesignated Malinovsky’s 12th and 37th armies as the Don Operational Group and ordered him to protect the Armavir–Stavropol axis. Kolomiets’ 51st Army was transferred to the Stalingrad Front. In order to defend Krasnodar and the Kuban, Budyonny decided to
use the forces in the Taman Peninsula, General-mayor Grigorii P. Kotov’s 47th Army and Polkovnik Mikhail M. Shapovalov’s 1st Separate Rifle Corps, which were renamed the Coastal Operational Group and placed under the command of General-polkovnik Ivan T. Cherevichenko. Uncertain if Budyonny’s forces could hold, Stavka ordered General Ivan V. Tyulenev’s Transcaucasus Front to begin constructing a fall-back line on the Terek River with the 44th Army, to protect Grozny. Stavka dispatched four airborne brigades from Moscow to form two new rifle corps on the Terek. Unlike the Germans, the Soviets were more flexible about planning for defeat, which worked in their favour during the campaign.

By 31 July, von Kleist had all eight of his divisions across the Don and Generaloberst Richard Ruoff’s 17. Armee had six of his nine divisions across the river – a total of over 167,000 German troops. Although German logistics across the Don were minimal at this point, List had a decisive superiority over Budyonny’s scattered units and for the advancing panzer crews it must have felt like the heady days of Operation Barbarossa all over again. However, quick successes encouraged Hitler to tinker with the plan. Operation Edelweiss had always been premised upon the idea that von Kleist’s 1. Panzerarmee would receive substantial assistance from Hoth’s 4. Panzerarmee and the XXXXVIII Panzerkorps had been briefly placed under von Kleist’s control during the crossing of the Don. Yet the Soviets had committed their 1st and 4th Tank armies against Heeresgruppe B in the Don bend, so Hitler felt compelled to transfer XXXXVIII Panzerkorps back to Hoth, whose 4. Panzerarmee would now focus exclusively on pushing toward the Volga River and Stalingrad. This decision is often described as a mistake, but the fact is that Budyonny’s front had disintegrated south of the Don and List could neither supply nor profitably employ Hoth’s panzers in the Caucasus for the time being; sending them to support Paulus’ 6. Armee was prudent and led to a major German victory in the Don bend.

However, Hitler and the OKH were not satisfied with transferring just panzers from the advance into the Caucasus and were worried that the Soviets would mount offensives on other parts of the Eastern Front, particularly the Rzhev salient, so it was decided to transfer Infanterie-Division Großdeutschland to Heeresgruppe Mitte. List had also been told to expect substantial reinforcements from von Manstein’s 11. Armee in the Crimea, but now Hitler decided that the bulk of that formation would go north to participate in a new offensive at Leningrad, leaving List with the disappointing promise that he would eventually receive one or two of von Manstein’s infantry divisions. Parts of the Romanian 3rd Army would also be used to guard the yawning gap between Heeresgruppe B and A, rather than participate in the Caucasus campaign. Consequently, List’s Heeresgruppe A was suddenly deprived of follow-on forces and it was clear that Hitler’s priorities were shifting.

At 1200 hours on 31 July, Breith’s 3. Panzer-Division mounted a deliberate assault across the Manych River near Proletarskaya, supported by Nebelwerfer rockets. Although the lead Panzergrenadier unit suffered heavy losses, Polkovnik Petr P. Sushevskii’s 11th NKVD Rifle Division was defeated after a tense fight that involved hand-to-hand combat and retreated, with 1,000 troops captured. At 0245 hours the next morning, Major Günther Pape led a small armoured Kampfgruppe south from the bridgehead and advanced into the virtually unguarded city of Salsk. A few hours later, the advance guard of 13. Panzer-Division arrived. The Red Army was in full retreat.
Once Salsk fell and Budyonny’s thin front was broken, List’s Heeresgruppe A switched into pursuit mode. Rather than a single main Schwerpunkt (main effort), the Germans advanced in five dispersed, corps-sized groups, which became very spread out. Konrad’s XXXXIX Gebirgskorps from 17. Armei advanced the slowest, with 4. Gebirgs-Division and 73. Infanterie-Division marching south from Staro-Minskaya towards Timoshevskaya, clearing the eastern shore of the Sea of Azov. Two of XXXXIX Gebirgskorps’ four divisions were still back near Rostov, mopping up bypassed pockets of resistance; Konrad’s advance guards were thus relatively small, which enabled Kirichenko’s cavalry to delay them for a few days.

A column of German PzKpfw III medium tanks pushes into the Caucasus, in pursuit of Budyonny’s retreating armies. German mechanised mobility was constantly hindered by fuel shortages, which forced them to commit divisions into combat piecemeal. The failure of spare parts to reach frontline units would also reduce the operational readiness of von Kleist’s panzers by September 1942. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

On Konrad’s left flank, General der Infanterie Wilhelm Wetzel’s V Armeekorps advanced with 9., 125. and 198. Infanterie-Division towards the vital rail junction at Tikhoretsk (population 40,000), held by remnants of Kamkov’s 18th Army. Kamkov lacked cavalry or tanks to delay Wetzel’s infantry and rashly decided to employ the eight armoured trains of the 16th, 51st, 53rd and 65th ODBPs as a mobile fire support group. The armoured trains of the 51st ODBP supported a counterattack by the 15th Cavalry Division against the vanguard of 73. Infanterie-Division at Kuschevskaya on 1 August, firing over 250 shells. However, the Luftwaffe easily found the exposed Soviet armoured trains and damaged several of them with near misses and strafing attacks. Kamkov’s staff ordered the remaining trains to move south of Tikhoretsk and assemble at the Malorossiyskiy train station, but by the time this occurred the German LVII Panzerkorps had already severed the rail line below this station. The 18th Army staff dithered for a critical 24 hours – apparently forgetting about the plight of its armoured trains, during which time the German 198. Infanterie-Division had marched into Tikhoretsk and occupied the city by 1500 hours on 4 August. Four Soviet armoured trains were now stranded, with the Germans holding the line both north and south of them. The 18th Army ordered the trains to attempt a highspeed run through occupied Tikhoretsk, then head...
south-west on open line to Krasnodar. At 1700 hours on 5 August, a group of Soviet armoured trains attempted a run through Tikhoretsk but were immediately engaged by German artillery. First one train, then another were derailed in frantic efforts to get around the German defences and their crews were forced to destroy their disabled trains. Both the 51st and 53rd ODBPs were eliminated as fighting units in this debacle, although most of the crews escaped south on foot.

Pursuit, 1–10 August 1942.

The fate of Kamkov’s armoured trains had been sealed by Kirchner’s LVII Panzerkorps, which advanced rapidly towards the city of Kropotkin on the Kuban River with the SS-Division ‘Wiking’ and the Slovak Fast Division. General-mayor Andrei A. Grechko’s retreating 12th Army was unable to make a stand at Kropotkin, but when an armoured Kampfgruppe from ‘Wiking’ advanced into the city, Soviet engineers blew up the bridges over the Kuban River. However, another Kampfgruppe from the SS-Regiment ‘Germania’ had already seized a small bridgehead over the Kuban at Grigoripoliskaya 25km south-east of Kropotkin and engineers established an 8-ton pontoon bridge there by 0500 hours on 6 August. Since this was insufficient for heavy vehicles, it was replaced by a 24-ton bridge on the next day, allowing Wiking’s Panzer-Abteilung to cross the Kuban. Brigadier-General Jozef Turanec’s Slovak Fast Division arrived at Kropotkin and secured the city, enabling SS-Gruppenführer Felix Steiner to shift his entire division to the Grigoripoliskaya bridgehead. Grechko made little effort to defend the bend of the Kuban River, and once it was clear that ‘Wiking’ was across in force by 7 August, the remnants of his 12th Army retreated to the Caucasus Mountains.
Soviets retreating across the Steppe in small groups. Many would be scooped up by the pursuing panzers, but others would make it to Tuapse or the Terek River to reform. German prisoner hauls in the Caucasus were small in comparison to previous operations. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

While Kirchner’s corps crossed the Kuban, von Mackensen’s III Panzerkorps bore down upon the city of Armavir with Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division and Generalleutnant Sigfrid Henrici’s 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.). Although German propagandists claimed that von Kleist’s panzers had entered Asia, the actual boundary lay south of the Caucasus Mountains, in the Transcaucasus. Nevertheless, von Mackensen’s troops did begin to spot camels and temperatures in the region were up to 104° F (40° C), which made water just as precious as fuel. Grechko’s 12th Army decided to make a stand at Armavir, a city of 150,000, because it was essential to delay the German advance in order to gain time for the 44th Army to prepare positions on the Terek River. The only combat troops available were from the 236th Rifle Division, which had been a relatively lucky unit thus far and not suffered crippling losses. Grechko’s forces were weak but he had one advantage: Armavir was on the west bank of the 80m-wide Kuban River and von Mackensen’s troops were on the east side – the Germans needed a bridge to gain access to the city. Grechko ensured that the few bridges in the area were well guarded and prepared for demolition.

Herr selected Major Albert Brux, commander of I./Panzergrenadier-Regiment 66 and a highly skilled combat veteran who had been awarded the Ritterkreuz in 1941, to lead the armoured Kampfgruppe that attempted to seize a bridge over the Kuban north of Armavir on 3 August. Brux hit the bridge with fury and managed to get six panzers across before the Soviets blew up the bridge, stranding his tanks. During the night, Brux managed to get some of his infantry across on rubber rafts to reinforce the bridgehead, but a Soviet battalion prevented any further expansion. Stymied by tough Soviet resistance and the Kuban River, Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division was forced to wait for 24 hours for bridging columns and artillery to arrive in order to mount a forced river-crossing operation south of the existing bridgehead. Another Kampfgruppe, comprising Oberstleutnant Harald Stolz’s Kradschützen-Bataillon 43, was quietly sent across the Kuban on the night of 4/5 August. Oddly, Grechko’s troops did not contest this crossing, which enabled German engineers to establish a ferry within 2 hours and a 24-ton pontoon bridge within 10.5 hours. At 1000 hours on 5 August, German mechanised forces began crossing the Kuban.

Generalleutnant Sigfrid Henrici’s 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.) sent its Infanterie-Regiment 60 to capture Armavir, while a Kampfgruppe from Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division
headed west toward Maikop. Grechko’s troops had dug anti-tank ditches outside Armavir, but instead of tanks they were struck by three battalions of dismounted Panzergrenadiere. Supported by artillery and the Luftwaffe, the Panzergrenadiere quickly fought their way into the city but it took the remainder of the day before Soviet resistance was overcome. The captured city yielded a small refinery and an oil storage area – both burning – and an airfield, which was quickly occupied by the advance elements of Fliegerkorps IV.

While part of Henrici’s division cleared Armavir, Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division sent three Kampfgruppen toward the primary strategic objective of Maikop. Already, a special 62-man detachment of Russian-speaking Brandenburg troops, led by Leutnant Adrian von Fölkersam, had infiltrated Maikop, disguised as NKVD soldiers. Herr’s division was able to establish a small bridgehead over the intermediate Laba River on 6 August, but required another 24 hours to construct a pontoon bridge to allow the tanks of Major Wolfram Montfort’s I./Panzer-Regiment 4 and the SPW half-tracks of Major Brux’s Panzergrenadiere to cross. By the morning of 8 August, Herr had pushed a considerable force across the Laba River, while both ‘Wiking’ and 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.) had also crossed the river, on either flank. Soviet resistance along the Laba River was minimal, focused around the inexperienced Special Motorised Brigade. The Soviet 12th Army troops in Maikop feared that German troops would arrive at any moment, and von Fölkersam’s men went into action on the afternoon of 8 August, knocking out Soviet communications in the city and issuing false orders that the city was to be immediately abandoned. Von Fölkersam’s raid was a success insofar as it destabilised an already wobbly Soviet defence of the city, but his men failed to prevent real Soviet security personnel and engineers from sabotaging the oil rigs located around the city. In fact, Major Brux’s SPWs did not arrive at the outskirts of Maikop until 1500 hours on 9 August and they found oil storage tanks near the train station and other facilities ablaze. However, Brux could not secure the entire city until two other Kampfgruppen arrived the next day and he was wounded during mopping-up operations.
By early August 1942, the German 3. Panzer-Division was across the Don River and in hot pursuit of the retreating Soviet 37th Army. However, fuel shortages made it impossible for the entire division to advance simultaneously, so small advance guards were dispatched to push as far as they could before running out of fuel.
themselves. At the tip of 3. Panzer-Division’s advance guard was Major Günter Pape’s Kampfgruppe, which consisted of his Kradschützen-Bataillon 3 and the I./Panzer-Regiment 6, along with small detachments of Panzerjäger, Pioniere and signal troops.

By the morning of 3 August, Kampfgruppe Pape was approaching the city of Stavropol, where they encountered friendly Caucasian civilians, as well as camels. Only a few PzKpfw III tanks were still with the column, with the rest falling out due to mechanical problems. Along the road, Pape’s column passed disabled Soviet vehicles, abandoned in their hasty retreat. Pape’s small column, consisting of fewer than 2,000 troops, was thrusting deep into the Caucasus, against minimal enemy resistance. The Germans thought that this easy pursuit indicated that the campaign would soon end in victory, but that feeling would quickly pass.

Here we see the German column, with the motorcycles (1) in front, followed by an SdKfz 251 half-track (2), and two SdKfz 250 SPWs with troops aboard (3 and 4) and a PzKpfw III tank (5). They are passing by a derelict Soviet GAZ-AA truck on one side of the road (6) and on the other peasants and a camel are watching them pass.

Although Kirchner’s LVII Panzerkorps had been led to believe that their primary objective was located within Maikop, this proved to be a false assumption. In fact, of the approximately 150 oil rigs located in the region, only about a dozen were actually located within the city environs. Imprudently, an advance battalion from the Technical Brigade Mineralöl (TBM) followed in the wake of Herr’s panzers, along roads that were still teeming with bypassed Soviet troops and suffered heavy losses. After arriving at Maikop, it quickly became obvious that restoring oil production in captured Caucasian fields was not going to be as simple as Konti Öl executives in Berlin had believed. The German oilmen had expected some sabotage, but were stunned by the level of Soviet ingenuity in vandalism; steel cores had been driven down each shaft and could not be removed. The TBM personnel would have to drill new shafts.

Having spent more than two weeks fighting across 300km of the Caucasus, Herr’s tired Panzergrenadiere now learned from the TBM oil experts that the bulk of the ‘Maikop oilfield’ was actually located 45–50km to the south-west, near the villages of Neftegorsk, Khadyzhensk and Shirvanskaya. This meant that Kirchner’s corps needed to cross the Belaya River and continue the advance southwards, into the mountains, in order to seize the oilfields. As a follow-on objective, the OKH added the port of Tuapse to Kirchner’s task list. An initial attempt to get across the Belaya River ended in failure due to Soviet artillery fire. Thus the capture of Maikop itself proved to be an empty triumph and should have served notice to Hitler, Göring and the OKH that the seizure of the oil resources in the Caucasus was not going to be easy.

The fog of war was particularly thick at this stage of the Caucasus campaign. The Germans had little idea where the bulk of Budyonny’s forces had retreated and Luftwaffe Fw-189 reconnaissance planes sought out columns of vehicles and other signs of defensive preparations. For their part, the Soviets only became aware of German advances when they lost communications with towns. Many small groups of bypassed Soviet troops retreated southwards, left behind in the wake of von Kleist’s panzers.

Up to this point, Kirchner’s panzers had been operating in flat terrain, but now at Maikop they were asked to proceed down a single dirt road into the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains – terrain that was increasingly unsuitable for mechanised warfare. Konrad’s XXXXIX Gebirgskorps had moved south and had 1. and 4. Gebirgs-Division near Kropotkin on the Kuban River, while General der Artillerie Maximilian de Angelis’ XXXXIV Armeekorps was even closer, with 97. and 101. Jäger-Division on the Laba River. At this point, List made a critical mistake – the kind of mistake that snatches defeat
from the jaws of victory. He decided to send Konrad’s two Gebirgs-Divisionen far to the south to make a push towards the port of Sukhumi in western Georgia. List did allow 13. Panzer-Division and 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.) to pull out of the advance towards the Neftegorsk oilfields, but decided to leave SS-Division ‘Wiking’ and the Slovak Fast Division to continue pushing into the mountains. Angelis’ two Jäger-Divisionen were committed to support the advance towards Tuapse, but were badly deployed as flank guards, instead of the main effort. SS-Gruppenführer Steiner’s ‘Wiking’ was given the honour of pushing on to the oilfields and Tuapse, albeit along a one-tank front. The muddle caused by this spate of bad decisions gave vital days to Grechko to rebuild his 12th Army and build a new defensive line in the mountains.

While Kirchner’s and von Mackensen’s panzers were focused on Maikop, von Schweppenburg’s XXXX Panzerkorps was the only significant German force pushing towards the next strategic objective of Grozny. Initially, von Schweppenburg’s XXXX Panzerkorps headed south from Salsk towards Stavropol (renamed Voroshilovsk in 1935, but it reverted to Stavropol in 1943; both names were used in 1942) some 160km distant. Soviet resistance evaporated in front of the panzers, which advanced southwards with Breith’s 3. Panzer-Division in the lead and Mack’s fuel-starved 23. Panzer-Division trailing. Breith’s 3. Panzer-Division moved with Kampfgruppe Pape and Kampfgruppe von Liebenstein out in front, but the rest of his division was strung out over 60km to the rear. The German advance towards Stavropol was particularly dramatic, with the mechanised Vorausabteilungen moving over 100km across the flat steppe in a single day, but severe fuel shortages were already immobilising many of the vehicles in each mechanised division. A fully fueled PzKpfw III tank had a maximum range of between 90 and 160km, while an SdKfz 251 half-track could travel between 150 and 300km on a single load of fuel; this meant that the advance was led by the more fuel-efficient vehicles while most of the tanks, artillery and bridging engineers lagged behind or sat stationary. Major Pape’s Kampfgruppe consisted of Kradschützen-Bataillon 3 and I./Panzer-Regiment 6 – about 1,200 troops and 30 tanks – but the retreating 37th Army could not stop it. Here and there, the Germans encountered resistance, but either overran it or bypassed it in favour of keeping Budyonny’s forces on the run.

As Kampfgruppe Pape approached Stavropol, it entered a fertile agricultural belt and encountered friendly Caucasian civilians, who were happy to see the Red Army and the hated NKVD gone. Outside Stavropol, Pape’s panzers overran a train station and captured an abandoned train with seven tanks aboard. Fliegerkorps IV bombed Stavropol to disrupt the Soviet retreat, setting parts of the city on fire, but Budyonny made no stand there. Pape’s panzers entered the smouldering city of 85,000 souls at 1345 hours on 3 August and found no civilians or enemy troops in sight; within 75 minutes, Pape’s men had secured the entire city. Stavropol provided a windfall for Breith’s 3. Panzer-Division, with an intact fuel storage dump and warehouses filled with almost 3,000 tons of grain. Among the citizens to fall under German occupation was 11-year-old Mikhail Gorbachev, future Soviet leader. Uninformed about the fall of the city, the Soviet VVS (Military Air Forces) kept trying to land at the captured airfield, to the glee of Breith’s 2cm flak gunners, who destroyed seven aircraft, including a TB-3 heavy bomber.

On 5 August, Breith’s 3. Panzer-Division had salvaged enough captured fuel in Stavropol to dispatch Kampfgruppe Pape (six tanks, I./Panzergrenadier Regiment 3,
Kradschützen-Bataillon 3, Panzer-Pionier-Bataillon 39 and artillery) south through the foothills to seize the city of Nevinnomyssk and thereby sever the Armavir–Georgiyevsk rail line. Just outside the city, as Pape’s column approached a bridge over the Kuban, it came under Soviet artillery fire. A Soviet rifle battalion, supported by an artillery battery, defended the crossing site. However, Pape quickly recognised that the Soviets were only defending the area around the bridge and he simply sent his motorcycle infantry further south and they found an unguarded crossing. Once across, Pape’s troops overran the outflanked Soviet artillerists and routed the battalion at the bridge. With just six tanks and two battalions of infantry, Breith’s division captured the city of Nevinnomyssk. Further back, Mack’s 23. Panzer-Division mopped up retreating Soviet units, capturing 2,200 prisoners and 34 artillery pieces from the 4th Rifle Division. However, von Schweppenburg’s XXXX Panzerkorps was completely out of fuel and immobilised for three critical days. It was not until the morning of 8 August that Breith’s 3. Panzer-Division could resume its advance, with the next objective being the city of Pyatigorsk (population 62,000).

Kampfgruppe Westhoven advanced in the lead, with one Panzer-Abteilung, Kradschützen-Bataillon 3, a Panzergrenadier-Bataillon, artillery and divisional pioneers. In 19 hours, the Kampfgruppe advanced 100km, encountering light resistance at several points. For the first time, the Germans caught sight of the snow-covered Mount Elbrus in the distance. However, the retreating Soviets successfully blew up all the bridges along the route and destroyed the oil pumping stations. On the morning of 9 August, Kampfgruppe Westhoven began fighting its way into the northern outskirts of Pyatigorsk, but encountered heavy resistance from NKVD troops, supported by multiple rocket launchers. Westhoven’s group consisted of fewer than 4,000 troops and the German troops were fatigued by the excessive heat, which reached 52° C (125° F). Nevertheless, Westhoven’s troops slowly fought their way block by block into the city, suffering significant losses. German reinforcements arrived in the afternoon, as Breith added another Panzer-Abteilung and a Panzergrenadier-Bataillon to tip the fight in his favour. By evening, 3. Panzer-Division had occupied the northern half of Pyatigorsk. The next morning, Kradschützen-Bataillon 3 sent motorcycle infantry across the Pudkumok River and the southern half of the city was occupied before noon on 10 August. The NKVD troops had withdrawn.
German troops cautiously approach a burning oil storage and trans-shipment facility at Maikop’s train station. Soviet sabotage rendered most of the region’s oil infrastructure useless for most of the Germans’ brief occupation. (Author’s collection)

After the capture of Pyatigorsk, von Schweppenburg called a temporary halt to all offensive action by his XXXX Panzerkorps. The combat units were all out of fuel and the logistical support units were far to the rear, some as far back as the Manych River. Numerous pockets of Soviet troops had been bypassed during the heady pursuit, but now they threatened von Schweppenburg’s tenuous lines of communications. It was time to consolidate the conquered areas and replenish the troops for a deliberate advance, rather than continuing on with a couple of battalions of motorcycle infantry and some armoured cars. The tip of von Kleist’s spear had outrun its supplies, giving Budyonny a vital breathing space.

While von Kleist’s pursuit was culminating in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains, Ruoff’s 17. Armee was descending upon the city of Krasnodar with four infantry divisions from Wetzel’s V Armeekorps. The infantrymen had been marching 20km or more for two weeks through the desert-like terrain south of the Don and the heat and lack of water was particularly telling upon the horses that pulled their artillery. Ruoff’s army had lost over 950 horses since crossing the Don, which reduced the mobility of his divisions. In order to keep up with the fleeing Soviets, each of Wetzel’s infantry divisions formed a motorised Vorausabteilung by pooling all available trucks and cars, but this further deprived logistic units of vehicles essential to move supplies forward. Nevertheless, Wetzel’s corps closed in on Krasnodar, the capital of the Kuban and a city of 200,000 inhabitants. Krasnodar was a key target of Edelweiss since crude oil from Maikop and the nearby Krymskaya oilfield in the Taman Peninsula was sent to the city by pipeline, where the city’s refineries converted it into fuel. Budyonny could not simply abandon such a critical objective, so he ordered General-mayor Aleksandr I. Ryzhov’s 56th Army to make a stand there. Ryzhov’s army consisted of the 30th, 339th and 349th Rifle divisions and two separate artillery regiments, but they were in poor shape after the retreat from Rostov. Polkovnik Boris N. Arshintsev’s 30th Rifle Division was in the best condition, but the 339th Rifle Division only had 2,573 troops and the 349th Rifle Division just 1,137 troops (half of whom were unarmed). On 7 August, communist party officials began to mobilise 19,000 local
residents – mostly teenagers and old men – to dig trenches and anti-tank ditches outside Krasnodar. Thousands of hastily levied militiamen were provided to Ryzhov to replenish his battle-worn divisions, but he remained very short of ammunition, weapons and radios.

While the Krasnodar militiamen were still looking for shovels to dig anti-tank ditches, Oberst Paul Scheuerpflug’s Vorausabteilung from 9. Infanterie-Division reached the northern outskirts of Krasnodar on the morning of 8 August, followed soon thereafter by elements of 73. and 125. Infanterie-Division. Major Kurt Schäff’s Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung 249 provided a battery of StuG III assault guns to reinforce the assault. Ryzhov tried to establish a perimeter north of the city, with Arshintsev’s 30th Rifle Division holding the centre and the two weaker divisions covering the flanks, but left only two battalions of officer cadets. This was a serious mistake. Once it became clear during the afternoon that his thin red line was going to be attacked by three full-strength German infantry divisions, Ryzhov had a change of heart and decided to order Arshintsev to mount a rearguard, while he withdrew the rest of his army across the Kuban River. When Wetzel launched his attack on the morning of 9 August, 9. and 73. Infanterie-Division simply enveloped much of Arshintsev’s positions and quickly penetrated into the city proper. Although Arshintsev managed a fighting withdrawal to a pontoon bridge across the Kuban, most of the city was in German hands by the end of the day. However, the vital oil refinery and storage tanks, as well as all the bridges across the Kuban, had been destroyed, leaving an empty triumph for Ruoff’s 17. Armee. Having gained a wrecked city, Ruoff directed the newly arrived Romanian Cavalry Corps to advance westwards to clear the coastline along the Sea of Azov and isolate General-mayor Grigorii P. Kotov’s intact 47th Army in the Taman Peninsula.

The first ten days of August were a heady time for von Kleist’s panzers and Ruoff’s infantrymen but despite the seizure of a good deal of terrain, not one strategic objective had been accomplished. Fuel shortages deprived von Kleist’s panzers of their mobility at a critical moment, while the bulk of the German infantry was too slow to catch Budyonny’s retreating forces. German logistical support south of the Don was bad and getting worse, while Luftflotte 4 was unable to provide effective air support across such a broad front. Furthermore, losses had been fairly heavy – over 12,000 casualties – despite the spotty Soviet resistance. In essence, there were already signs by early August that Heeresgruppe A could not achieve its objectives. It was clear that the Soviets were not going to let any significant oil resources fall into German hands intact.

Following on the heels of Heeresgruppe A, SS-Brigadeführer Walther Bierkamp’s Einsatzgruppe D also brought the Holocaust to the Caucasus. Bierkamp recruited Caucasian auxiliaries to conduct ‘Special Operations’ against the Nazi regime’s enemies. The actual number of Jews in the Caucasus was estimated to be only 45,000 out of a population of about 7.5 million and spread across a very large area. Consequently, Einsatzgruppe D made extensive use of specially built vans to gas their victims, beginning in Stavropol on 5 August. Bierkamp established his headquarters in the picturesque city of Pyatigorsk, but his minions spread out across the Caucasus, using precious fuel to bring genocide to each corner of the region. Nor were Jews the only victims of Bierkamp’s homicidal campaign; particularly repugnant was the murder of retarded and invalid children in Yeysk.
A panzer unit from 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.) has established itself in a village on the Kalmyk Steppe. Initially this sector was fairly quiet and the German troops had time to rest after the rapid advance from the Don, but in time isolated German detachments in this area were at great risk. (Author’s collection)

CLEARING THE KUBAN, 11 AUGUST–27 SEPTEMBER

While von Kleist waited for fuel in order to resume his advance towards the Terek River and Grozny, the bulk of German combat activity shifted towards clearing the Taman Peninsula and the Kuban. The OKH believed that this operation would improve German logistics in the Crimea by allowing naval convoys to arrive through the ports of Anapa and Novorossiysk, as well as eliminating a good part of the Soviet coastal forces. Although Wetzel spent a few days mopping up around Krasnodar, he had his four infantry divisions fairly concentrated. In addition, Lieutenant-General Mihail Racovita’s Romanian Cavalry Corps, with its 5th, 6th and 9th Cavalry divisions, was brought up to cover Wetzel’s right flank to the Sea of Azov. The Romanians had already chased the Azov Flotilla out of its base at Yeisk (8 August) and were about to evict them from Primorsko-Akhtarskaya. Wetzel’s eastern flank was loosely tied in with Kirchner’s LVII Panzerkorps, advancing towards Tuapse.

In contrast, the Soviet Maritime Group in the Kuban was dispersed. Ryzhov’s 56th Army had retreated south of the Kuban River and established a linear defence, but was thinly spread. The main force in the Kuban was General-mayor Kotov’s 47th Army, consisting of the 32nd Guards Rifle Division, the 77th Mountain Rifle Division and the 103rd Rifle Brigade – all intact formations. Kotov’s headquarters was shifted to Novorossiysk along with the 77th Mountain Rifle Division and 103rd Rifle Brigade, but Budyonny ordered Vice-Admiral Fillipp Oktyabrsky’s Black Sea Fleet to begin evacuating the 32nd Guards Rifle Division by sea on 7 August to reinforce the defence of Tuapse. About 5,000 naval personnel were left to guard the Taman coast, while Rear-Admiral Sergei Gorshkov’s Azov Flotilla established a new defensive hedgehog in the minor port of Temryuk.

Since early August, General Kurt Pflugbeil’s Fliegerkorps IV had conducted regular
bombing raids against the port of Novorossiysk, inflicting considerable damage to both shipping and facilities. Consequently, the Black Sea Fleet Air Arm (VVS-ChF) formed the MAG-NOR (Naval Aviation Group Novorossiysk Defensive Area) to provide air defence from three airfields around the port. The Soviet naval fighter regiments inflicted painful losses on German raiders: three Ju-88s from I./Kampfgeschwader (KG) 51 were shot down on 8 August and five He-111s from KG 55 on 10 August. Due to this resolute resistance by Soviet naval fighters, the Luftwaffe was unable to interdict Soviet naval lines of communication into Novorossiysk and to the Taman Peninsula, which led to a protracted battle for the Kuban.

German infantry ford a river at a shallow point. Ruoff’s 17. Armee was faced with crossing one water obstacle after another, many of which were not this easy. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

While Racovita’s Romanian cavalry cleared the coastline, Wetzel prepared for an operation to cross the Kuban River; his intent was to hit Ryzhov’s 56th Army across a wide front and hope to find a weak spot. Before dawn on 14 August, all four divisions from Wetzel’s V Armeekorps conducted regimental-size crossing operations across the Kuban using rubber boats. Soviet resistance was unexpectedly heavy at first, particularly from the 5th Air Army and VVS-ChF, which repeatedly bombed the German crossing sites. Oberst Otto Hitzfeld, commander of Grenadier-Regiment 213 and one of the heroes of the Crimean campaign, was badly wounded by a Soviet air raid. Attempts to build pontoon bridges were also frustrated by Soviet air raids, but eventually 9. Infanterie-Division succeeded in establishing a viable bridgehead and a 16-ton pontoon bridge was erected by nightfall. Once Wetzel had established his bridgehead across the Kuban, he brought the entire 9. and 73. Infanterie-Division across and began pushing eastwards towards Krymskaya, while his other two divisions slowly pushed the 56th Army back into the mountains.

Kotov shifted the 103rd Rifle Brigade and a company of T-26 light tanks from Major Peter I. Reshetin’s 126th OTB to Krymskaya, in order to block the German advance. The 103rd Rifle Brigade was an unusually large 5,000-man formation, consisting mostly of military students, but was woefully short of heavy weapons. On 17 August, 9. and 73. Infanterie-Division fought their way into the town and gained a foothold, but could not completely eject the Soviet brigade. However, losses were heavy, including ten T-26 tanks. While the 103rd Rifle Brigade bought time at Krymskaya, Kotov deployed the 77th
Mountain Rifle Division to block the main Novorossiysk–Krasnodar road at Verkhnebakanskiy. This division had been destroyed in the Crimea in May and was still in the process of rebuilding; it was short on both weapons and personnel. Captain 1st Rank Georgii N. Kholostyakov took charge of the inner defences around Novorossiysk and assigned the newly raised 83rd Naval Infantry Brigade (NIB) to cover the north-west sector and a composite naval infantry brigade to cover the north-eastern approaches near Neberdzhayevskaya. Due to the delay in establishing a fortified defensive perimeter around Novorossiysk there were few bunkers, and the defenders had to rely upon hastily dug entrenchments. However, the port was well protected behind two tall ridgelines, which greatly favoured the defence.

A Romanian machine-gun team in the Kuban. The Romanian 3rd Army performed fairly well in the Caucasus and were often superior to the rag-tag Red Army units involved in the early stages of the campaign. On several occasions, such as at Temryuk, the Romanians engaged in house-to-house combat. (Author’s collection)

It took Wetzel’s two infantry divisions four days to clear the 103rd Rifle Brigade out of Krymskaya and to struggle through the forested and mountainous terrain south of the town. The important towns of Neberdzhayevskaya and Nizhnebakanskiy were captured on 22 August, ripping a hole in Novorossiysk’s outer defensive perimeter. Yet the sacrifice of the 103rd Rifle Brigade had bought Kotov valuable days to strengthen the defences around Novorossiysk and German casualties were mounting. Wetzel was forced to temporarily suspend his offensive on 25 August. Kotov immediately ordered the 77th Mountain Rifle Division to mount a regimental-size counterattack to retake Neberdzhayevskaya, but this ended up as a bloody repulse. Soviet losses were heavy during the fighting on the outer perimeter, and the 126th OTB lost 30 out of 36 T-26 tanks.
Meanwhile, Racovita’s Romanian cavalry had better success along the coast, since the Soviets had denuded this sector in order to reinforce Novorossiysk. The Romanian 6th and 9th Cavalry divisions pushed back the Azov Flotilla’s two ill-equipped naval infantry battalions and closed in on their base at Temryuk. By 22 August, Racovita’s cavalry was just outside the port and Gorshkov was forced to scuttle all of his gunboats and order his crews to make their way on foot to Novorossiysk. The Romanians occupied Temryuk on 23 August and then turned south towards the port of Anapa in order to trap Soviet troops in the Taman Peninsula.

It was clear that Novorossiysk was going to be a tough nut to crack, not unlike Sevastopol, so Wetzel used the temporary lull to bring up two regiments (Infanterie-Regiment 419 and 421) from 125. Infanterie-Division, more assault guns and more artillery. Ruoff’s 17. Arme did not have a great deal of heavy artillery, but he was able to provide Wetzel with a battalion of 21cm Mörser, one battalion of 10cm cannons and one battalion of 15cm howitzers. This was nothing like the level of support provided to von Manstein’s 11. Arme for the assault upon Sevastopol two months earlier and Ruoff’s Luftwaffe air support evaporated at this critical moment. Buoyed by the rapid capture of Krasnodar, Maikop and Pyatigorsk, Generalfeldmarschall Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen decided in mid-August that the Caucasus campaign was all but over and opted to transfer the bulk of his Luftflotte 4 to support Heeresgruppe B’s advance towards Stalingrad. Between 17 and 19 August, Fliegerkorps IV began shifting the bulk of its combat power northwards, including six bomber Gruppen. List’s Heeresgruppe A was left with anaemic air support – just 30 Bf-109G fighters (III./Jagdgeschwader 52 based at Armavir), 23 Bf-110 fighter-bombers (II./Zerstörergeschwader 1 at Krasnodar), 20 Ju-87 Stuka dive-bombers (II./Sturzkampfgeschwader 77 at Belaya Glina) and 4 He-111
bombers. With the sharp reduction in Luftwaffe support, the Soviet MAG-NOR became very active in supporting the defence and Wetzel’s troops came under frequent enemy air attack.

Nevertheless, German tactical communications intercepts by Nachrichten-Nahaufklärungs-Kompanie 596 was able to learn a great deal about the Soviet defences, particularly from the 47th Army’s indiscreet artillery staff. Armed with this intelligence, Wetzel resumed his offensive on 29 August and achieved tactical surprise by shifting his axis of attack from the north-east to the north-west. The two infantry regiments from 125. Infanterie-Division pushed back the 83rd Naval Infantry Brigade’s screen line north of Krymskaya–Verkhnebakanskiy and began enveloping the left flank of the 77th Mountain Rifle Division. At the same time, 9. Infanterie-Division attacked with two of its regiments against the Composite Naval Infantry Brigade, threatening to overwhelm the eastern sector of the defence. Wetzel also committed two assault-gun battalions to strengthen his attack units. Only stubborn resistance by the Soviet naval infantrymen, assisted by naval gunfire support from the destroyers Kharkov and Soobrazitel’ny in Tsemes Bay, prevented a German breakthrough. However, the German attacks had fixed most of the Soviet defenders in place and the centre of Kotov’s line had been dangerously thinned to support the threatened flanks.
German forces advance towards Krasnodar, supported by StuG III assault guns.

Ruoff’s 17. Armee was heavily dependent upon mules and horses to carry supplies, like this one with a spare MG 42 barrel and two boxes of 7.92mm ammunition. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

While Wetzel’s corps was closing in on Novorossiysk, the Soviet hold over the rest of the Kuban was disintegrating as well. On 31 August, Racovita’s cavalry pushed back a thin screen of Gorshkov’s naval infantrymen and captured the port of Anapa. With the Taman Peninsula isolated, the Axis forces were now prepared to conduct an amphibious operation across the Kerch Strait. On the night of 1/2 September, Kapitänleutnant Max Giele’s 1. Landungs-Flottille began Operation Blucher II, by transporting 46. Infanterie-Division across the Kerch Strait to occupy the north-west corner of the Taman Peninsula. By this point, Gorshkov’s Azov Flotilla was out of the fight and the Soviets could not oppose the German amphibious operation. The German Kriegsmarine employed 24 Marinefährprahme (naval ferry barges, MFP) to transport the division across the strait during hours of darkness, in order to avoid Soviet air attacks. Once the Soviets realised that the landing was in progress, they used their own remaining light naval forces to evacuate 5,000 isolated naval troops on the Taman Peninsula.

As the situation deteriorated in the Kuban, Stavka decided on 1 September to transfer Cherevichenko’s Black Sea Group (12th, 18th, 47th and 56th armies) to Tyulenev’s Transcaucasus Front. This realignment allowed Budyonny to focus on the inland battles, while Tyulenev managed the coastal fight. In Novorossiysk, Kholostyakov was able to form two additional battalions of naval infantrymen from sailors and three more battalions were brought in by sea from Poti, adding a total of 4,900 troops to the defence. However, Wetzel’s outflanking manoeuvre with 125. Infanterie-Division was gradually encircling the 77th Mountain Rifle Division at Verkhnebakanskiy from the north-west, while 73. Infanterie-Division closed in from the east. After three days of tough fighting, the trapped Soviet division was smashed. The 73. Infanterie-Division then shifted southwards, crossed the last ridgeline before the city and overwhelmed the thin cordon of naval infantrymen, including the newly formed 255th Naval Infantry Brigade. On 4 September, Infanterie-Regiment 213 captured the Vorota Pass, leading directly into the city. Kotov and Kholostyakov desperately tried to shift forces to block the German breakthrough and they did succeed in delaying 73. Infanterie-Division’s advance into the city. However, 125. Infanterie-Division and the Romanian 5th Cavalry Division had swung wide to the south and were now approaching the virtually undefended western side of the city. On 7
September, a battalion from Infanterie-Regiment 186 was the first to fight its way into the city and managed to occupy the port area. The flotilla leader Kharkov led a Soviet naval convoy carrying 2,500 reinforcements from the 137th Naval Infantry Regiment into the harbour but found it impossible to land troops in the enemy-occupied docks.
After the German 73. Infanterie-Division captured central Novorossiysk, Ruoff ordered Wetzel’s V Armeekorps to continue the advance along the coast road to threaten Tuapse from the west. The Soviet 47th Army had been virtually demolished in the fight for the city and the only significant Soviet force blocking the coast road was three battalions of naval infantrymen, formed from survivors of Gorshkov’s Azov Flotilla and the 83rd Naval Infantry Brigade. On 8/9 September, the German Infanterie-Regiment 213 began the effort to push along the coast road, supported by assault guns and heavy artillery.

The 16th Naval Infantry Battalion had occupied a strong position in the Proletary Cement Factory, on the outskirts of the town, while the other two battalions were in the nearby Krasny Oktyabr Factory. Like Thermopylae in ancient Greece, the terrain was narrow here due to the water of Tsemes Bay and the nearby mountains, which reduced the German numerical advantage. At dawn on 8 September, the German Landser from Infanterie-Regiment 213 came on at the point of the bayonet, but encountered unexpectedly strong resistance at the Cement Factory. German infantrymen fought their way into the lower floors and engaged in hand-to-hand combat, while Soviet sailors fired down upon them from upper floors. After a day of intense fighting, the Soviet battalion was nearly surrounded, but the survivors were able to slip out to continue the fight at the Oktyabr Factory. Despite repeated attacks, the German V Armeekorps could not achieve a breakthrough along the coast road and the costly Soviet defence ultimately proved successful.

This scene shows the side of the factory (1) and the oncoming German infantry (2). Several of the Germans have already become casualties (3), but a few of the Germans have reached the lower floor (4) and are engaged in vicious hand-to-hand combat with the Soviet naval infantrymen (5).

German pioneers and Romanian mountain infantry crossing a water obstacle in a large rubber raft, probably east of Novorossiysk, September 1942. Axis cooperation in the Caucasus campaign was somewhat better than in other sectors of the Eastern Front. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-2004-0186; photo by Steiniger)

Although two more days of mopping-up were required to secure the city, Novorossiysk had fallen. The German V Armeekorps claimed to have captured 6,500 prisoners in the city, but had suffered over 4,000 casualties in two weeks of costly fighting. Once central Novorossiysk was occupied, Stavka relieved Kotov of command and transferred Grechko to take over the 47th Army on 8 September. Very little was left of the latter, but two battalions of Soviet naval infantrymen and some army survivors had established a strong blocking position at the Proletary Cement Factory and Oktyabr Factory at the south-east outskirts of Novorossiysk. Once the city was secured, Ruoff ordered Wetzel to advance along the coast road towards Tuapse, but when Infanterie-Regiment 213 attempted to advance on the morning of 11 September, it encountered heavy resistance from the Soviet naval infantrymen in the two factory complexes. Despite
repeated attempts, Wetzel’s corps could not budge the Soviet defenders and Grechko received some reinforcements from the Transcaucasus Front. Soviet coastal batteries also still controlled Tsemes Bay, which prevented Axis shipping from using the port of Novorossiysk for logistic purposes. Wetzel continued to pound futilely on Grechko’s positions but failed to take any ground; he finally shifted to the defence on 27 September. The German conquest of the Kuban had proved to be a hollow triumph and the only slim compensation was the seizure of 23 operational wells in the small Krymskaya oilfield. By January 1943, these wells were producing between 12 and 20 tons of crude oil per day, although this small amount was consumed locally by Axis forces in the Kuban.

The M1937 45mm anti-tank gun was the standard Soviet divisional anti-tank weapon in the early years of the war and was effective against German PzKpfw III and PzKpfw IV tanks at ranges up to 500m. This weapon is deployed on open steppe, but in mountainous terrain the 45mm anti-tank gun could be very difficult to spot before it opened fire. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

COSTLY DIVERSION TO TUAPSE, 11 AUGUST–23 OCTOBER

List had ordered Kirchner’s LVII Panzerkorps to continue the advance towards Neftegorsk with the SS-Division ‘Wiking’ and Henrici’s 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.), while de Angelis’ XXXXIV Armeekorps was moving up with 97. and 101. Jäger-Division to reinforce them. Kirchner intended to conduct a pincer operation on the Soviet oilfields located between Khadyzhensk and Apsheronsk, with ‘Wiking’ advancing from Belorechenskaya in the west and Henrici’s division advancing from Maikop in the east. After the oilfields were occupied, German forces would advance towards the port of Tuapse along two routes: the Belorochensk–Tuapse rail line, and the Apsheronsk–Lazarevskoye road. Initially, Soviet resistance was light; Budyonny had transferred Kirichenko’s 17th Kuban Cossack Cavalry Corps to block ‘Wiking’ but arrived too late to interfere with its opening moves. Cherevichenko had the 12th Army deployed on the main route to Tuapse, but it had few infantrymen and little artillery. Assisted by infiltrators from the 7. Kompanie of Brandenburgers, ‘Wiking’ was able to capture an intact bridge over the Pshekha River on 11 August, enabling two battalions from the SS-Regiment ‘Germania’ and its Panzer-Abteilung to advance 50km in three days to overrun the oilfields at Kabardinskaya. However, the captured oilfields were all burning and Soviet resistance suddenly stiffened. Kirichenko’s cavalry began harassing ‘Wiking’’s exposed right flank,
which forced SS-Gruppenführer Felix Steiner to divert one of his regiments to screen that area until that mission could be handed off to the Slovak Fast Division. Steiner’s division was very spread out and he only had a few battalions committed to the advance along a narrow axis towards Tuapse. The terrain was increasingly mountainous and heavily forested, which enabled the Soviet 12th Army to focus its defence at Khadyzhensk. The efforts made by ‘Wiking’ to break through this Soviet blocking position on 15–16 August failed.

Romanian infantry clearing out a Soviet rail station in the Kuban. The Romanians conducted a successful and semi-independent campaign clearing out the Taman Peninsula, which enabled the Germans to conduct their amphibious operation across the Kerch Strait. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)
Nor did Henrici’s 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.) achieve much success. South of Maikop, he sent Kampfgruppe Brede south on 12 August, trying to approach Apsheronsk and the Neftyanaya oil centre from the east. However, Brede had to approach along a narrow, heavily forested mountain road and encountered one of 12th Army’s blocking positions. Brede attempted a hasty attack, but this was repulsed with heavy losses, including himself. Henrici was forced to bring up more troops and mount a set-piece attack on 13 August, but gained little ground. By 15 August, de Angelis’ XXXIV Armeekorps began to conduct a forward passage of lines through Kirchner’s LVII Panzerkorps and assumed the lead, while Henrici’s division was relieved and sent south to rejoin von Kleist’s spearhead. The two German light divisions – 97. and 101. Jäger-Division – now assumed the lead in the offensive towards Tuapse, but Kirichenko was beginning to exert real pressure on the Belorechenskaya–Kabardinskaya road, so both SS-Division ‘Wiking’ and the Slovak Fast Division were retained to protect de Angelis’ right flank; the commitment of these two mechanised divisions to a supporting role for the better part of a month was an absurd error on List’s part.

Generalmajor Erich Diestel’s 101. Jäger-Division was first into action and easily overran Apsheronsk on 15 August, then pivoted westwards to outflank the Soviet blocking positions at Khadyzhensk. Initially, Diestel’s Jäger made good progress, approaching the outskirts of Khadyzhensk by evening of 16 August. However, the lead elements of Polkovnik Mikhail F. Tikhonov’s 32nd Guards Rifle Division – transferred by sea from the Taman Peninsula – began to arrive in the area at the same time, which re-energised the
12th Army’s defence. By the time that Diestel began to organise a deliberate assault upon the town, the 32nd Guards Rifle Division was dug in around the train station and nearby railway tunnel. When 101. Jäger-Division began its attack upon Khadyzhensk on 18 August, supported by Stukas and corps-level 21cm Mörser fire, Tikhonov’s troops repulsed every German attempt to advance.

On de Angelis’ left flank, Generalmajor Ernst Rupp’s 97. Jäger-Division began a major attack southwards from Apsheronsk on 16 August with two regimental-size Kampfgruppen. The Jäger moved quickly through the rugged and heavily forested terrain, capturing Samurskaya on the first day. Soviet resistance was spotty and Rupp allowed his division to disperse, with individual battalions pushing forward as fast as possible. On 18 August, I./Jäger-Regiment 204 captured the Neftyanaya oilfield. Hauptmann Friedrich Höhne’s III./Jäger-Regiment 204 achieved a remarkable 25km advance in three days towards the Tuby Pass and overran a Soviet 15cm howitzer battalion. However, the Soviet 12th Army had merely retreated to more defensible positions on mountain tops further south and Höhne’s lone battalion boldly advanced along a narrow track into a classic ambush at the 50m-wide Wolf’s Gate Pass. Both sides of the narrow pass were flanked by steep, wooded ridges which were occupied by the Soviets. Höhne’s battalion advanced in a long column and was blasted from both sides as it entered the pass, destroying the vanguard. The Soviets had fortified Mount Oplepek (Gora Oplepen), which overlooked the Wolf’s Gate Pass and brought the German column under heavy fire while Soviet infantrymen manoeuvred through the hills to cut off their escape route. With great difficulty, Höhne extracted his bloodied battalion from the ambush at the cost of abandoning his wounded and heavy weapons and retreated 12km back to Samurskaya. The next day, Rupp tried an outflanking manoeuvre with II./Jäger-Regiment 207, but this too failed.

De Angelis’ XXXIV Armeekorps offensive towards Tuapse had been halted after only four days by the increasing Soviet resistance and rugged terrain. Diestel’s 101. Jäger-Division brought up more artillery and attempted an ambitious double envelopment of the 32nd Guards Rifle Division between 28 and 30 August; the jaws of the two converging Jäger-Regiment almost closed around Tikhonov’s division, but ground to a halt just short of their objective. Tikhonov launched a counterattack that briefly surrounded II./Jäger-Regiment 228 before Diestel called off the offensive. West of Khadyzhensk, 198. Infanterie-Division had captured Goryachy Klyuch on 20 August, which offered the possibility of outflanking the Soviet position, but the offensive was called off. Instead, 17. Armee remained in a funk for the next month, slowly preparing for another offensive and drifting into command limbo after List was relieved by Hitler on 10 September.

While Ruoff’s army sat immobile, the Soviets used the respite to rush reinforcements to Cherevichenko’s Black Sea Group from the Transcaucasus. Kamkov’s 18th Army eventually absorbed the depleted 12th Army and assumed primary responsibility for defending the main avenue of approach to Tuapse; this army was rebuilt around six rifle and one cavalry divisions, and received substantial artillery reinforcements. On 23 August, the Military Council of the North Caucasus Front ordered the creation of a Tuapse Defensive Region (TOR), under the command of Rear-Admiral Georgy Zhukov – which would be subordinate to Kamkov’s 18th Army. Ryzhov’s 56th Army, with four rifle divisions, was ordered to defend Kamkov’s left flank and to tie in with Grechko’s 47th
Army. The 5th Air Army also received another fighter division and more Il-2 Sturmoviks.

Ruoff’s 17. Armee was not able to resume the offensive until late September; he wanted proper mountain troops to conduct the operation, but none were at hand. Since the promised Italian Alpine Corps had not arrived, the OKH finally cancelled the operation by XXXIX Gebirgskorps against Sukhumi and sent parts of both of its divisions, totalling five infantry and five artillery battalions, as Division Lanz to reinforce 17. Armee. Ruoff also received an infantry regiment from 46. Infanterie-Division. Altogether, Ruoff intended to hurl three German corps against the Tuapse defences, but the delay allowed the Soviets to regain their confidence. During the lull, on 6 September Soviet troops from the 395th Rifle Division managed to ambush and kill Generalmajor Albert Buck, commander of 198. Infanterie-Division, and wound his operations officer.

German troops arriving in the Taman Peninsula across the Kerch Straits, September 1942. Originally, the entire 11. Armee was to reinforce List’s offensive into the Caucasus, but only two depleted German divisions would arrive from this quarter. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

Ruoff’s offensive, dubbed Operation Attika, began on 23 September when LVII Panzerkorps committed 125. and 198. Infanterie-Division against the 56th Army’s 395th Rifle Division south of Goryachy Kluych. His intent was to penetrate through Ryzhov’s weaker defences and push down the Pseikups Valley to reach Shaumyan, thereby enveloping Kamkov’s left flank. Kirchner’s two infantry divisions succeeded in making a modest 10km bulge into Ryzhov’s front and captured Fanagoriyskoye by 30 September, but were then stymied by tough Soviet resistance. In the centre, de Angelis’ XXXXIV Armeekorps concentrated both Jäger-Divisionen, reinforced by Infanterie-Regiment 72 from 46 Infanterie-Division, against Tikhonov’s 32nd Guards Rifle Division on 25 September; although they kept pounding for a week, they could not capture the main defensive positions. Despite support from Stukas, heavy artillery and assault guns, 101. Jäger-Division was repeatedly repulsed by Tikhonov’s division. The 97. Jäger-Division succeeded in pushing back the 236th Rifle Division and capturing Mount Lyssaya, but was fought out after just four days of combat.
The narrow Wolf’s Gate Pass, where Hauptmann Friedrich Höhne’s III./Jäger-Regiment 204 was ambushed on 18 August 1942. As can clearly be seen, moving a battalion in column through such a defile in enemy-held territory violates every rule of military common sense. The post-war monument at right marks the furthest point of the German advance toward Tuapse along this route. (Author’s collection)

It was Generalmajor Hubert Lanz’s ad hoc division of Gebirgstruppen that achieved the most success. Lanz did not launch his attack until 27 September and his battalions advanced across mountainous terrain that the Soviets regarded as nearly impassible. In just three days, Lanz’s Gebirgsjäger advanced 10–15km, capturing Mount Geiman and Mount Gunai. On 28 September, the remainder of 46. Infanterie-Division (two regiments) conducted a supporting attack on Lanz’s left flank and succeeded in capturing Mount Oplepek. Having broken through Kamkov’s centre, Division Lanz pivoted westward into
the Gunaika Valley, intent upon outflanking Tikhonov’s 32nd Guards Rifle Division. Kamkov was forced to pull some of his units back to prevent encirclement. The 46. Infanterie-Division achieved a clear-cut breakthrough south of Mount Oplepek and advanced to seize Kotlovina on 3 October. De Angelis’ XXXXIV Armeekorps continued to pound on Tikhonov’s nearly encircled division and briefly cut it off by seizing Kurinskiy, but a rapid Soviet counterattack by 32nd Guards Rifle Division reopened the road.

By early October, the German advance towards Tuapse was bogged down, moving only occasionally in fits and starts. Ruoff could only jab in a few sectors – he lacked the resources to mount an all-out offensive. Short of infantry, Ruoff was forced to use Sicherungs-Regiment 4 in the front line to cover his army’s left flank. Kamkov received reinforcements from the 47th and 56th armies, enabling him to mount local counterattacks between 7 and 13 October, which succeeded in cutting into the flank of XXXXIX Gebirgskorps and recapturing Mount Oplepek. The weather was beginning to turn and would soon make offensive operations impossible in the mountains. Nevertheless, on 14 October Ruoff kicked off another offensive by all three corps. The 198. Infanterie-Division was able to break through the 56th Army’s defences, which finally caused Tikhonov’s 32nd Guards Rifle Division to evacuate its positions at Khadyzhensk and retreat towards Tuapse. The 101. Jäger-Division followed and captured Shaumyan on 17 October. Ruoff was confident that 17. Armee would make it to Tuapse before the weather closed in. Then it began to rain on 18 October, turning the mountain trails into untrafficable muck. Low cloud cover also interfered with the ability of I./StG 77’s Stukas to provide close air support.

Soviet reinforcements arrive by sea from Poti to reinforce the defences of both Novorossiysk and Tuapse. Fliegerkorps IV’s limited resources in the Caucasus prevented it from interdicting Soviet coastal convoys, which enabled Tyulenev’s Transcaucasus Front to shift thousands of troops by sea. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)
The entrance to a valley in the Caucasus, with a river running through it. German forces had great difficulty moving rapidly in this type of terrain since even small Soviet blocking detachments on the high ground took a great amount of effort to neutralise. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

Only Division Lanz continued to push forward slowly, while the rest of Ruoff’s army struggled merely to hold on to what they already possessed. Kampfgruppe Lawall, with all three battalions of Gebirgsjäger-Regiment 98, pushed on resolutely despite the rains that began on 18 October. Four days later, the Gebirgsjäger were able to capture the 1,016m-high Mount Semashkho, from which they could see the Black Sea in the distance. However, furious Soviet counterattacks by the fresh 408th Rifle Division and 383rd Rifle Division brought the German advance to a halt and inflicted heavy losses on Division Lanz. Although the German effort to capture Tuapse would continue for two more pointless months, Ruoff’s offensive had peaked by late October 1942 and the front line settled into a static nature. Soviet counterattacks kept picking at the exposed German flanks throughout the next two months. The commitment of three German corps to capture a minor Black Sea port had proved to be a costly diversion in a campaign which had little margin for error.

TO THE HIGH CAUCASUS, 10 AUGUST–2 SEPTEMBER

The offensive against Tuapse had been weakened from the beginning by the OKH’s last-minute decision to send General der Gebirgstruppe Rudolf Konrad’s XXXXIX Gebirgskorps far to the south to advance down the so-called ‘Sukhumi Military Highway’ in order to seize several mountain passes in the High Caucasus Mountains and then capture the port of Sukhumi. Konrad argued for using his corps in the advance upon Tuapse, while von Kleist wanted to use the Gebirgsjäger to assist 1. Panzerarmee’s advance to Grozny, but both were overruled. As early as 5 August, Konrad was informed that in addition to seizing several key passes, he was to organise an expedition to occupy Mount Elbrus – the highest point in the Caucasus and in Europe. The powers back in Berlin, like Dr Joseph Goebbels, wanted a photogenic propaganda triumph which planting
a Nazi flag on Elbrus would serve admirably, while ignoring the affect of this extravagant diversion on the overall operation.

Konrad knew that the Caucasus mountain passes would be closed by snow by September, so like a good soldier he forced-marched his two divisions 200km southwards as rapidly as possible, following in the path of von Kleist’s panzers. Amazingly, his vanguard – Kampfgruppe Lawall from 1. Gebirgs-Division – reached Cherkessk on 11 August and then stormed into Mikoyan-Shakhar (Karachayevsk). The ‘Sukhumi Military Highway’ turned out to be little more than a dirt road, which turned into an even narrower track as they approached the main Caucasus peaks. Meanwhile, Tyulenev’s ZKF (Transcaucasus Front) staff were completely unaware that Konrad’s troops were pushing through the mountains towards Sukhumi and did not even issue orders to defend the passes until 10 August. General-major Vasily F. Sergatskov’s 46th Army was assigned the mission of defending the Caucasus passes, but even Soviet sources are frank about condemning his lethargic effort to move units towards them. Sergatskov merely ordered General-major Konstantin N. Leselidze’s 3rd Mountain Rifle Corps to send company and battalion-size detachments from the 9th and 20th Mountain Rifle divisions and the 394th Rifle Division to observe the passes. One unit, the 1st Battalion, 815th Rifle Regiment from the 394th Rifle Division marched to the town of Teberda, where it was surprised and defeated by Kampfgruppe Lawall on 14 August. The German Gebirgsjäger pushed on, with a single picked battalion known as Kampfgruppe von Hirschfeld and seized the important Klukhor Pass on the evening of 17 August. Stalin was furious that the Germans had penetrated so deeply into the Caucasus and ordered his NKVD chief Lavrenti Beria, who had arrived at Tyulenev’s headquarters in Tbilisi, to relieve Sergatskov of command. Leselidze, a Georgian officer (Stalin and Beria were both Georgians) managed to survive this shake-up and demonstrated ability by rushing a reinforced regiment to the Klukhor Pass to block any further German advance towards the coast; Stalin gave him command of the 46th Army.

Konrad’s other division, 4. Gebirgs-Division, also initially made good progress towards the coast by marching on a parallel route, and its vanguard Kampfgruppe Stettner (two Gebirgsjäger-Bataillone and six 7.5cm mountain guns) seized several passes. Yet despite the apparent proximity of Sukhumi – just 30km away – Konrad never really had a
chance to reach that objective. It began to snow in the mountains on 18 August and continued for several days, reducing the German advance to a crawl. The Sukhumi Military Highway petered out after the Klukhor Pass into trackless mountains. The OKH staff members who thought that Konrad’s Gebirgstruppen could advance from the Klukhor Pass to the southern segment of the Sukhumi Military Highway near the coast did not appreciate that this would require a corps to supply itself along a 90km stretch of trail that was only fit for mules; the nearest railhead was over 170km distant. It was not the Soviets that defeated Konrad, but a combination of the terrain and weather. Even if Konrad could somehow have reached the coast, he would have had to defeat the bulk of the 46th Army with a handful of battalions in order to seize Sukhumi – and then his lines of communications across the Caucasus would be severed by snow for the entire winter. If his corps was caught on the wrong side of the passes once winter arrived, it would eventually be destroyed. Neither the Kriegsmarine nor the Luftwaffe would be able to supply the Gebirgskorps in the Caucasus Mountains for an entire winter. Indeed, the entire OKH plan to push Konrad’s Gebirgskorps towards Sukhumi was a half-baked concept that ignored terrain and weather and which risked these elite troops becoming isolated and possibly destroyed, all for the sake of a tertiary objective.

A column of German Gebirgsjäger advance into the foothills of the Caucasus. Notice that the track they are following is a 3m-wide dirt trail, which snow and rain would render virtually impassable. At first, this was a great adventure for the Gebirgsjäger, an athletic challenge rather than a military manoeuvre, but that impression would soon change. (Author’s collection)

After taking the Klukhor Pass, 1. Gebirgs-Division sent a hand-picked force to climb Mount Elbrus, which was accomplished on 21 August. Hitler was rightly furious when he heard about this frivolous expedition, which caused further friction with List. Konrad’s advance was now running up against serious opposition. Leselidze quickly shifted his 46th Army divisions along the coast road and received reinforcements from Tyulenev, while Konrad was on his own. Kampfgruppe Stettner was able to cross the Bsyb River on 28 August but was blocked by the 354th Rifle Division near the Achavkar Pass, while Kampfgruppe Lawall was blocked by the 304th Rifle Division. Konrad’s supply lines were a mess, requiring four days or more for mule convoys to reach Kampfgruppe Stettner. By late August, it was clear that the plan to seize Sukhumi had failed and List, Ruoff and Konrad met in Krasnodar to discuss options. It was decided that the
**Gebirgstruppe** could be better employed in supporting Ruoff’s offensive towards Tuapse, rather than freezing to death in the High Caucasus. The Sukhumi front would become an economy of force effort, where the Germans left only enough troops to prevent Tyulenev’s forces from threatening von Kleist’s lines of communications. Gruppe von Le Suire, consisting of five battalions, was left to guard the passes. Consequently, Konrad pulled the rest of his corps back to reduce his supply problems and transferred the remaining units to Division Lanz, which was sent north to join in the second offensive against Tuapse.

The German Gebirgs-Divisionen advanced very quickly toward Sukhumi in August 1942 and seized several key mountain passes before the Soviets could react. Each Gebirgs-Bataillon had about 250 pack animals. (Nik Cornish at [www.Stavka.org.uk](http://www.Stavka.org.uk))

By October 1942, the front line in the mountains was static and German supply lines were strained. Here, German pioneers have rigged a cable-car system to transfer mortar and howitzer ammunition up to high peaks. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-B22462; photo by Kintscher)
Soviet scouts advancing in the high Caucasus Mountains. The Red Army had very little mountain infantry but was forced to create a number of units that could challenge the Gebirgsjäger in the mountains. The Soviet troops had the advantage of local knowledge, but lacked the training of the Gebirgsjäger. (Author’s collection)

German wounded from the Gebirgskorps being transported to the rear in a Panje wagon. It could take days for a casualty in the high mountains to reach an aid station in the best of conditions; once winter weather arrived, casualty evacuation was even more difficult. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

STYMIED ON THE TEREK RIVER, 12 AUGUST–3 OCTOBER

Von Kleist had a narrow window of opportunity to reach Grozny, but he only had 3. and 23. Panzer-Division from von Schweppenburg’s XXXX Panzerkorps in position to push eastwards. Both divisions were extremely short of fuel and were scattered over a large area. Soviet units that had been bypassed during the pursuit phase were now appearing to attack von Schweppenburg’s lines of communications, forcing him to devote combat units to mop up his rear areas. Consequently, it was not until 13 August that von Schweppenburg could begin advancing east from Pyatigorsk and then only with small combat forces. Breith’s 3. Panzer-Division committed Kampfgruppe Pape
(II./Panzergrenadier-Regiment 394 reinforced with artillery and engineers) and Mack’s 23. Panzer-Division contributed Kampfgruppe Bachmann (I., II./Panzergrenadier-Regiment 128). Both Kampfgruppen advanced south-east about 20km to the Malka River, where they began to encounter unexpected difficulties. The Malka consisted of three small tributaries, each less than 10m wide, but together forming a 60m-wide obstacle that was covered by enemy fire. Kozlov’s 37th Army was no longer running – it was establishing defensive positions behind water obstacles and on rough terrain.

Getting across the Malka consumed the better part of a day and once Kampfgruppe Bachmann advanced southwards, it encountered an even more formidable obstacle: the 80m-wide Baksan River. Kozlov’s troops had destroyed all the bridges across the river and an upriver dam, which increased the current. Furthermore, Kozlov had deployed the 2nd Guards Rifle Division, and the 275th and 392nd Rifle divisions along the length of the Baksan, supported by two artillery regiments with 122mm and 152mm howitzers. Although all the Soviet units were depleted, they greatly outnumbered the two German Kampfgruppen. Furthermore, Vershinin’s 4th Air Army was also out in force, since Fliegerkorps IV was too dispersed to maintain air cover over multiple sectors. Most of the time, XXXX Panzerkorps received little or no fighter cover. Kozlov’s artillery pounded the German spearheads as they approached the Baksan, while Pe-2 and A-20 bombers struck the columns. German personnel and equipment losses were significant, while they had no real means to strike Kozlov’s forces on the other side. Von Schweppenburg wanted both Kampfgruppen to cross the Baksan River and advance to seize Nalchik, but after two costly attempts to get across the river, he changed his mind on 19 August. Instead, von Kleist and von Schweppenburg decided to pivot due east towards Prokhladnyy and cross the Terek River, along with Mackensen’s III Panzerkorps, which was en route. The Romanian 2nd Mountain Division was brought up and assigned to screen the Baksan River, to prevent Kozlov’s 37th Army from causing any mischief against von Kleist’s left flank.

A German base camp established in the Caucasus Mountains. All wood for construction purposes had to be labouriously brought up by mule trains. Note the camp is built on a reverse slope, to protect it from Soviet artillery fire. Once the Gebirgskorps abandoned the offensive toward Sukhumi, the Germans created a chain of fortified camps such as these on key terrain to control the mountain passes. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

Supply problems and rear area difficulties further complicated von Schweppenburg’s
ability to mount an offensive eastward and it was not until 23 August that he was ready to proceed. This time, he arranged for support from Major Gordon Gollob’s Jagdgeschwader 52 fighters to cover the advance and he had a larger, better supplied force. However, the Soviets had used the respite to rush six airborne brigades from the Stavka reserves to the 9th Army, which was erecting defences along the Terek River; these fresh brigades were formed into the 10th and 11th Guards Rifle corps.

The Germans formed *Vorausabteilungen* from light motorised elements to push on ahead of the main body. Here, a Krupp Protze from the divisional reconnaissance unit tows a 2cm flak gun into a town. Although the German advance guards were often quite small and vulnerable to ambushes, the retreating Red Army rarely turned to fight in the early stages of the campaign. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

On the morning of 23 August, XXXX Panzerkorps resumed its offensive. Breith’s 3. Panzer-Division crossed the 2m-wide Lenin Canal at Russkoye then swung south across flat terrain, reaching the outskirts of Mozdok by late afternoon. Major Gollob’s Bf-109Gs provided air cover over the *Kampfgruppen*, downing at least 19 aircraft in the first three days. However, the Soviets had rushed elements of General-major Konstantin A. Koroteev’s 11th Guards Rifle Corps to Mozdok and emplaced mines and anti-tank guns around the town. When Breith’s panzers approached Mozdok, they were aggressively engaged by two Soviet armoured trains, both of which were knocked out. Breith decided not to try and storm into an obviously well-defended town with just his vanguard and instead opted to slowly clear the town over the next two days. Koroteev’s paratroopers put up strong resistance, but Mozdok was in German hands by the evening of 25 August. Major Gollob immediately flew into Mozdok’s captured airfield with III./Jagdgeschwader 52 to provide fighter cover over the area. Meanwhile, Mack’s 23. Panzer-Division had closed in on Prokhladnyy. Soviet resistance in this sector was stiff, as well. Kampfgruppe Burmeister finally fought its way into Prokhladnyy on the morning of 26 August and captured the town and 300 prisoners. However, Mack did not live to see this success; while observing the front, he and a battalion commander were killed by Soviet artillery fire. Nor was 23. Panzer-Division able to seize the nearby railway bridge over the Terek River, which was destroyed and the opposite bank held by the 151st Rifle Division. By the end of 26 August, von Schweppenburg had reached the Terek at several points, but it was apparent that Soviet resistance was increasing and the prospects for a river crossing did not look promising. Above all, he needed more infantry and fuel to continue his advance, but both were in short supply.
Panzers from 23. Panzer-Division reach the Terek River on 25 August after an advance of over 550km. Fewer than 150km now separated them from their objective of the Grozny oilfields. However, fuel shortages immobilised much of von Kleist’s panzers at the critical moment in the campaign. (Author’s collection)

The advance to the Terek, Sukhumi and the Kalmyk Steppe, 12 August–3 October 1942.

Note: German units are shown in their positions on 12 August 1942.

1. 4 August: the Astrakhan–Kizlyar rail line is completed.
2. 12 August: Elista is captured by the Vorausabteilung from 111. Infanterie-Division.
4. 14 August: 34th Guards Rifle Division is deployed to defend Astrakhan.
5. 15–17 August: 23. Panzer-Division captures Georgiyevsk, but efforts to cross the Baksan River fail.


7. 20 August: the Romanian 2nd Mountain Division arrives to screen XXXX Panzerkorps’ left flank on the Baksan River.

8. 21 August: troops from 1. Gebirgs-Division scale Mount Elbrus.


10. 26 August: Generalmajor Mack, commander of 23. Panzer-Division, is killed during the attack on Prokhladnyy.

11. 28 August–2 September: Kampfgruppe Laroche from 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.) arrives in Elista and pushes east to Khulkhuta.

12. 29 August: Kampfgruppe Stettner from 4. Gebirgs-Division crosses the Bsyb River but can advance no further.

13. 30 August: 3. Panzer-Division establishes a limited bridgehead across the Terek at Isherskaya.

14. 31 August: Kampfgruppe Bodenhausen advances to Chervlenaya.

15. August: the Soviet 9th and 44th armies receive reinforcements to create the 10th and 11th Guards Rifle Corps. The 58th Army is formed in Makhachkala.

16. 2 September: 111. Infanterie-Division establishes a larger bridgehead across the Terek near Mozdok.

17. 6–11 September: LII Armeekorps slowly expands the Mozdok bridgehead, opposed by the 11th Guards Corps.

18. 12 September–3 October: 13. Panzer-Division crosses into the Terek bridgehead and slowly clears the Don bend. SS-Division ‘Wiking’ arrives to reinforce it.

19. 13–14 September: Kradschützen-Bataillon 165 conducts longrange patrols towards Astrakhan.

German infantry advance into the cornfields of the Caucasus, with mountains in the background. This type of advance was nerve-wracking for the troops, since close combat could occur at any time. It was also difficult to detect mines in such terrain.
While von Kleist’s 1. Panzerarmee was advancing eastwards with just two *Panzer-Divisionen*, General der Infanterie Eugen Ott’s LII Armeekorps had advanced with his two infantry divisions from Salsk east towards the Kalmyk Steppe. The deployment of two infantry divisions in such a flat, arid region while LVII Panzerkorps attempted to move through mountainous terrain to Tuapse demonstrates the scale of misjudgements made by List in the critical stages of the campaign. Ott’s infantry divisions, heavily dependent upon horse-drawn transport, could not advance en masse into this desert-like region, but he directed each of his divisions to form a motorised *Vorausabteilung* from reconnaissance and support units. By 12 August, the *Vorausabteilung* from 111. Infanterie-Division captured Elista, while other units cleared the north and south sides of the Manych River. Ott was also tasked with maintaining tenuous communications with Heeresgruppe B’s forces to the north. However, von Kleist recognised that Ott’s corps was clearly unsuited for this role and demanded the release of motorised units from the Tuapse sector to assume this mission. List did not agree to release 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.) from the Tuapse sector until 15 August and it took ten days for its advance elements to arrive in Elista. At that point, Ott’s LII Armeekorps was ordered south to reinforce von Kleist’s offensive on the Terek, but it would not arrive until the end of August.

![Stavka rushed six airborne brigades to the Caucasus by sea, rail and TB-3 bombers, shown here. These experienced troops were used to form two new Guards Rifle corps that slowed German efforts to cross the Terek River. (Author’s collection)](image)

An impatient von Schweppenburg tried to get across the Terek before Ott’s infantry arrived. Breith’s 3. Panzer-Division managed to get two dismounted battalions across the Terek 30km east of Mozdok at Isherskaya on 30 August, but the site proved unsuitable for a pontoon bridge and Soviet counterattacks made it impossible to expand the toehold. The next day, von Schweppenburg sent Kampfgruppe Bodenhausen in a probe as far east as Chervlennaya and briefly interfered with Soviet rail traffic from Baku, before beating a hasty retreat from the 10th Guards Rifle Corps. Ott’s infantry were not in place until 2 September, when 111. Infanterie-Division conducted a successful company-size assault crossing near Mozdok, which was rapidly expanded into a two-battalion bridgehead. Koroteev’s 11th Guards Rifle Corps fought bitterly to contain the bridgehead but during the night of 2/3 September, two panzer companies from 23. Panzer-Division were ferried
across the Terek to reinforce. At 0500 hours on 4 September, the Germans began attacking out of the bridgehead with III./Infanterie-Regiment 117 and two companies of panzers. After advancing a few kilometres, the Germans ran into tough resistance from the 11th Guards Rifle Corps, supported by two artillery battalions and several anti-tank units. In the afternoon, the Soviets counterattacked with the 62nd Naval Rifle Brigade and 25 T-34 tanks from the 249th OTB; the Soviet tactics were crude and seven T-34s lost, but the German attack was halted.

Both sides now engaged in a race to win the Battle of the Mozdok bridgehead, with von Kleist pushing more forces across the Terek while the Soviet 9th and 44th armies were further reinforced. By 6 September, the Germans had pushed two complete Panzer-Abteilungen across the river and an artillery battalion to reinforce 111. Infanterie-Division. Oberst Otto Herfurth (a Ritterkreuz holder, who was executed for his role in the 20 July 1944 plot to kill Hitler) organised a Kampfgruppe with two battalions from his Infanterie-Regiment 117 riding on the two Panzer-Abteilungen, to attack westwards to Kizlyar to expand the bridgehead and catch the Soviets by surprise. However, the Soviets had captured a German soldier who revealed this plan and the 9th Army adjusted its defences. When Kampfgruppe Herfurth attacked at 0400 hours on 6 September, it was immediately struck by Soviet multiple rocket-launcher barrages and the panzers ran into the 47th Guards Anti-Tank Battalion. Additionally, the 4th Air Army mounted 420 sorties, including low-level strafing runs. Herfurth’s assault was broken up with heavy losses. Vershinin’s aircraft then went after the crossing site, sinking seven ferries. Later that night, a U-2 biplane from the 599th Night Bomber Aviation Regiment, flown by a 20-year-old female pilot named Marina P. Chechneva, scored a direct hit on the German pontoon bridge with 50kg bombs. Although the Germans soon repaired their pontoon bridge and managed to carve out a larger area around the bridgehead, continuous Soviet counterattacks prevented the Germans from making any real headway. For the first time since the beginning of the campaign, the Soviets began to commit substantial amounts of armour, up to 60 tanks in one attack against the bridgehead.

Soviet troops rush to set up a machine-gun position in a village. Soviet resistance increased greatly in September 1942, both at Stalingrad and in the Caucasus. Von Kleist’s troops were no longer advancing across steppe country, but fighting in foothills that favoured the defender. (Courtesy of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces, Moscow via Stavka)
German troops preparing to cross the Terek River in a large raft, which could hold a squad. German pioneers had great difficulty bridging the Terek due to its fast current and constant Soviet bombardment. A motorised Sturmboot is returning from the far shore. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

Stalin took a personal interest in the Caucasus campaign, which threatened his native Georgia, but he was not entirely confident in the ability of Budyonny or Tyulenev to direct a proper campaign. On Beria’s suggestion, General-leytenant Ivan A. Maslennikov – an NKVD officer – was sent on 8 September to command the Northern Group on the Terek River. Maslennikov was not a bad choice for a defensive operation since he could enforce discipline and motivate subordinates with threats of sending them to the Gulag, but his ability to coordinate four armies was negligible.

Even though the bridgehead battle was not going well, von Kleist decided to commit the entire 13. Panzer-Division across the Terek to affect a breakout. This was a very risky decision, since 1. Panzerarmee only had small detachments screening its flanks and the 10th Guards Rifle Corps was getting increasingly aggressive. Nevertheless, Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division crossed the Terek and began attacking westwards towards the bend in the Terek on 12 September. Massing up to four Panzer-Abteilungen along one axis, the Germans slowly began to chew their way through the 9th Army’s defences. Assisted by 370. Infanterie-Division, Herr’s panzers slowly bent the left flank of the 11th Guards Rifle Corps back, pushing towards Terek and Elkhotovo. It took three weeks of costly fighting to accomplish this objective and by 3 October, the German offensive was spent. Von Kleist had carved out a larger bridgehead across the Terek, but Koroteev – now in command of the 9th Army – had sealed it off with a very solid front.
Once across the Terek, 13. Panzer-Division slashed southwards to expand the Mozdok bridgehead. Here, a PzKpfw III tank advances cautiously, with Panzergrenadiers, while under mortar fire from Soviet troops on the ridgeline in the distance. (Author’s collection)
In order to get to the Grozny oilfields, 1. Panzerarmee needed to cross the Terek River, but time was running out. Stavka had rushed several airborne brigades to reinforce the Soviet 9th Army’s defences on the Terek River, which made a crossing problematic. On 30 August, 3. Panzer-Division succeeded in getting two Panzergrenadier battalions across the Terek at Isherskaya, 30km east of Mozdok, but the site was unsuitable for a bridge. Once the German LII Armeekorps reached the Terek, 111. Infanterie-Division was ordered to prepare a set-piece crossing operation near Mozdok for 2 September. At this point, the Terek River was less than 200m wide, but the current was very strong and the Soviets were alert in this sector.

Hauptmann Konrad Lyhme’s III./Infanterie-Regiment 50 was selected for the dangerous mission and the first wave would consist of only the 11. Kompanie, in 16 rubber rafts. In order to gain surprise, the crossing would be made without an artillery preparation. The German infantry began crossing at 0200 hours but were soon detected by outposts from the 8th Guards Rifle Brigade, which opened fire with machine guns and mortars. Some rafts were destroyed, but 11. Kompanie succeeded in getting across and began establishing a beachhead. Subsequent waves brought Hauptmann Lyhme and the rest of his III./IR 50 across, then the I./IR 50. The Soviet 8th Rifle Brigade mounted a spirited counterattack but could not eliminate the German bridgehead.

Here, one of the subsequent waves carrying Hauptmann Lyhme (1) – still under heavy fire – is depicted crossing early in the morning. German wounded (2) are waiting at the river’s edge, to be brought back on the return trip. The establishment of the bridgehead at Mozdok by IR 50 enabled German engineers to construct a pontoon bridge, which then allowed von Kleist to begin sending his panzers across the Terek River. However, the window of opportunity was closing rapidly for von Kleist’s army and increased Soviet resistance was wrecking the tight German operational schedule.
It was during the Battle for the Mozdok Bridgehead that Hitler realised that the Caucasus campaign was not going according to plan and that Generalfeldmarschall List was part of the problem. Hitler accused List of not following orders and not properly deploying his troops – both of which had some truth. List had misused both LII Armeekorps and LVII Panzerkorps in the wrong type of terrain and his overcommitment of resources to the Tuapse operation reduced the resources left to von Kleist to push on to Grozny. Hitler had good reason to be dissatisfied with List’s performance in the Caucasus – it was sub-par – but ignored the fact that he had not provided the resources he had promised to make *Edelweiss* feasible. Consequently, on 9 September Hitler decided to relieve List of command and Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm Keitel flew to Heeresgruppe A the next day to inform him. Amazingly, Hitler announced that he would take ‘personal command’ of Heeresgruppe A from Berlin; in reality von Kleist was tacitly allowed to act as army group commander, although Hitler would not make this official until 23 November. The net result of this action was to complicate operational decision-making in Heeresgruppe A, with Hitler increasingly intervening in tactical matters.
An entrenched Soviet defensive position under artillery fire. By mid-September 1942, the defences around Tuapse and the Terek had hardened to the point that the Germans could only make limited gains. (Author’s collection)

In October, the SS-Division ‘Wiking’ began pushing eastward toward Sagopshi and Malgobek, but encountered very stiff resistance and suffered heavy casualties. Here, an assault group of SS Panzergrenadiers is about to launch an attack from dead space. (Author’s collection)

In late September, the SS-Division ‘Wiking’ was finally transferred from the Tuapse sector and von Kleist sent it across the Terek with the intent of using it to attack east towards Malgobek. At 0500 hours on 26 September, ‘Wiking’ attacked eastwards from Nizhniy Kurp, with the SS-Regiment ‘Nordland’ in the first echelon and SS-Regiment ‘Westland’ in the second echelon, supported by SS-Panzer-Abteilung 5. The objective was the towns of Malgobek and Sagopshi, 17km to the east. As soon as the attack began, the SS infantrymen came under intense artillery and automatic weapons fire which inflicted heavy losses and pinned two out of three battalions. By the end of the first day, ‘Wiking’ had managed to advance 6–10km, but had not reached its objectives. The attack continued the next day and the next. On 28 September, ‘Wiking’ reached the outskirts of Sagopshi but the Soviets committed two tank brigades, which resulted in a large-scale tank battle outside the town. Most of the tank combat occurred at ranges of just 200 to 400m. ‘Wiking’ claimed to have knocked out 11 Soviet tanks in the action, but admitted losing about a dozen of their own. Despite heavy losses, the ‘Wiking’ continued to attack for
another week, until it finally secured Malgobek on 6 October. After that, the division shifted to the defence and Koroteev’s 9th Army began launching regular counterattacks.

Increasingly aggressive Soviet troops counterattacked von Kleist’s army continually, which sapped the fighting energy of his front-line divisions along the Terek and brought the German advance to a halt. This unit, plentifully equipped with automatic weapons, appears to be from one of the Guards Rifle brigades. (Author’s collection)

A German SdKfz 10/4 half-track with 2cm flak gun in the Caucasus, alert for low-flying Soviet aircraft. 13. Panzer-Division had eight single-barrelled 2cm mobile flak guns and two quad 2cm flak guns, which was insufficient to cover the division’s combat elements when they were dispersed over a wide area. (Author’s collection)

A Soviet infantry unit picks its way along a stream bed, probably early November 1942. The soldier in the lead has a PTRD anti-tank rifle, which was best used as an anti-material weapon. (Author’s collection)
The supply of Lend Lease tanks through the Persian Corridor was critical to revitalising Soviet armoured strength in the Caucasus, since most Soviet tank production was going to the Stalingrad Front. Here, two American-built M3 Lee medium tanks are being used for driver training prior to being sent to the front. (From the fonds of the RGAKFD in Krasnogorsk via Stavka)

While the Battle of the Mozdok Bridgehead was transpiring, Henrici’s 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.) pushed small detachments forward across the Kalmyk Steppe. However, water was too scarce in the region to support a full division and Henrici could only commit a reinforced regiment into the actual steppe. Since his mission was to screen Heeresgruppe A’s northern flank and tie in with Heeresgruppe B, he was forced to deploy individual companies in isolated positions. An anti-tank strongpoint was established at the village of Khulkhuta, 120km west of Astrakhan. The Soviet 28th Army held the approaches to the city with the 34th Guards Rifle Division and mounted raids against the German outposts. Between 13 and 14 September, four armoured cars from the Kradschützen-Bataillon 165 conducted a long-range patrol which reached the train station at Zenzeli and briefly interfered with rail traffic on the Astrakhan–Kizlyar line, then retreated. Henrici did not know it, but between August and October 1942 some 16,000 rail cars carrying fuel moved north along this line from Baku – a total of about 150,000 tons of crude oil. For the next few months, Henrici conducted his screening operation in the Kalmyk Steppe, occasionally sparring with the 28th Army.

By early October, it was obvious that von Kleist’s offensive had stalled and that his army would not get to Grozny anytime soon. Stavka also realised that the defences on the Terek were sufficient to keep the Germans out of Grozny and sent its remaining reserves to the Stalingrad Front. Hitler ordered the Luftwaffe to set the oilfields in Grozny ablaze and Fliegerkorps IV mounted two large-scale raids on 10 and 12 October; although these inflicted serious damage, the effort was suspended.

LAST GASP ON THE TEREK, 25 OCTOBER–12 NOVEMBER

While Maslennikov was preoccupied with the Battle for the Mozdok Bridgehead, 23. Panzer-Division quietly began pushing back the right flank of General-major Petr M. Kozlov’s 37th Army from the area south of Prokhladnyy. The town of Kotlyarevskaya, located between the Terek and Cherek rivers, was captured on 24 September and a few
days later Panzergrenadiers were able to establish a bridgehead across the eastern end of the Baksan River. Kozlov did not seem unduly alarmed and simply adjusted his lines, nor did he receive reinforcements since priority was afforded to Koroteev’s 9th Army. However, von Kleist’s staff noticed that 37th Army’s defences had been compromised and German signals intelligence was able to extract further useful information due to poor communications procedures, including the exact location of Kozlov’s command post.

The campaign appeared all but over after the failure to break out of the Mozdok bridgehead and von Kleist already issued orders to his units to prepare winter quarters on the Terek front. However, long-awaited replacements began to arrive for 1. Panzerarmee and von Kleist realised that he might have one last chance to seize an important objective, like the city of Ordzhonikidze, if not Grozny. The former city of 127,000 inhabitants was the terminus for the Georgian Military Highway, along which a steady stream of reinforcements was arriving from the Transcaucasus Front; if occupied, this could reduce Budyonny’s ability to mount a winter counteroffensive. Von Kleist decided to mount a deliberate offensive against the vulnerable 37th Army, with the intent of bypassing the 9th Army’s thick defences and swinging round to take Ordzhonikidze. He assigned the mission to Mackensen’s III Panzerkorps, which was given 13. and 23. Panzer-Division and the Romanian 2nd Mountain Division. Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division only moved into the assembly area at Kotlyarevskaya the night before the offensive began; this was not noticed by Soviet intelligence.

The offensive began with a massive Luftwaffe bomber attack on Kozlov’s command post, which knocked out his communications. Shortly afterwards, the Romanian mountain troops began crossing the Baksan with four battalions and gained a lodgement. This fixated Kozlov’s attention to the north, when the real threat was to the east. At 0530 hours
on 26 October, von Mackensen’s two *Panzer-Divisionen* attacked, supported by Nebelwerfer fire and strong air support. Opposing them was the Soviet 257th Rifle Division, which was sitting behind thick minefields covered by artillery and anti-tank guns. However, the terrain was grassy steppe with little cover and the weather was clear. Some German panzers were knocked out on the mines and others were lost to anti-tank fire, but the uncoordinated Soviet defence was quickly overwhelmed and within hours von Mackensen’s panzers were fanning out in true Blitzkrieg fashion. Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division boldly enveloped Nalchik from the south-east, aiming to link up with the Romanians, while 23. Panzer-Division – now under Generalleutnant Hans Freiherr von Boineburg-Lengsfeld – slashed southwards to Argudan. Before the dumbfounded Kozlov could react, the bulk of two more of his divisions were encircled east of Nalchik and the city fell on 28 October, along with over 7,000 prisoners.

![Image](image.png) Due to the threat of Soviet armour and cavalry enveloping 1. Panzerarmee’s left flank in the Nogai Steppe, von Kleist deployed 8.8cm flak guns from the Luftwaffe’s 17. Flak-Division in the anti-tank role to support Korps Felmy and other screening units.

Kampfgruppe Brückner from 23. Panzer-Division led the advance south to seize a crossing over the Urukh River at Khaznidon; Soviet resistance there was stiff and three German tanks were destroyed in the effort. Yet by 30 October, Mackensen’s offensive had sent the 37th Army reeling back into the mountains and the way appeared open for a strike towards Ordzhonikidze. After repositioning 13. Panzer-Division – and leaving the Romanians to guard their open flank – Mackensen attacked eastwards from the Urukh on 31 October. The Soviets had managed to rush the 10th Rifle Corps to the Urukh, supported by the 52nd Tank Brigade, but they had yet to organise a coherent defence. Under a warm, sunny sky, the German mechanised units assaulted through them, with Panzergrenadiers remaining mounted in their SPWs. Enemy positions were bypassed and a Soviet armoured ambush west of Ardon failed to stop 13. Panzer-Division. To the south, 23. Panzer-Division fought its way into Alagir on 1 November, blocking the Ossetian Highway.

Boldly, Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division pushed towards Ordzhonikidze, but Soviet resistance increased greatly as they approached the city. Koroteev’s 9th Army was rushing reinforcements to bolster the decimated 37th Army, including two tank brigades and part of the 10th Guards Rifle Corps. An effort by the Luftwaffe to interdict the Soviet reinforcements into the city with a large bomber raid on 2 November resulted in the death
of General-leytenant Pavel I. Boldin, the Transcaucasus Front’s chief of staff, and NKVD Commissar Aleksei N. Sadzhaia. By the time that Mackensen began to attack the outskirts of the city on 3 November, the defenders outnumbered his forces. Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division got the closest, but soon found itself surrounded on three sides and under intense artillery fire while trying to overcome minefields. Even worse, heavy rains began, depriving Mackensen of air support and slowing his supply columns. Without air support and running short of fuel and ammunition, the offensive bogged down.

On 6 November, the Soviets counterattacked in force, mounting a pincer attack from north and south that encircled Herr’s 13. Panzer-Division. Most of the division’s supply troops were eliminated on the first day, but the combat elements formed a hedgehog. The 23. Panzer-Division, having suffered debilitating casualties, could not break through to Herr’s trapped division, which was pounded mercilessly for the next five days. Von Kleist hurriedly transferred Kampfgruppe Illig from SS-Division ‘Wiking’ to rescue Herr’s division, but it did not arrive until 10 November. On the night of 11/12 November, Herr’s division conducted a successful breakout to link up with Kampfgruppe Illig, at the cost of abandoning much of its equipment. The 13. Panzer-Division had been crippled, losing over 80 tanks and 1,088 trucks. After this disaster, von Kleist terminated the offensive and ordered Mackensen to pull III Panzerkorps back to defensible positions.

A battery of 152mm ML-20 howitzers in training in the Caucasus. The Soviets started the campaign with very little artillery but gradually built up a respectable fire support base which was capable of smothering any German advance with high-explosives. By November 1942, the Soviets had a decided edge in artillery fire support. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

BEHIND THE LINES

The population of the North Caucasus in 1939 was 7.2 million, and by 1942 was increased by about 300,000 refugees. Aside from the region’s oil wealth, the North Caucasus was one of the few regions in the wartime USSR that enjoyed a food surplus – which benefitted the armies of both sides, as well as the civilian population. The Germans anticipated that much of the local population in the Caucasus was anti-Soviet and would be friendly towards the troops of Heeresgruppe A. In contrast to German behaviour in the rest of the USSR, the troops of Heeresgruppe A were ordered to treat Caucasian civilians
carefully, particularly in regard to looting and respect for Muslim traditions. German propaganda also sought to convince locals that they should join in a common fight against communism. Cossacks turned out to be the main German ally in the Caucasus and were granted considerable autonomy in the conquered Kuban. In return, 11,000 Cossacks volunteered to serve in the German Army. Large numbers of Georgians also volunteered, but only a few Osttruppen units were organised in late 1942, since Hitler was reluctant to arm too many troops of Soviet origin. It was not until after the Stalingrad debacle that Hitler changed his mind and allowed large-scale recruiting of Caucasian troops – and when Heeresgruppe A began its retreat from the Caucasus, it was accompanied by 80,000 Cossacks, who rightly feared retribution from Beria’s NKVD. Eventually, tens of thousands of ethnic Caucasians would serve the Third Reich as Osttruppen, but not until the war was lost.

During the Caucasus campaign, both sides tried to use partisans to disrupt the other sides’ rear areas, but with only limited results. Since much of the Caucasian population was either friendly or indifferent and the Germans pointedly avoided requisitioning too much from the population, the Russian partisan effort in the Caucasus was slow to form. The most effective Soviet partisan units were in the mountainous terrain around Novorossiysk and Tuapse, but small detachments operated near Armavir and Mineralnye Vody. Despite inflicting losses on isolated German units, the Soviet partisans failed to seriously interfere with German operations. Likewise, the German Abwehr’s effort to co-opt the Chechen insurgency around Grozny came to naught. Agents were parachuted into the mountains to work with Chechen insurgents near Grozny’s oilfields, but the operation was a failure.

A group of Cossack cavalry patrolling a village in the Caucasus. By making an alliance with local Cossack leaders, the Germans helped to secure their rear areas with friendly local militias. Thanks to the Cossacks, Soviet partisans could only operate in remote areas and caused little harm in 1942. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)
A Cossack cavalry unit in the Caucasus. The Germans began forming two regiments for front-line duty, which saw limited action in the late stages of the campaign. After the defeat at Stalingrad, the Germans would increasingly seek to recruit Osttruppen to make up their own manpower losses in combat. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

One group to which the Germans did not extend courtesies was the Jewish population in the Caucasus, estimated to be between 45,000 and 55,000 in mid-1942. SS-Brigadeführer Walther Bierkamp’s Einsatzgruppe D came in right behind the spearheads of Heeresgruppe A, where they used specially equipped vans to exterminate the enemies of the Third Reich. Bierkamp began in Stavropol on 5 August, where his troops gassed 660 mentally ill patients, then he moved on to Krasnodar, Mineralnye Vody, Yeisk and Pyatigorsk. It is not clear how many civilians Bierkamp murdered in the Caucasus between July 1942 and January 1943, but estimates range from a low of 10,000 to perhaps 35,000. These are small numbers in the context of the Holocaust and only a fraction of the region’s population, but it is important to remember that Heeresgruppe A invaded the Caucasus not only in pursuit of oil riches but as the vanguard of a sadistic and murderous ideology.

A 3.7cm flak gun on the Black Sea coast, probably near Novorossiysk or Anapa. The Germans made little use of these captured ports, which the VVS-ChF routinely bombed. (www.Stavka.org.uk)

**STALEMATE AND RETREAT, NOVEMBER 1942–**
JANUARY 1943

After the failure of the German offensive towards Ordzhonikidze, Maslennikov’s Northern Group (the 9th, 37th and 44th armies) began to relentlessly attack both flanks of the weakened 1. Panzerarmee for the next seven weeks. The Ardun-Alagir sector held by Mackensen’s III Panzerkorps was particularly hard hit and von Kleist managed to get 50. Infanterie-Division brought across the Kerch Strait from the Crimea, with part of it transferred to reinforce Mackensen’s corps in late November. Maslennikov’s Northern Group also began to commit more and more tanks to support its local counterattacks, leading to several pitched tank battles with III Panzerkorps. On several occasions, Mackensen’s front was penetrated and only restored with difficulty. The Soviet 37th Army even began attacking out of the mountains against Mackensen’s exposed flank, which was screened by a single Romanian division.

North of the Terek, in the Nogai Steppe, 3. Panzer-Division was continuously being attacked by the 44th Army. Von Kleist sent Korps z.b.V. Felmy and the Cossack Regiment ‘von Jungschulz’ to reinforce his steppe flank and Budyonny sent Kirichenko’s 17th Kuban Cossack Cavalry Corps, which was redesignated as the 4th Guards Cavalry Corps. Soon, it was joined by the 5th Guards Cavalry Corps and Tyulenev even proposed forming a cavalry army to operate on the Nogai Steppe, but Stavka rejected the idea. While Maslennikov’s Northern Group was getting noticeably stronger, Heeresgruppe A grew weaker as resources were diverted to sustain 6. Armee at Stalingrad. On 19 November the Soviet counteroffensive against Heeresgruppe B began, and four days later von Kleist learned that 6. Armee was surrounded at Stalingrad. The next day, the OKH ordered von Kleist to transfer 23. Panzer-Division to participate in Operation Wintergewitter, an effort to relieve the trapped 6. Armee. Although some officers counselled that it was time to pull back Heeresgruppe A from the Terek River in order to devote all resources to the Stalingrad relief operation, Hitler was unwilling to abandon his gains in the Caucasus.
Soviet counterattacks increased steadily in ferocity as news of Stalingrad energised the North Caucasus Front. German armoured strength ebbed rapidly, partly from combat losses and partly from the lack of spare parts. By 19 December, it was clear that Wintergewitter had failed and that 6. Armee was doomed. Two days later, the OKH ordered von Kleist to transfer the SS-Division ‘Wiking’ north as well. By Christmas, Soviet attacks were pounding Heeresgruppe A’s front in multiple places and it became clear that von Kleist’s depleted forces could not remain on the Terek River all winter. Even worse, General-polkovnik Andrei I. Eremenko’s Southern Front was pushing south along the Stalingrad–Tikhoretsk rail line, threatening von Kleist’s lines of communications from Rostov. Only LVII Panzerkorps was in Eremenko’s path. The Kalmyk Steppe region was also wide open and 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.) was nearly encircled at Elista. Furthermore, the entire German front in southern Russia was in a flux and the newly created Heeresgruppe Don was struggling to create a new front, but Soviet armies were advancing towards Rostov in great strength. If Soviet armour reached Rostov, Heeresgruppe A would be isolated in the Caucasus. Fear of another encircled German Army forced Hitler to react: he authorised von Kleist to withdraw 1. Panzerarmee – but only to Pyatigorsk and the Kuma River line.

Soviet troops continue to attack through the ruins of a shattered village. Unlike the Germans, Soviet front-line morale improved throughout the campaign, particularly once news of the victory at Stalingrad arrived. From this point on, the average Red
The 1. Panzerarmee was supposed to begin its withdrawal at 1700 hours on 2 January, but on the morning of 1 January 1943, Maslennikov’s Northern Group launched furious attacks with Tank Group Lobanov (106 tanks) against the Nogai Steppe flank and near Ardon. The 44th Army hit the left flank of 3. Panzer-Division, which had few operational tanks left. Recognising that they lacked the strength to repulse this massive attack, XXXX Panzerkorps began a fighting withdrawal, ahead of schedule. Despite initial success, Maslennikov’s command and control fell apart and he lost control over his forces. The Germans were able to withdraw to Pyatigorsk and the Kuma River, but Lobanov’s tankers found and overran Grenadier-Regiment 122 from 50. Infanterie-Division before it could reach the river. All three German corps were able to fall back and form a new line, which was held for four days. In the high Caucasus Mountains, Gruppe von Le Suire (four Gebirgs-Bataillone) began retreating on 4 January. Stavka harshly criticised Maslennikov for conducting a slipshod pursuit and allowing von Kleist’s forces to break contact.

Maslennikov’s 9th and 44th armies were able to close with the new German positions and got across the Kuma River in several places. Von Kleist had expected this and simply fell back to the Kalaus Line, east of Armavir, where he paused for a week. Except for the two cavalry corps pushing along the Manych, Maslennikov’s forces were not prepared for a lengthy pursuit operation and again lost contact with von Kleist’s forces. Although von Kleist could be satisfied that Maslennikov’s Northern Group was not a serious threat, the steady advance of Eremenko’s Southern Front towards the Manych River was a different story. Von Kleist shifted 16. Infanterie-Division (mot.) to help prevent Eremenko from getting across the river, while LVII Panzerkorps fought a tenacious defensive action at Proletarskaya against vastly superior forces.

Stalin wanted Maslennikov to pin down von Kleist’s forces while Eremenko slipped in behind and cut his line of escape – he did not want the Northern Group to simply follow as von Kleist executed a leisurely retreat. Furthermore, he was piqued that Petrov’s Black Sea Group was remaining passively on the defence and he ordered them to attack Ruoff’s 17. Armee. On 11 January, the Soviets began probing attacks but it was not until 16 January that the 56th Army, now under Grechko, began a serious attack against XXXXIV Armeekorps. Grechko’s infantry slowly pushed forward through rugged terrain, but fell far short of the objective of taking Krasnodar or cutting off any German units.

Von Kleist’s situation deteriorated rapidly after Eremenko’s mechanised forces got across the Manych River on 21 January and threatened to cut his line of communications to Rostov. It was now time to cut and run. Hitler decided to interfere, first ordering von Kleist to take all of 1. Panzerarmee to Rostov, then deciding that part should go to the Kuban with 17. Armee, then changing his mind again. Von Kleist sent LII Armeekorps to link up with Ruoff’s 17. Armee, which was now falling back into the Kuban under pressure. Although there were close calls with Soviet mechanised units threatening von Kleist’s exposed left flank, he made it Rostov with his army intact and the last units withdrew across the Don bridges on 6 February. By saving 1. Panzerarmee from destruction, von Kleist provided Heeresgruppe Don with the means to prevent the entire southern front from collapsing. Hitler promoted von Kleist to Generalfeldmarschall – indicating that he could reward a successful defeat. Ruoff’s 17. Armee retreated into the
Kuban, where they fought an extended defensive campaign until evacuated to the Crimea in October 1943.

13. Panzer-Division was encircled and nearly destroyed outside Ordzhonikidze between 6 and 12 November 1942, losing most of its tanks, artillery and trucks. Here Soviet infantry capture an abandoned PzKpfw IV tank – which will probably be put into Soviet service. After this battle and the diversion of forces to Stalingrad, von Kleist was left with fewer than 100 operational tanks by December 1942.

(Author’s collection)
The retreat, 1–31 January 1943.

1. 1–19 January: LVIII Panzerkorps conducts a mobile delaying operation against the Southern Front's 3rd Guards Army, all the way back to the Manych River.
2. 1 January: the Soviet 44th Army conducts a major attack against the XXXXI Panzerkorps, just as it Panzerarmee is about to begin falling back from the Terek.
3. 2–7 January: Panzerarmee withdraws to the Kuma River, where it pauses for four days. During the retreat, Tank Group Lobanov overruns Grenadier-Regiment 122.
4. 4–12 January: Gruppe Le Saire (4th Panzer Division) retreats from the high mountains.
5. 10 January: Soviet Northern Group eventually breaks through the German defences along the Kuma, forcing Panzerarmee to fall back to the Kalaez Line, where it pauses until 17 January.
6. 15–19 January: Panzergruppe 14 is shifted to defend the upper Manych River, where two mechanised corps from Southern Front are attempting to cross.

7. 15–19 January: SS-Division "Wiking" and Panzer-Division Tiger conduct an epic defensive action at Proletarskaya, buying time for Panzerarmee to withdraw from the Caucasus.
8. 16–20 January: 69th Army spearheads an offensive by the Black Sea Group of Forces toward Krasnodar, but only advances 20 km in a week.
9. 23 January: once across the Manych, the Southern Front links up with the Northern Group's cavalry and threatens to push toward Tskhinvali to cut Panzerarmee's escape route. Hitler orders von Kleist to send the bulk of Panzerarmee to Rostov, but Lt. General Voss is ordered to the Kuban.
10. 24–31 January: 1st Panzerarmee retreats to Rostov and avoids encirclement. The last units cross the Don on 5 February.
11. 24–31 January: Rundstedt's 17th Army retreats to the Kuban bridgehead.
AFTERMATH

Goring and his Konti Öl associates had promised an oil bonanza in the conquered Caucasus, but in fact the Technical Brigade Mineralöl was only able to extract about 1,000 tons of oil from Maikop in the period November 1942–January 1943, before having to abandon the facility to the advancing Soviets. At best, the Germans only managed to get a handful of rigs back on line, capable of extracting a mere 7–10 tons per day. The limited quantity extracted was used locally for transport purposes – none being shipped back to Germany. The TBM estimated that it would not be able to extract significant quantities of oil until mid-1943 and that Maikop would not be restored to large-scale production (50,000–70,000 tons per month) until late 1943. In other words, it would require at least 15 months to bring Maikop back on line, but the Germans did not have that long. Nor was the Soviet war effort significantly impacted by the German seizure of Maikop and damage to Grozny’s oilfields, since Stalin simply ordered the oilfields in the Urals region to increase their production by drilling new wells. Soviet oil production actually increased after the Caucasus campaign.

During the period from 25 July 1942 to 30 January 1943, Heeresgruppe A suffered over 72,000 casualties in the Caucasus campaign, including 22,000 dead or missing. The Romanian 3rd Army incurred about 45,000 casualties in this period, of which more than 12,000 were dead or missing. In contrast, the Red Army suffered over 511,000 casualties in the Caucasus, including 247,000 dead, missing or captured. Thus six months of fighting in the Caucasus had resulted in over 628,000 military casualties on both sides, plus uncounted thousands of civilian casualties in the wreckage of cities like Krasnodar and Novorossiysk. While Heeresgruppe A had inflicted better than 4 to 1 casualties upon the North Caucasus Front, this mattered very little in the long run since the Germans failed to seize their principal objectives or to encircle and destroy any large Soviet formations.

A German Gebirgsjäger watches the beginning of the retreat from the Caucasus in January 1943. Although Heeresgruppe A successfully escaped encirclement in the Caucasus, it was forced to abandon a great amount of its vehicles and artillery, due to lack of fuel and spare parts. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-031-2424-08; photo by K. F. Maier)

When combined with the losses of Heeresgruppe B around Stalingrad, the losses of
Heeresgruppe A further drained German strength to the point that the strategic initiative was lost to the Red Army. Yet unlike Stalingrad, the Germans could not blame their defeat in the Caucasus upon their Romanian allies – failure was entirely due to German-made decisions. List, with some help from Hitler and the OKH, made mistake after mistake, beginning with the inability to focus on a single objective, followed by committing the wrong forces to the wrong missions. Instead of focusing on the oil, List allowed his command to disperse on multiple divergent missions. While it is unlikely that the capture of Tuapse or Grozny would have had any substantial impact on the outcome of the campaign, Heeresgruppe A did have the resources to take one of these objectives, but not both.

The Caucasus was the kind of campaign that the panzer divisions were designed to win, using bold manoeuvres across flat steppes against a disorganised foe that lacked proper air, artillery or armour support. However, Hitler and the OKH failed to provide their main effort with the logistic resources and air support it needed to succeed. Had 1. Panzerarmee received priority of fuel in August, including deliveries of fuel by air, it almost certainly could have ‘bounced’ the Terek before the Soviets could build a defensive line along the entire river. Reduced to only two fuel-starved divisions at the tip of this spear, von Kleist’s spearhead was stopped more by his own side than the Red Army. Failing this, Hitler should have recognised by mid-September 1942 that the offensive in the Caucasus was futile and shifted all effort to Heeresgruppe B – which could have reduced the risk to 6. Armee at Stalingrad. Historians have generally focused on Stalingrad as the defining moment of the 1942 campaign, but the faulty German performance in the Caucasus indicates endemic problems in the Third Reich’s style of operational and strategic planning that go well beyond the mistakes of a few individual generals.
At Maikop, the Technical Brigade Mineralöl was forced to drill new shafts to get at the oil since the original shafts had been so badly damaged. The new rigs did not produce any oil until October 1942, and then only a trickle. By the time Maikop was abandoned in late January 1943, the TBM was still six months away from producing enough oil to ship back to Germany.

Under the circumstances, the Red Army’s performance in the Caucasus was quite good and after the pell-mell retreat of the first few weeks, they made the Germans pay dearly for terrain. The Soviet stand along the Terek River and at Ordzhonikidze was a great defensive success, followed up by constant counterattacks that gradually unravelled the overextended Heeresgruppe A. The main Soviet problem in the Caucasus campaign was a tendency by Stalin to put unqualified NKVD generals like Maslennikov or party commissars like Lazar M. Kaganovich in key decision-making positions; the reason the Red Army performed well in the Caucasus was because it had fighting generals like Koroteev and Kirichenko. Finally, it is worth noting that both sides conducted concurrent air, ground and sea operations during the campaign that affected the outcome – which was rare on the Eastern Front. In modern parlance, the Caucasus was a joint campaign, conducted by all three services, plus a sprinkling of Axis coalition partners. Success on the ground proved heavily dependent upon local air superiority and naval forces also played a significant role at key moments.
THE BATTLEFIELD TODAY

The Caucasus has witnessed a great deal of warfare, terrorism and inter-ethnic violence in the past two decades and until the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, was not known to be welcoming to foreign tourists. The Sochi Olympics briefly brought foreign tourists to a tiny corner of the region, but the Russia–Ukraine crisis over the Crimea brought a new chill in East–West relations that made travel to and within the Caucasus a problematic enterprise. Most air travel to the Caucasus has to go through Moscow and travellers can expect multiple plane-switching to get from Western locations to the heart of the Caucasus. There is only one international airport in the region, Sochi (AER), which is remote from where most of the fighting in 1942–43 occurred. There are also smaller airports at Grozny, Pyatigorsk and Krasnodar that offer limited access to flights from Turkey and Germany. A tourist visa is required.

The best areas to find exhibits related to the 1942–43 campaign are in Krasnodar and Novorossiysk. Krasnodar has the best tourist offerings in the Caucasus, replete with Western-style hotels like Hilton. Two local exhibits are the 30th Anniversary of the Victory Park and the Museum of Military Technologies ‘Oruzhie Pobedy’, both of which offer open-air displays of World War II-era tanks and artillery. In addition, there are numerous local markers denoting Soviet heroes and accomplishments. Novorossiysk is littered with reminiscences of the war and has exhibits and monuments of interest, particularly in a memorial park around the ‘Little land’ (Malaya Zemlya) beachhead. These exhibits include an IL-2 Sturmovik, trenches, some very green tanks, artillery (including a rare 152mm Br-2) and monuments to the naval infantry and various heroes of the fighting. In south-east Novorossiysk, there are a number of monuments marking the site where the advance of Wetzel’s V Armeekorps was stopped, including the ruined Proletary Cement Factory and another near the site of the Oktyabr Factory, which still has a bullet-riddled freight car once used as a command post for the 305th Naval Infantry Battalion. Tuapse has a small Historical and Local Lore Museum of Military Defence that has a collection of infantry weapons, a diorama and displays on fighting around the city in 1942.

A typical Soviet victory memorial – a T-34/85 tank on a pock-marked concrete plinth – on the south-east suburbs of Novorossiysk. This site commemorates one of the Red Army’s proudest moments in the campaign: stopping the advance of
Further south, it is more difficult to find items related to the 1942–43 campaign. Maikop is still an oil town but little local effort has been made to remember World War II. The same is generally true of Armavir, Pyatigorsk and Vladikavkaz (formerly Ordzhonikidze). Of course, there is the usual tank-on-a-plinth type display, although often an anachronous T-34-85 or IS-3 as near Malgobek. Grozny, target of von Kleist’s panzers, was centre stage in the First Chechen War (1994–96) and Second Chechen War (1999–2000), which resulted in a brutal Russian counter-insurgency campaign against the Chechens. After the wars were over, the United Nations declared that Grozny was ‘the most destroyed city on earth’. Although gradually rebuilt, the city has little to offer foreign tourists and the threat of terrorism still hangs heavily over the region.

A Soviet monument atop Mount Semashkho, which was captured by German Gebirgsjäger on 22 October 1942. This proved to be the high-water mark of the German offensive toward Tuapse, which lay 22km in the distance. (Author’s collection)

The Caucasus Mountains still hold some vestiges of World War II. In September 2012, a Russian team found five 7.62mm M1927 howitzers (captured Soviet weapons pressed into German service) and ammunition on the slopes of Donguz-Orun south-east of Mount Elbrus. Partly covered by ice, the guns had lain abandoned for 70 years. Other Russian teams have found the remains of wartime casualties, preserved in the ice, as well as personal effects. One of the most poignant was a German camera, found inside an ammunition pouch, on the ice; clearly the owner had found the Caucasus Mountain beautiful and intended to send photos back to Germany; however, neither he nor his camera returned.
FURTHER READING


Eichholtz, Dietrich, *War for Oil: The Nazi Quest for an Oil Empire* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2012)


ARTIST’S NOTE

Readers may care to note that the original paintings from which the colour plates in this book were prepared are available for private sale. The Publishers retain all reproduction copyright whatsoever. The artist can be contacted via the following website:

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The Publishers regret that they can enter into no correspondence upon this matter.

THE WOODLAND TRUST

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DEDICATION

To Captain Jason B. Jones, 1st Battalion/3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne), KIA near Jalalabad, Afghanistan, 2 June 2014; 1st Lieutenant Markym Savchenko, Ukrainian 95th Airmobile Brigade, KIA near Luhansk, 19 July 2014; and 1st
Lieutenant Natan Cohen, Israeli Armored Corps, KIA in the Gaza Strip, 22 July 2014 – a sad reminder that a century after the ‘War to End All Wars’ began, there is still plenty of war to go around.

**LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

AOK – Armeeoberkommando (Army Command)
CKF – Severo-Kavkazskiy Front (North Caucasus Front)
GCC – Guards Cavalry Corps
GRD – Guards Rifle Division
GRC – Guards Rifle Corps
JG – Jagdgeschwader
KKK – Kuban Cossack Cavalry Corps
KG – Kampfgeschwader
MAG NOR – Morskaya aviagruppa Novorossiyskogo oboronitel’nogo rayona (Naval Aviation Group Novorossiysk Defensive Area)
MD – Military District
MFP – Marinefährprahm (naval ferry barge)
mot. – motorised
MRD – Mountain Rifle Division
NIB – Naval Infantry Brigade
NKO – Narodny Komissariat Oborony (Commissariat of Defence)
NKVD – Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs)
ODBP – Otdel’nykh divizionov bronepoyezdov (armoured train division)
OKH – Oberkommando des Heeres
OTB – Otdel’nyy tankovyy batal’on (independent tank battalion)
PzAOK – Panzerarmee
PzKpfw – Panzerkampfwagen
RB – Rifle Brigade
ROA – Russkaya Osvoboditel’naya Armiya (Russian Army of Liberation)
RVGK – Reserve of the Supreme High Command (Stavka)
SPW – Schützenpanzerwagen
StG – Sturzkampfgeschwader
StuG – Sturmgeschütz
StuGAbt – Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung
StuK – Sturmkanone
TBM – Technical Brigade Mineralöl
TOR – Tuapse Defensive Region
VA – Vozdushnaya armiya (air army)
VS – Verbrauchssatz
VVS – Voyenno-Vozdushnye Sily (Military Air Forces)
VVS-ChF – Black Sea Fleet Air Arm
YF – Yuzhny Front (Southern Front)
ZG – Zerstörergeschwader
ZKF – Zakavkazskiy Front (Transcaucasus Front)
### Key to military symbols

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### Key to unit identification

- **Unit identifier**
- **Parent unit**
- **Commander**

(+): with added elements
(-): less elements