

The Defence and Evacuation of the Kuban Bridgehead, January - October 1943: examining a forgotten campaign in the German-Soviet War.

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This article examines the little-known battles fought by German and Soviet forces over the Kuban bridgehead on the north-eastern coast of the Black Sea from January to October 1943. The bridgehead formed when the German Seventeenth Army withdrew into the Taman Peninsula as Army Group A retreated from the Caucasus in the wake of the defeat at Stalingrad. Seventeenth Army held the position through the spring, summer and autumn of 1943, before withdrawing to the Crimea. The campaign can be viewed as an interesting microcosm of the entire German-Soviet war. Many of the events and trends of the wider war can be seen at a smaller scale in the Kuban: the seemingly unstoppable German advance that was halted against the odds in a shattered industrial area, and the gradual and often unsteady transformation of the Red Army from the chaos and catastrophe of the early period of the war to a skilfully led and professional fighting force, in parallel with the Wehrmacht's gradual but inexorable decline in both quantitative and qualitative terms. The entire rationale for holding the bridgehead is an early example of Hitler's inflexible and unrealistic strategic vision as the tide of war turned, and the campaign fell under post-war rewriting of history by the Soviet leadership to overstate the contributions of senior political figures and erase mistakes and defeats from the record. The campaign has been largely overlooked in the published English language history of the war. This article addresses that lack of attention, providing a detailed exploration of the campaign based on German and Russian sources to offer new insight and understanding of a rarely analysed part of the war.

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Introduction

This article examines the little-known campaign in the Kuban Bridgehead on the Black Sea coast of southern Russia in the first nine months of 1943. In addition to shedding light on a campaign that is virtually unknown in the West, and providing some insight as to why the campaign in the Caucasus as a whole fell into obscurity, the article will frame the Kuban operations as a microcosm of the second period of the Soviet–German war as a whole.

The bridgehead formed the last German-held territory in southern Russia after the destruction of Sixth Army at Stalingrad and the retreat of Army Group A from the Caucasus. It was created in February 1943, as Hitler insisted that some part of the region be held as a jumping-off point for a future second offensive to seize the oilfields. Accordingly, Seventeenth Army was withdrawn into the small bridgehead on the Taman Peninsula between the Azov and Black Seas. The terrain offered a solidly defensible position, with marshes along the Azov coast and mountains on the Black Sea side (which had caused significant difficulties for the German advance in the summer of 1942), leaving a relatively narrow inland strip where manoeuvre was more straightforward. A number of ports along the Black Sea coast allowed relatively easy supply from the Crimea, just a few miles to the west across the Kerch Strait. These defensive advantages combined with largely ineffectual Soviet offensive efforts and complete failure to interdict German marine operations to enable Seventeenth Army to hold its position for nine months and ultimately to evacuate it in good order and with minimal losses.

These events too place during the second period of the Soviet–German War, from the autumn of 1942 to the end of 1943, when the strategic balance of the war shifted inexorably from the German to the Soviet side. Unsustainable losses suffered by the Wehrmacht increasingly degrading its forces, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The Red Army could draw on a much larger pool of manpower, enabling it to maintain and even increase its numerical strength. Furthermore, the lessons learned by the survivors of the catastrophic first period of the war, from common front soldiers to the highest levels of command, saw the Red Army becoming an increasingly professional, skilled and flexible fighting force. This learning process was not without its painful lessons—the victory at Stalingrad was followed by defeats in the Donets basin and at Kharkov and even successful operations continued to suffer huge losses—but by the end of the second period, there could be no illusions as to what the eventual outcome of the war would be.¹

David M. Glantz, one of the foremost scholars of the Soviet-German war of 1941-5, makes frequent reference to what he calls the “forgotten battles” of the war, the many operations that are partially or completely overlooked in the published history. These operations are understandably obscured by more famous events, such as the initial German advance in the summer of 1941, the Battles of Moscow, Stalingrad and

Kursk and the huge Soviet offensives of the later period of the war.² Glantz argues, however, that a comprehensive understanding of the war cannot be gained without some knowledge of these forgotten battles, as they accounted for upwards of 40 percent of the Red Army's total wartime operations.

The operations in the Kuban bridgehead can certainly be included in the ranks of the forgotten battles. Indeed the entire campaign in the Caucasus during 1942-3 is often viewed as merely a footnote to the Battle of Stalingrad, even though the oilfields were the primary objective of Operation Blue, the Wehrmacht's 1942 summer offensive, and the forces sent to the Volga were initially intended to act as a screen for the advance to the south. The Kuban bridgehead, which was held by the German Seventeenth Army from January to October 1943, receives even less attention. As an example, John Erickson's *The Road to Berlin* devotes several early pages to the Soviet offensives and German withdrawal that led to the pocket being formed, then briefly mentions the Soviet plans to eliminate the bridgehead, but the next mention of Seventeenth Army sees it in the Crimea in October 1943 following its evacuation over the Strait of Kerch from the Kuban, which is not discussed at all.³

This article will use the campaign in the Kuban to examine a 'forgotten campaign, and to explore the shifting balance on the eastern front. The German offensive in the area had been halted in the industrial suburbs of Novorossiysk in September 1942, at the same time as Sixth Army's ill-fated assault into the streets of Stalingrad was beginning. About six months later, declining German strength was illustrated by the weakness of the force that was assembled for Operation Neptune: an unsuccessful to dislodge a relatively small Soviet force (see Part Three).

On the Soviet side, the failings of the first period of the war are evident in the breakdown of command, control and communication that greatly contributed to the failure of the landing operation at Yuzhnaya Ozereika (Part Two) and the inflexible and uncoordinated attempts to bludgeon through the German defences in the central part of the Taman peninsula (Part Three).

Part I of the article provides an introductory examination of the operations of the Army Group South and Army Group A from the launch of Operation Blue in late June 1942 until the isolation of Seventeenth Army in the Kuban in the early weeks of 1943. The following parts consider the nine-month campaign, broken into three phases.

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

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

Finally, Part Four examines the withdrawal of the Seventeenth Army through a series of prepared defensive positions and then across the Kerch Strait to the Crimea. In total, almost a quarter of a million men, over 70,000 horses, almost 50,000 vehicles and over 100,000 tons of supplies were evacuated by sea, and another 15,000 men were airlifted out, with very light losses.⁴

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

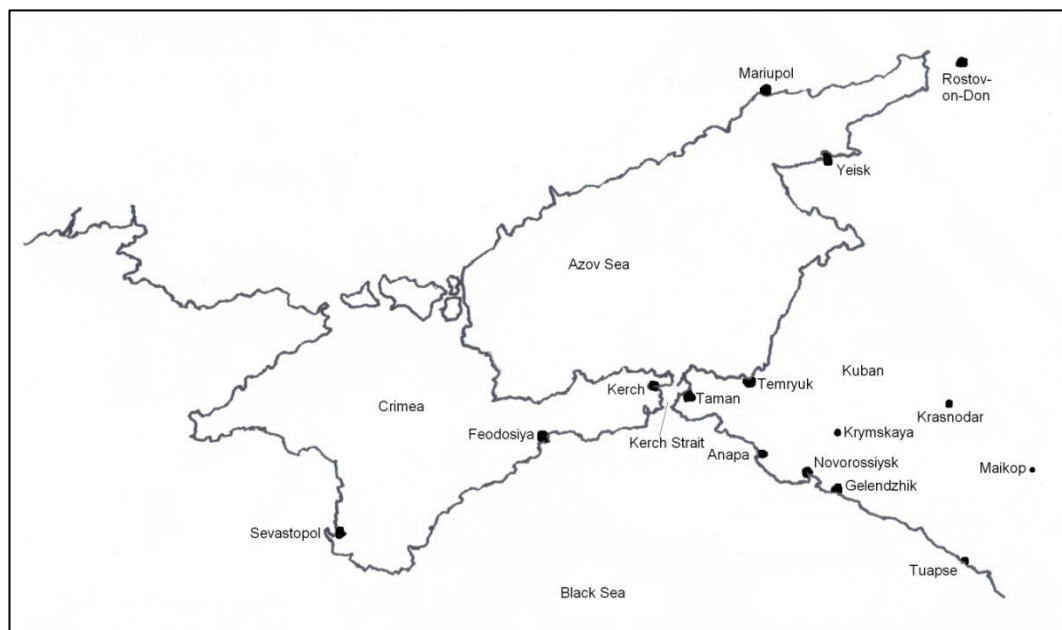


Figure 1: The Kuban and Crimea

Part I: The Operations of Seventeenth Army, June 1941 – Jan 1943

Seventeenth Army was established on 13 December 1940, under the command of General Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel.⁵ For the offensive against the Soviet Union, it was assigned to Army Group South, which was commanded by Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt. Because of the huge extent of this sector, the army group was split into two parts: to the north of the Carpathian Mountains, Seventeenth was joined by Sixth and First Panzer Armies, while the southern grouping comprised the German Eleventh and Romanian Third and Fourth Armies.⁶ On June 20 1941, Seventeenth Army struck at

the junction between the Rava-Russkaya and Przemyśl fortified districts, aiming initially to break through to Lvov, but met the relatively well-organised and prepared defences of General Mikhail Kirponos's Southwestern Front and faced a much tougher fight through the first Soviet positions than in many other sectors of the front. On the second day of the offensive, however, the infantry located a weak spot between the two fortified districts and tore a wide gap between the defending 6th and 26th Armies, opening the path to Lvov, which fell on the night of 29 – 30 June.⁷

As the offensive tore eastwards, Stavka believed that the entire northern grouping of Army Group Centre was headed directly for Kiev and ordered Kirponos to launch attacks against the spearheads of First Panzer Group, but this proved unsuccessful. Only after von Rundstedt launched the whole of the northern group against 5th Army did Kirponos belatedly realise that the German aim was to encircle large Soviet forces before the drive on Kiev was launched.⁸ On 19 July, Führer Directive No. 33 described the encirclement of Muzychenko's 6th and Ponedelin's 12th Armies, and on 2 August, troops of Seventeenth Army's 1st Mountain Division and First Panzer Group's 9th Panzer Division linked up on the Sinyucha River, closing what became known as the Uman Pocket.⁹ After a last attempt to break out of the encirclement, the two Soviet armies capitulated three days later, yielding a haul of 107,000 prisoners that included both army commanders, four corps commanders and eleven division commanders.¹⁰

Following the conclusion of the fighting at Uman, the commanders of Seventeenth and First Panzer Armies received orders to regroup and continue the advance eastwards towards the Dnieper River, and by mid-August, most of the western bank of the river as far south as Dnepropetrovsk was in German hands.¹¹ On 29 August, Seventeenth Army's LII Corps and Eleventh Army's XI Corps forced a crossing over the river at Derievka, just south of Kremenchug, and by the next morning, they had established a 4-kilometre wide bridgehead that was significantly expanded over the following days.¹² The breakout of First Panzer Group from the bridgehead was one of the keys to the massive encirclement at Kiev in which Southwestern Front was virtually erased from the order of battle, with over 600,000 prisoners being taken by the Germans. As this was occurring, Seventeenth Army was again forging eastward, taking Poltava on 19 September.¹³

On 6 October, Colonel-General Hermann Hoth took over command of Seventeenth Army from von Stülpnagel.¹⁴ Kramatorsk was taken on 27 October,¹⁵ but III Panzer Corps' sweep south to take Rostov-on-Don on 20 November opened a significant gap between First Panzer and Seventeenth Armies. Marshal Timoshenko and Colonel-General Cherechivenko, the Southern Front Commander, launched a furious counter-attack that retook Rostov and threatened the flanks and rear of III Panzer Corps. When von Rundstedt proposed a withdrawal behind the Mius River, Hitler replaced him with Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau, who had been in command of Sixth Army, only to eventually authorise the proposed withdrawal. Additional units were transferred from Kharkov to stabilise the position, meaning they could not be used to support the drive on Moscow.¹⁶

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

On 1 June, General Richard Ruoff assumed command of Seventeenth Army.¹⁸ On 28 June the first phase of Operation Blue, the German summer offensive in the south was launched. The initial phase of the plan called for a pincer operation extending from Kursk on the left wing to the Black Sea on the right to encircle and destroy the Soviet armies that remained on the western side of the Don, with the pincers meeting at Kalach. The advance into the Caucasus would then be launched.¹⁹ Timoshenko's Southwestern Front, which was severely weakened after the Kharkov disaster, soon began to collapse under the weight of Sixth Army's assault, and in the south, Seventeenth and First Panzer Armies hit Southern Front.²⁰ Despite these early successes, however, the anticipated encirclements did not occur, as on 13 July Stavka ordered Soviet formations on the western side of the Don to withdraw over the river to regroup.²¹

Army Group South was split in two on 10 July. Army Group A was commanded by Field Marshal Wilhelm List and comprised the Seventeenth, First Panzer and (after 14 July) Fourth Panzer Armies. Army Group B, under Fedor von Bock, was made up of the German Sixth, Hungarian Second, Italian Eighth and Romanian Third Armies. Seventeenth, along with First and Fourth Panzer, was committed to an attack on Rostov, which fell on 23 July. On the same day, Hitler issued Directive no. 45, which ordered Seventeenth, along with the Romanian Third Army to take the entire eastern coast of the Black Sea down to Batumi, while First and Fourth Panzer Armies would take the oilfields of Maikop before striking east towards the Caspian Sea and the oilfields of Baku.²²

The attacking formations made rapid progress across the flat steppe region between the Don and Kuban Rivers, achieving breakthroughs of up to 40 miles in the first two days, but again the Soviets pulled back to avoid encirclements.²³ On 10 August, 9th and 73rd Infantry Divisions and 1st Mountain Division broke into Krasnodar, the largest city of the Kuban region, completing its capture two days later.²⁴ It was around this critical time, however, that the offensive forces were weakened. Fourth Panzer Army was transferred north to bolster the drive on Stalingrad, and was followed later by the Third Romanian Army. With the transfer of Eleventh Army to the Leningrad Front, the

offensive against the Caucasus was ultimately reduced from the planned five armies to just two.²⁵

During the middle of August, Seventeenth Army crossed the Kuban River on both sides of Krasnodar and began its push towards the ports of Novorossiysk and Tuapse. V Corps, with 73rd and 125th Infantry Divisions, reached the outskirts of Novorossiysk at the end of the month, and around the same time, XXXXII Corps took the Taman Peninsula, but VII Panzer Corps and XXXXIV Corps were unable to force their way through the mountains to Tuapse.²⁶

V Corps took the city centre and port of Novorossiysk on 10 September, but the defending Soviet 47th Army regrouped and dug in around an industrial sector in the eastern suburbs of the city that guarded the coast road to the south. Between 12 and 24 September, 73rd Infantry Division attempted to force a way through these defences, but was unable to do so. An attempt by the Romanian 3rd Mountain Division to break through to the road from the east was also repulsed with heavy losses. There was further indecisive fighting through October, before both sides began to dig in for the winter and major operations were halted.²⁷

In late November, as the noose was closing around Sixth Army and much of Fourth Panzer Army at Stalingrad, the Soviet command was planning an even greater stroke. Operation Saturn would use three armies of Southwestern Front (1st Guards, 3rd Guards and 5th Tank) to smash the Italian Eighth Army on the Don and cross the Donets at Kamesnk before wheeling south, with 2nd Guards Army being added as a second echelon, to take Rostov and trap Army Group A in the Caucasus. Fortunately for the latter, if not for the encircled forces, the Stalingrad pocket was much larger than originally thought, and with 2nd Guards Army being committed to its reduction, the plan for an immediate drive to Rostov was removed from the downgraded Operation Little Saturn.²⁸

The threat to Army Group A remained critical, however, and over the New Year period, Hitler was finally persuaded to withdraw the two armies that remained in the Caucasus, before changing his mind and ordering them to pull back to the Kuban bridgehead.²⁹ On 29 December, the commander of the Transcaucasus Front, General Ivan Tyulenev, was ordered to prepare for an operation to encircle the whole of Army Group A. Transcaucasus Front was to attack from the south through Krasnodar to Tikhoretsk, about 100 miles to the northeast, where it would link up with forces of Southern Front (which was renamed Stalingrad Front on New Year's Day) moving down from the north to cut off the retreat of First Panzer Army.³⁰ First Panzer Army began withdrawing from deep in the Caucasus on 1 January, and as it pulled back to the Kuma River over the next few days, the adjoining left wing of Seventeenth Army began pulling out of its positions in the mountains above Tuapse.³¹ General Ivan Maslennikov, the commander of the Northern Group of Transcaucasus Front, failed dismally in his effort to cut off First Panzer from the south, allowing it to continue its withdrawal in relatively good order.³²

It was only on 24 January that Hitler finally agreed to bring the whole of First Panzer Group through Rostov and out of the Caucasus, meaning that Seventeenth Army alone would be withdrawn into the Kuban bridgehead, supposedly to act as a jump-off point for a future offensive into the Caucasus. Under huge pressure, Fourth Panzer Army was able to hold the Rostov corridor open for long enough to allow the passage of First Panzer Army.³³ The complete isolation of Seventeenth Army occurred on 6 February, when the port of Yeisk on the Sea of Azov was captured by the 276th Rifle Division of 58th Army.³⁴

Part II: The Novorossiysk Landing Operations

Although Soviet attempts for a second huge encirclement had been thwarted, the German position in the southern sector was still perilous, and the eyes of the Soviet command turned to the isolated Seventeenth Army. Plans for a Soviet amphibious landing in the Novorossiysk area had first been drawn up in November 1942, and at a Stavka meeting on 24 January 1943, a combined amphibious and ground operation against the German Seventeenth Army was proposed.³⁵ On land, the Soviet 18th and 46th Armies would seize the Kuban River crossings in the Krasnodar region and then push west towards the Taman Peninsula, while the 47th Army would launch a direct attack on Novorossiysk. Meanwhile, the amphibious landing would place forces into the rear of the German defences and move to link up with 47th Army. The combined operation would encircle Seventeenth Army and prevent it from withdrawing into the defensible Kuban Bridgehead.³⁶ At this meeting, the Soviet forces in the area were also reorganised. Transcaucasus Front's Northern Group, under the command of General Ivan Maslennikov, was renamed North Caucasus Front, while the remainder of Ivan Tyulenev's Transcaucasus Front returned to its original role of guarding the southern frontiers with Iran and Turkey.³⁷

The location chosen for the landing operation was Yuzhnaya Ozereika, about thirty kilometres southwest of Novorossiysk, and the detailed plan was drawn up by Vice-Admiral Filipp Sergeyevich Oktyabrskiy, the commander of the Black Sea Fleet, and timed for 01:30 on 4 February.³⁸ The timetable was as follows:

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

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

01:30: The main landing at Yuzhnaya Ozereika, commanded by Rear-Admiral Nikolai Yefremovich Basistiy, would be launched, along with a simultaneous diversionary landing at Stanichka in the southern suburbs of Novorossiysk. Dummy landing

operations would also be feigned at a number of locations along the southern coast of the Taman Peninsula: Anapa, Blagoveschenskiy, the Sukko River Valley and Cape Zhelezniy Rog.³⁹

The main landing force comprised two echelons. The first was formed up in Gelendzhik and was made up of 255th Independent Red Banner Naval Infantry Brigade, 563rd Independent Tank Brigade and a separate machine-gun battalion. The second echelon formed up in Tuapse and comprised 83rd Independent Red Banner Naval Infantry Brigade, 165th Infantry Brigade and 29th Anti-tank Artillery Regiment.⁴⁰ Both groupings underwent intensive training in landing operations throughout January.⁴¹

Even during the earliest preparations for the operation, however, a number of officers expressed doubts over the selection of Yuzhnaya Ozereika as the site of the main landing, citing the unpredictable winter weather and sea conditions, the presence of numerous minefields in the area and the distance from the ultimate objective of Novorossiysk.⁴²

The operation ran into serious problems from the start. On 27 January, 47th Army began its ground offensive in the Verkhnebakanskaya and Krymskaya areas, but was unable to force a breakthrough at any point. Although the original plan stipulated that the landing operation would not begin until such a penetration had been achieved, the Transcaucasus Front command nevertheless gave the order for the landing to proceed, partly in the hope that it would divert German forces and help 47th Army to achieve its aim.⁴³

The first landing group was late setting out from Gelendzhik and made slower than expected progress in heavy seas, so Basistiy sent a request to Vladimirskiy on *Krasniy Kavkaz* and to Oktyabrskiy, requesting a 90-minute postponement. Without waiting for confirmation from Oktyabrskiy, Vladimirskiy ordered his ships to hold fire and Basistiy postponed the arrival of the second landing wave until 04:40, but the commanders overseeing the airborne, air-support and dummy landing operations did not receive this information and acted according to their original orders and timetable.⁴⁴

Oktyabrskiy did not wish to delay the operation as doing so would deprive him of the cover of darkness. He ordered that the original plan should be adhered to, but this message did not reach Basistiy and Vladimirskiy until it was too late for them to revert to the original plan. Again, Oktyabrskiy did not communicate with the air-support, parachute and diversionary landing groups, so they remained oblivious to the unfolding chaos.⁴⁵

The bombing raids and bombardment of the dummy landing sites were launched in accordance with the original timetable, as was the parachute drop, but one of the transport planes was unable to locate the drop zone and returned to base, reducing the strength of the parachute force by over 25 percent before the operation started. This disconnect between the different parts of the operation alerted the defending German and Romanian forces, allowing them to ascertain that a landing operation was

imminent and also its likely location.⁴⁶ At 00:35, V Corps placed all its forces defending the southern coast of the Taman Peninsula on the highest alert.⁴⁷

At 02:30, the naval support ships began their 30-minute bombardment against the German and Romanian defences at Yuzhnaya Ozereika. The fire was poorly-directed, however, and although over 2,000 shells were fired, the gun emplacements and defensive positions were largely undamaged. At 03:00, the cruisers ceased firing and set course for port, although the destroyers continued firing. The landing craft of the first group approached the shore at around 03:30, but came under intense fire and suffered heavy losses. Many of the tanks in the first landing group were released too far from the shore so their engines flooded and they were immobilised in the surf.⁴⁸

A group of 1,427 men, with 10 tanks, was able to reach the shore. They quickly captured Yuzhnaya Ozereika and set out for Glebovka, a few miles to the north, but without support, they could not maintain the advance.⁴⁹ The bulk of the group, including the last two remaining tanks, was pushed back and isolated in an area about one kilometre west of Yuzhnaya Ozereika on the morning of 5 February.⁵⁰ Over the next few days, small groups tried to force their way through to Stanichka, and about 150 succeeded. Another group of 25, along with 18 paratroopers and 27 partisans, reached the coast to the east of Yuzhnaya Ozereika and were picked up by a motor boat on the evening of 9 February.⁵¹ Another 542 men of the landing group were captured.⁵² On 6 February, Seventeenth Army reported that the landing force at Yuzhnaya Ozereika had essentially been destroyed, and the following day, reported that 300 enemy dead and 31 U.S.-built tanks lay on the beach.⁵³

The numerous failures of command, control and communication that plagued the operation strongly echo the first phase of the war, when the rapid German advances and encirclements shattered the coherence of the Red Army in the field. Although the strategic initiative was decisively tipping toward the Soviet side, the damage inflicted in 1941 and the summer of 1942 would take time to fully repair. Furthermore, the inflexibility and reluctance to alter plan and timetables that was displayed by the commanding officers can be viewed highlights that the Red army was still suffering from the effects of the purges of the pre-war years. Most obviously, there was a chronic lack of experienced and even competent officers at all levels of the command chain, but the purges also had a paralysing effect the remaining officers, who were often afraid to display any independent thought or initiative or to take even the slightest risks.⁵⁴

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

reinforced. The bridgehead quickly became known as “Malaya Zemlya” (The Small Land).⁵⁵

The success against the Yuzhnaya Ozereika landing appears to have led to a degree of complacency among the German command regarding the Stanichka operation. At 00:15 on 6 February, General Ruoff sent a message of congratulations to all the commanding officers who had been involved in the defence against the two landings, and later in the day, V Corps’ war diary reported that the landing force at Stanichka was encircled and that its attempts to expand its beachhead would be defeated.⁵⁶ A German offensive to throw the landing party back into the sea was planned, but was not scheduled to start until 7 February, when parts of 198th Infantry Division were due to arrive from Krasnodar to reinforce V Corps’ line in a number of locations around Novorossiysk.⁵⁷ Ivan Y. Petrov, the commander of the Black Sea Group of North Caucasus Front, displayed no such hesitation and quickly decided to divert all of the forces that had been intended for the main landing to reinforce the success of the Stanichka diversion.⁵⁸

Within a few days, over 17,000 men, twenty-one guns, seventy-four mortars, eighty-six machine guns and 440 tons of supplies had been landed on the beachhead. Kunikov was fatally wounded by a shell splinter on the night of 11–12 March and was posthumously awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union.⁵⁹ He is buried in Heroes’ Square, close to the waterfront in the centre of Novorossiysk.

Petrov’s display of initiative is a small example that the Red Army were slowly overcoming the ossification of the pre-war years and was growing into a truly effective force. The lessons learned in the early defeats were a major part of this, but decisions taken by Stalin and the national leadership were also crucial. The most inept of Stalin’s cronies were removed from command, and many of the officers who would lead the army to victory were identified and nurtured from as early as late 1941 and early 1942. Officer education and training at the country’s military academies was expanded, reformed and reorganised to fill the shortfall in experienced and capable commanders. Finally, while never relinquishing absolute control of both military and political leadership, Stalin at least showed a willingness to place some trust in the commanders at the front through initiatives such as the abolition of the formal commissar system, the institution of new awards for both individuals and units and the introduction of new symbols of officer ranks.⁶⁰



Figure 2: Tsesar Kunikov's Grave in Novorossiysk (Photograph by Author)

The debacle at Yuzhnaya Ozereika has been largely overlooked in the Soviet history of the war, as attention focussed on the Malaya Zemlya landings. The *official History of the Great Patriotic War* describes the events at Yuzhnaya Ozereika in just two sentences while devoting several pages to the success of the auxiliary operation.⁶¹ During this period, Leonid Brezhnev was serving as a political officer with 18th Army, and he made a number of trips by boat to Malaya Zemlya to encourage the troops. During his term as general secretary of the Communist Party (1964-82), the legend of Malaya Zemlya was elevated to new heights. In 1973, Novorossiysk was awarded the title of Hero City, ranking it on a par with the likes of Stalingrad and Leningrad in terms of its importance in the war. A series of massive memorial complexes were constructed, including one at the site of the Malaya Zemlya landings.⁶²



Figure 3: The Malaya Zemlya Memorial Complex in Novorossiysk (Photograph by Author)

The question of what the Malaya Zemlya landing actually achieved, beyond its propaganda value and tying down German forces, is worthy of further consideration. Grechko claims that the operation created favourable conditions for the liberation of Novorossiysk,⁶³ but this view is difficult to support, as the city was not recaptured until a full seven months after the landing operation and after the Germans had already decided to withdraw the whole of Seventeenth Army from the Kuban Bridgehead. Several writers, including Tieke, note that the presence of the Soviet forces at Malaya Zemlya prevented the Germans from using the port facilities at Novorossiysk.⁶⁴ This argument is also questionable. There were already significant Red Army forces on the high ground on the eastern side of Tsemess Bay, where the front line had been static since September 1942. These forces provided artillery support for the landing operation, so they would also have been able to threaten any German vessels attempting to enter or exit the port even if the beachhead had been eliminated. Furthermore, the German-held ports and airfields further to the rear were sufficient for Seventeenth Army's supply needs. During March, for example, the supply and evacuation totals by sea and air were as follows:⁶⁵

<u>Withdrawals</u>	<u>Air</u>	<u>Sea</u>
Soldiers & Wounded	21,889	76,010
Civilians	2,887	17,806
Motor Vehicles		9,256
Horse-drawn Vehicles		12,442
Horses		48,624
Field Kitchens		444

Guns		253
<u>Supplies</u>		
Fuel	2827 m ³ *	1880 m ³
Flour	2248 t	1554 t
Rations	238 t	2318 t
Animal feed/roughage	5341 t	5793 t
Ammunition	262 t	3730 t

*Note: 1 m³ = 1,000 litres

To further supplement the supply system, a cable-car system across the Kerch Strait, with a capacity of 1,000 tons per day, went into operation in June.⁶⁶

A second question that warrants further examination is that of what could have been achieved if the main landing at Yuzhnaya Ozereika had unfolded as planned. The landing forces at Malaya Zemlya were concentrated at the tip of a relatively narrow peninsula, so the opposing German defensive line remained quite short. Nevertheless, the quickly reinforced Soviet force put severe pressure on the German defences and created concern at Seventeenth Army headquarters. On 7 February, the army's war diary reported that it had been fully pushed onto the defensive by the reinforced landing group, and on 21 February, it stated that the decrease in the combat strength of its forces in the Novorossiysk area was "particularly serious."⁶⁷

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

Part III: Operation Neptune & Soviet Summer Offensives

In late February and early March, poor weather prevented any significant operations by either side.⁶⁸ Towards the end of March, the northern flank of Seventeenth Army was pulled back slightly to improve its positions in the marshy region along the coast of the Azov Sea.⁶⁹ Around this time, Army Group A and Seventeenth Army finalised plans for Operation Neptune, an offensive aimed at destroying the Soviet forces in the Malaya Zemlya beachhead.⁷⁰ The offensive was originally planned for 6 April, although this date was not definitively finalised, as clear weather was required to ensure that strong Luftwaffe forces could be used for close support of the attacking troops, suppression of enemy artillery batteries on the coast road between Novorossiysk and Kabardinka on the eastern shore of Tsemess Bay and prevention of reinforcement and supply of the beachhead by sea.⁷¹ Aircraft were transferred from the Donbass and southern Ukraine to reinforce Luftflotte 4's forces for this effort.⁷²

The attacking forces would include:⁷³

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

In order to achieve maximum surprise, the concentration of 4th Mountain Division and the regrouping of 125th and 73rd Infantry Divisions were to take place at night and in small groups, to be completed by 18:00 on 5 April. Additional deception measures included strict traffic control and radio silence, the dissemination of false rumours about an imminent withdrawal from Novorossiysk and unchanged reconnaissance, combat patrol and artillery activity. The attack was to be launched without a preliminary artillery barrage, and if individual assault groups required artillery support, this would only be launched at the jump-off time.⁷⁴

The attack was divided into two phases. In the first phase, 4th Mountain Division and 125th Infantry Division would advance from their concentration areas around Fedotovka and Poklaba Farm, respectively, towards the Myskhako – Stegneyeva Farm road, with 4th Mountain Division taking Myskhako Berg and Myskhako village and 125th Infantry Division clearing the Myskhako Valley and a wooded area to the north of the village. In this first phase, 73rd Infantry Division's artillery would provide support for the left wing of 125th Infantry Division. Once the first phase had crossed a loop on the Myskhako – Stegneyeva Farm road, 73rd Infantry Division would join in the second phase by attacking south into Stanichka. It was envisaged that the attack would reach so far into the beachhead that the enemy forces would be split into many individual groups that could be destroyed piecemeal.⁷⁵ In particular, the army commander General Ruoff stressed the importance of penetrating as far as possible into the beachhead on the first day to prevent the evacuation or reinforcement of the enemy by sea, although he expressly forbade the setting of specific daily goals.⁷⁶

On 1 April, radio intercepts and ground reconnaissance suggested that the Soviets would launch an attack against the east wing of XXXXIV Corps, perhaps as early as the following day. The army's war diary acknowledges that this could make the situation "uncomfortable," but concludes that it was not a reason for specific concern.⁷⁷ The intended start date of 6 April was postponed due to poor weather, as was the first rescheduled date of 10 April.⁷⁸

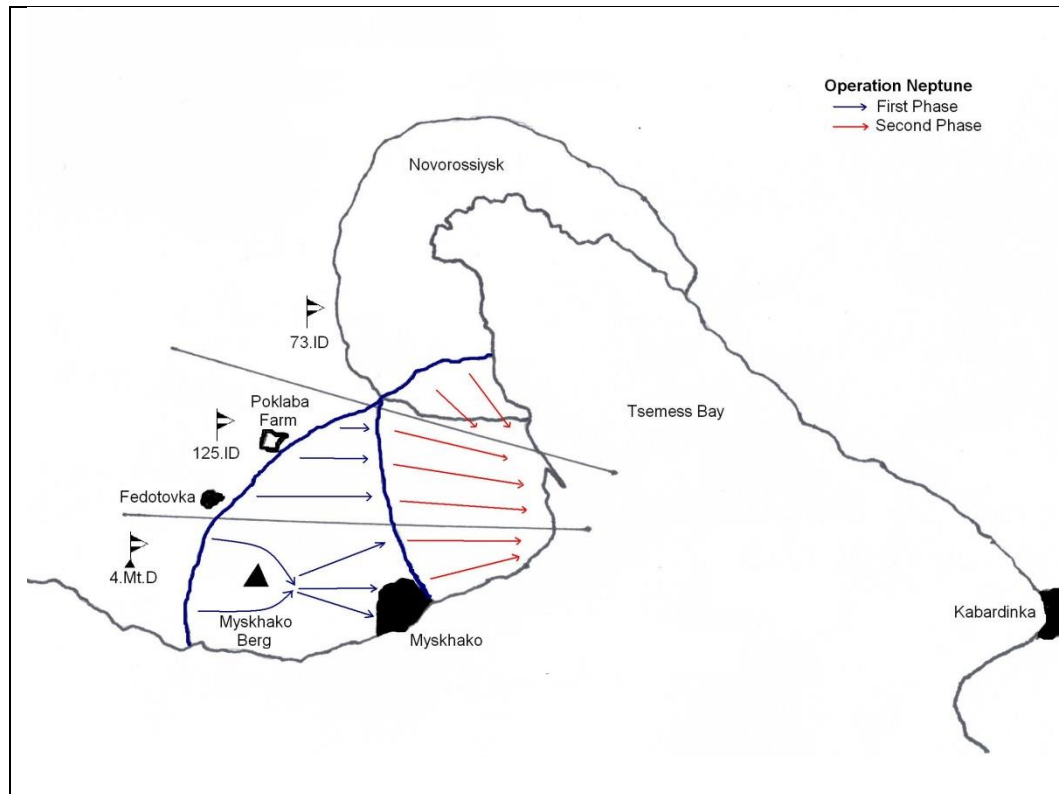


Figure 4: Operation Neptune

The offensive was eventually launched at 06:30 on 17 April, after a final one-hour delay caused by heavy fog that prevented air activity.⁷⁹ The 4th Mountain Division's attack initially broke through the forward positions to the slopes of Myskhako Berg and Teufels Berg, about 1.5 kilometres to the east, but was then held up by strong Soviet resistance.⁸⁰ The attack by the northern group of 125th Infantry Division was initially focussed on the Myskhako Valley and high ground to the north and northwest of Myskhako village, and a penetration of about one kilometre was forced. Its left wing broke through the forward positions southwest of the road loop and became involved in heavy fighting in an area around one kilometre west and southeast of Stegneyeva Farm.⁸¹

Despite the effort assigned to suppressing the Soviet artillery on the eastern shore of Tsemess Bay, fire from this area resumed in the early afternoon, aimed primarily at the northern wing of 125th Infantry Division. Combat reports confirmed that the front line defences in the area had been significantly strengthened in anticipation of the attack, and the heavy fighting for strongly-fortified positions caused considerable losses among the attacking infantry.⁸²

In the afternoon, in a conference among Generals Ruoff, Wetzel (V Corps) and Korten (Luftflotte 4), the possibility of transferring parts of 73rd Infantry Division to 125th Infantry Division to boost the latter's strength at the key breakthrough positions was discussed. This proposal was ultimately rejected because of the time that the regrouping would take and because it was considered that the most favourable force

ratios were in 73rd Infantry Division's sector, as the Soviets had moved significant forces from the southern parts of Novorossiysk to the Myskhako – Stegneyeva area.⁸³

During the night of 17 – 18 April, a Soviet convoy that approached the beachhead was brought under artillery fire, and two vessels were reported to have been set on fire.⁸⁴ The offensive was renewed at 05:30 on 18 April after harassing fire by all available artillery, but again quickly became bogged down by the tenacious Soviet defence and the difficult terrain and did not achieve a decisive early penetration at any point.⁸⁵ During the night, the Soviets had moved up the 83rd Marine Infantry Brigade, one of the units that had originally participated in the Malaya Zemlya landing, from the rear to reinforce the defences in the Myskhako Valley.⁸⁶

During the course of the morning, however, 125th Infantry Division succeeded in breaking through in an area to the southeast of Poklaba Farm and taking the north-eastern slope of a small hill about one kilometre north of Myskhako village. The attacks by 73rd Infantry Division and 4th Mountain Division, which had not achieved any significant results in the face of the strong Soviet resistance, were halted to allow additional forces to be thrown against this *schwerpunkt* north of Myskhako.⁸⁷ One regiment was transferred from 6th Romanian Cavalry Division, two regiments from 4th Mountain Division and two battalions, along with mortar and assault gun units, from 73rd Infantry Division.⁸⁸

In spite of poor weather, the first Soviet counter-attacks were launched early on the morning of 19 April, in the area of the road loop, preceded by heavy artillery and mortar fire, and through the day further localised counter-thrusts were launched.⁸⁹ On the German side, the bad weather delayed the redeployment of troops to 125th Infantry Division, but at 11:20 it launched an attack aimed at linking up with a group that had already reached the slopes of Teufels Berg.⁹⁰ After seven hours of bitter fighting, the linkup was finally achieved, but the united assault groups were almost immediately put on the defensive by Soviet counter-attacks from the south and east, supported by artillery fire of an unprecedented intensity.⁹¹

After defending against numerous local Soviet counterattacks through the night of 19 – 20 April, 125th Infantry Division launched another attempt to take the high ground at 10:30, but this was stopped by further fortified Soviet defensive positions after gains of just a few hundred metres.⁹² Later in the day, General Jaenecke visited the headquarters of both V Corps and 125th Infantry Division. A review of the operation so far revealed that the air and artillery support had not been able to eliminate the Soviet defensive systems, resulting in high casualties among the attacking German infantry. Although 125th Division was urgently calling for new reserves, an expected Soviet attack on XXXIV Corps' sector meant that no forces could be pulled from here to support 125th Division's attack. It was agreed to postpone further attacks until 22 April, so that new reserves could be created by a regrouping of forces.⁹³

On 21 April, there were numerous discussions between army and corps commands about the possibility of resuming the attack. The lack of available infantry forces was a constant theme, with losses since the start of the offensive being estimated at 2,741

men. The Chief of the Army General Staff, General Kurt Zeitzler, requested reports from 125th Infantry and 4th Mountain Divisions in order to present them to Hitler that evening. These reports again maintained that a continuation of the attack would only be possible if fresh forces were made available. Another report to Army Group A noted the declining quality of the divisions as a consequence of the shortage of NCOs and a complete lack of any opportunities for training since early 1942.⁹⁴ Another increasing problem for the German command was the situation in the air. In the first few days of the offensive, the Luftwaffe had largely enjoyed air superiority,⁹⁵ but by 21 April, aircraft from three newly arrived Soviet air corps were committed, shifting the balance towards the defenders.⁹⁶

On 22 April, V Corps submitted a situation report that concluded that it did not have sufficient forces to continue a concentrated attack against the beachhead, citing the weak attacking forces, loss of surprise, strengthening enemy air activity and continuous resupply and reinforcement of the defenders by sea. The total strength of the attacking group was just 13,541 men, out of a combat strength of the whole army of 57,590.⁹⁷ Following a visit by Field Marshal von Kleist, the commander-in-chief of Army Group A on 23 April,⁹⁸ Operation Neptune was finally called off two days later.⁹⁹

Even accounting for the benefit of hindsight, it appears clear that Operation Neptune was doomed to failure from the outset. The relatively small, worn-out and poorly-trained assault groups faced a numerically superior defending force that had significantly strengthened its positions in the difficult terrain and was able to continually resupply itself by sea. The increasing Soviet air strength over the area increased the pressure on the attacking Germans infantry, both directly and by allowing the Soviet artillery in the beachhead and on the opposite side of Tsemess Bay to play an increasing role. The war diaries of Seventeenth Army and V Corps around this time make an uncharacteristically high number of references to the weakened state of their forces. The growing disconnect between the plans of the German High Command and the forces in the field is graphically illustrated by an entry in Seventeenth Army's diary for 21 April. It records, perhaps with a hint of sarcasm, a visit by General of Railway Troops Otto Will, who reported on the "grand" plans for the construction of road and railway bridges across the Kerch Strait, with a planned completion date of the railway bridge of 1 August 1944.¹⁰⁰

This situation mirrors the changing pattern of the war across the front through the second period of the war, with the Wehrmacht gradually weakening both quantitatively and qualitatively, whereas the Soviet forces were able to maintain their numerical strength and were beginning to show the improvements in all aspects of fighting, command and logistics that would continue to the end of the war. There was still much to be learned, however, as was demonstrated by a series of ineffective efforts to break through the German defensive line across the peninsula during the spring and summer months.

The pulling back of Seventeenth Army's northern flank, noted at the start of this chapter, meant that this sector was protected by impassable reed beds along the coast and by rivers and marshes further inland. The heavily-forested mountains of the

southern sector also offered easily defensible positions, as the assault groups of Operation Neptune had found to their cost. Only the central sector, around the town of Krymskaya, offered any realistic possibilities for large-scale operations. The town was also an important communications centre, with road and railway connections to Novorossiysk, Anapa, Taman and Temryuk.¹⁰¹ This area therefore became the key to the entire German defence and the focus of Soviet attacks through the spring and summer months.¹⁰²

The first offensive was launched in early April. The plan called for 56th Army to break through on either side of the Krasnodar – Krymskaya railroad to encircle the latter, while 37th Army pushed through the German defences and moved west. The attack began at 08:00 on 4 April, and 55th Guards Rifle Division and 383rd and 61st Rifle Divisions quickly forced a penetration between 97th Jäger Division and 9th Infantry Division that was expanded to a width of 1.5 kilometres by the afternoon, before a counter-attack by assault groups formed by 97th Jäger Division, with support from an assault gun battery, restored the original front line.¹⁰³

To the defenders' surprise, the assault was not strongly renewed on the following day, although some fighting continued until 6 April. Heavy rain had severely hampered the movement of Soviet supplies and reinforcements, and an almost ten-day pause for refitting and reinforcement was required.¹⁰⁴ After heavy air raids on Krymskaya on the night of 13 – 14 April, the second attack was launched at 05:00. The three attack wedges again forced an early breakthrough, reaching the southern edge of Krymskaya by noon. A German counter-attack in the afternoon held up the advance, but could not seal off the penetrations. Overnight, both sides moved reserves from other sections of the front, and on 15 April, the fighting ebbed and flowed, with a height known by the Germans as Hill 68.8 and a nearby dairy being the focal points. More German reinforcements were moved up on the following night, and by the evening of 16 April, the front line had been stabilised, although the Germans had been pushed back slightly in the area to the south of Krymskaya.¹⁰⁵ Another pause in the fighting occurred, during which a high-powered delegation arrived from Moscow to oversee the next effort. It included Marshal Georgiy Zhukov, Air Force commander General Aleksandr A. Novikov, Admiral Nikolai Kuznetsov of Navy command and Stavka representative Sergei Shtemenko.¹⁰⁶

The 56th Army renewed its attack on 29 April, initially against the northern wing of 97th Jäger Division's sector. This achieved little, and the focus of the attack was switched to the south of Krymskaya. By the evening of 3 May the spearheads, including 20 tanks, had reached the Krymskaya – Neberdzhavskaya road, threatening to encircle Krymskaya from the south. That night, the Germans abandoned Krymskaya and pulled back to the D-Line, a deeply-echeloned defensive system a few miles to the west of the town.¹⁰⁷ The Soviets were unable to make any further progress, and the fighting died down again over the next few weeks as both sides regrouped and reorganised. Zhukov's party returned to Moscow on 17 May, with Shtemenko noting that they were in low spirits and preparing for a rebuke from Stalin for their failure to achieve a

decisive success. Ultimately, however, it was Maslennikov who paid the price, being replaced as commander of North Caucasus Front by Ivan Petrov.¹⁰⁸

The next attack plan called for 56th and 9th Armies to break through the German defences in the Kievskoe – Moldavanskoe area, to the northwest of Krymskaya, after which 18th Army's forces at Malaya Zemlya would break out of the beachhead to outflank Novorossiysk.¹⁰⁹ The attack opened with an artillery barrage and airstrike at 05:00 on 26 May, and after six hours the leading tank units had made advances of three to five kilometres, but were forced to withdraw by German counter-attacks and a lack of infantry support.¹¹⁰ Over the next few days, the focus of the fighting was Hill 121.4, approximately midway between Kievskoe and Moldavanskoe. It changed hands several times, but was taken for good by the Soviets on 29 May and held against several German counter-attacks. The intensity of the fighting subsided in the first days of June. The Soviets had taken a small patch of territory, but had failed to breach the German defences.¹¹¹

June and early July were relatively quiet, as both sides improved their positions and refitted their troops and also as a likely consequence of the focus of both commands on the upcoming Battle of Kursk.¹¹² On 7 June, Seventeenth Army received a new commander, when General Erwin Jaenecke arrived to replace Ruoff, who was transferred to the Führer reserve.¹¹³ It also received some much-needed reinforcement when 98th Infantry Division was transported from Bryansk, about 200 miles south-west of Moscow, to the Crimea at the start of June, from where it was shipped across the Kerch Strait from 15 – 26 June and inserted into the sector that had been occupied by 101st Jäger Division.¹¹⁴

On 15 July, prisoner interrogations and observations of Soviet activity, such as mine clearance, reconnaissance patrols and traffic movements, suggested that an attack against XXXIV Corps in the hills around Moldavanskoe and Krymskaya was imminent.¹¹⁵ Both sides fully understood that this sector was the key to the German defence of the whole Taman Peninsula.¹¹⁶ The expected attack was launched at 04:00 the following morning and was concentrated against 97th Jäger Division and a hill known by the Germans as Hill 114.1. After a heavy artillery bombardment, the attack was launched with at least two rifle brigades, parts of two rifle divisions and one tank brigade, with significant air and artillery support.¹¹⁷ Two penetrations of the German defensive line were initially made, on both sides of the main Krymskaya – Moldavanskoe road. The northern penetration was thrown back by a counter-attack in the afternoon, but the southern breakthrough area was only partially regained, despite counter-attack efforts during the night and on the following day.¹¹⁸ Further attacks by both sides over the next few days achieved little and sustained heavy losses.¹¹⁹ Soviet reinforcements were brought forward for a renewed offensive that was launched at 05:30 on 22 July. On the following day, a breach was briefly forced between 97th Jäger Division and 98th Infantry Division, but an assault group formed by the latter counter-attacked and restored the line. Further weakening Soviet attacks in the last days of July and into August failed to achieve any significant breakthroughs.¹²⁰

On 24 July, as the fighting around Krymskaya was at its peak, the Soviets launched a separate attack against V Corps in the Neberdzhavskaya area to the southwest, with the aim of breaking through to Novorossiysk. This effort continued until 10 August, without success.¹²¹ In the second half of August, the intensity of the fighting in all sectors subsided considerably, and by mid-September, the Soviets had suspended all major offensive operations and were taking up positions to threaten the imminent German withdrawal.¹²² This was finally authorised by Hitler on 8 September.¹²³

Part IV: The Evacuation of the Kuban Bridgehead

Seventeenth Army's command had in fact been preparing for the withdrawal for some time and issued the order to begin Operation Kriemhild, the withdrawal of all German and Romanian forces from the Kuban Bridgehead to the Kerch Peninsula on the eastern tip of the Crimea, at 12:00 on 4 September.¹²⁴ The operation was to be carried out in three phases. First, an outer defensive line called the Large Gothic Position would be held. Next, the withdrawal to a second line, the Small Gothic Position, would be conducted through a series of intermediate positions, with the shortening of the line allowing divisions to be removed from the line in sequence and sent back to harbours in the western part of the Taman Peninsula. Finally, the remaining divisions would pull back through a second set of intermediate positions to the north-western tip of the Taman Peninsula, from where they would be ferried across the narrow Kerch Strait to the Crimea. Two alternate plans for the withdrawal had been drawn up: Kriemhild, which envisaged the withdrawal of all of the army's manpower and equipment, as well as everything of economic or military value, including most of the civilian population, over a 10 – 12-week period; and Brunhild, which proposed a 6 – 7-week plan in which the army and its equipment would be withdrawn, but infrastructure and goods would be destroyed.¹²⁵ Once the order to initiate Kriemhild was issued, any subsequent decision to switch to Brunhild would be decided mainly by the activity of the Soviet forces in this and other sectors of the front.¹²⁶

A number of measures were taken to facilitate the smooth transport of men, supplies and equipment during the operation: a "Forwarding Staff East" was set up in Starotitarovskaya to control the transport to the harbours and airfields on the Taman side of the Kerch Straits; a corresponding "Forwarding Staff West" was established in Kerch to oversee the onward transport of evacuated units, supplies and equipment; and a Roads Command section was set up in XXXIX Mountain Corps to implement traffic control.¹²⁷

The first division to be withdrawn was 125th Infantry, which was transported by sea to Kerch and by air from Gostagaevskaya on 8 – 9 September.¹²⁸ It and several of the other divisions that were withdrawn in the early part of the operation were transferred to Sixth Army (a new army that was formed after the loss of the original at Stalingrad), which was attempting to hold back the advance of 4th Ukrainian Front along the northern coast of the Azov Sea.¹²⁹ This advance would isolate the German forces in the Crimea when it swept beyond the Perekop Isthmus, the narrow bridge

linking the peninsula to the mainland. Mindful of the supply complications that this would create, Seventeenth Army issued an order on 22 September encouraging soldiers to conserve ammunition whenever possible.¹³⁰

On 8 September, the order to go over from Operation Kriemhild to Operation Brunhild was issued.¹³¹ The withdrawal from the Large Gothic Position would begin on 20 September (X-Day) at the earliest, with the precise timing to be communicated by the army at least 3½ days before the jump-off. Ultimately, this date was brought forward to 15 September, by order of the commander of Army Group A, Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist.¹³² Each of the intermediate defensive positions was intended to be held for a maximum of three days, but the Small Gothic Position was to be prepared so that it could be defended for about three weeks.

The shortening of the defensive line would allow for the withdrawal of significant forces¹³³:

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

Each withdrawing division was assigned a specific march route and timetable:¹³⁴

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

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

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

On the night of 9 – 10 September, the Soviet 18th Army launched another landing operation at Novorossiysk. This time, they feigned a landing at Yuzhnaya Ozereika but launched the actual attack in the northern and western parts of Novorossiysk harbour.¹³⁵ Several beachheads were taken and were reinforced over the following two nights, allowing the group at the northern part of the harbour to break through the positions of the Romanian 20th Mountain Battalion on the coast road and link up with 47th Army.¹³⁶ Contrary to the Germans command's expectations, however, further reinforcements were not landed, and V Corps was able to pull out of the city in good order on the night of 15 – 16 September, having destroyed much of the port infrastructure.¹³⁷

At 19:00 on 15 September, the withdrawal from the Large to the Small Gothic Position began, with elements of V Corps pulling back to the Siegfried Checkpoint and XXXXIV Corps to the Völker Checkpoint,¹³⁸ and on 17 September, the 10th Romanian Infantry Division and parts of the 1st Romanian Mountain Division (V Corps) were detached from the line and began their march back to the embarkation area at Taman. Both of these divisions had been completely transferred to the Crimea by 23 September.¹³⁹ Meanwhile the XXXXIV Corps began moving back from the short Gernot Checkpoint into the Siegfried Checkpoint, forced back a day ahead of schedule by a Soviet attack against the centre of its positions.¹⁴⁰

On 18 September, the withdrawal of XXXXIV Corps to the Siegfried Checkpoint was proceeding as planned, and the disengagement of divisions was accelerated when the order to remove 9th Infantry Division and 1st & 4th Romanian Mountain Divisions (all V Corps) from the line was issued. At 21:00, XXXXIX Mountain Corps began its movement to the Harz Checkpoint and V Corps began pulling back into to the Völker Checkpoint.¹⁴¹

On 20 September, the withdrawal of V Corps and XXXXIV Corps into the Hagen Checkpoint and XXXXIX Mountain Corps into the Rhone Checkpoint began¹⁴². The move from the Völker to the Hagen Checkpoint meant that the harbour at Anapa was abandoned, and early on the morning of 21 September, a landing party of Soviet marines and parts of 5th Guards Tank Brigade took possession of the shattered town.¹⁴³

In an effort to disrupt the withdrawal operations on both flanks, the Soviets launched two landing operations on the night of 24 – 25 September.¹⁴⁴ On the Azov coast, a landing force made up of units from 389th Rifle Division and 369th Naval Infantry Battalion¹⁴⁵ was put ashore between the Kuban River Estuary and Golubitskaya, but was wiped out by noon, with 187 of 200 of the marines who landed being killed.¹⁴⁶ On the German right wing, elements of 55th Guards Infantry Division, 143rd Naval Infantry Battalion and 83rd Naval Infantry Brigade were landed in the vicinity of Lake Solenoye to the west of Blagoveshchenskaya. The defending Romanian 9th Cavalry Division was unable to eliminate this beachhead, but was able to seal it off and prevent it from

expanding its position. The Romanians began their planned withdrawal from the Small Gothic position during the night of 25 – 26 September, and had been fully withdrawn over the Kerch Strait by 28 September.¹⁴⁷

The army's general staff section was flown out to Mariental in the Crimea on 26 September, with XXXIX Mountain Corps taking over command of all the forces remaining in the Small Gothic Position and V Corps assuming responsibility for the defence of the Kerch Peninsula.¹⁴⁸ At this point, Seventeenth Army's force remaining in the Kuban bridgehead amounted to:¹⁴⁹

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

The beginning of the movement to the Vienna Position would leave no doubt that a full withdrawal from the Kuban was underway, so the time leading up to the start of this part of the operation was particularly tense, as the German commanders waited to see if the Soviets would launch a serious attack.¹⁵⁰ During the night of 30 September – 1 October, an attack against the junction of 97th Jäger Division and 98th Infantry Division was repulsed with heavy enemy casualties.¹⁵¹

At 20:00 on 1 October, the first withdrawal out of the Small Gothic Position began, with 98th Infantry Division and 97th Jäger Division moving back towards the Vienna Position, and on 3 October, the withdrawal of 19th Romanian Infantry Division from the right flank of the Small Gothic Position into the Bucharest position followed.¹⁵² This gave up the last remaining major harbour at Taman. The 19th Infantry was the last Romanian division to be withdrawn. It reached its embarkation point on the morning of 3 October and had been completely transferred to the Crimea by the afternoon of 5 October.¹⁵³

At 20:00 on 4 October, the withdrawal from the Bucharest and Vienna Positions to the Berlin Position began, unhindered by the Soviets, and by 6 October, the whole of 370th Infantry Division had reached this position. The bulk of the division continued through the Munich Position and on to the coast for evacuation, thus leaving 97th Jäger Division holding the Munich position.¹⁵⁴

Kriegsmarine forces in the Black Sea, under the command of Vice-Admiral Gustav Kieseritzky, had a number of tasks during the final stages of the withdrawal operation. These included securing the Kerch Strait and the Taman Peninsula coast along both flanks of the withdrawing army, providing smokescreen cover, bombarding enemy positions on the Taman peninsula, providing cargo space as part of the withdrawal

operation, preparing the withdrawal of the last units and laying mines to protect the crossing transports from attack by the Soviet Black Sea Fleet.¹⁵⁵

The plan for the final transport was issued by the Kerch Straits Command on 6 October.¹⁵⁶ This order listed the last units to be withdrawn on as 97th Jäger Division and parts of 4th Mountain Division and 370th Infantry Division, along with the final elements of the Seventeenth Army troops, supporting flak troops and the garrison on Kosa Tuzla island. The specified embarkation points were Iliyeh, both sides of Maliy Kut and the south side of Kosa Tuzla. Most of the transports were to sail to Cape Yenikale and Zhukovka, to the east of Kerch, with some docking at Kerch Harbour's south mole and fishing port and at Cape Ak Burun and Kamysh Burun Bay, to the south of the harbour.



Figure 5: Kerch Harbour (Photograph by Author)

Early on the morning of the 6 October, the Soviets landed about two companies from 83rd Marine Infantry Brigade on Kosa Tuzla, potentially representing a threat to the withdrawing transports and providing a springboard for a larger operation against the Crimea. The landing was reinforced the following afternoon, under the cover of a heavy fog.¹⁵⁷

On the night of 7 – 8 October, the withdrawal from the Munich to the Breslau Position began, with the final rearguards withdrawing at 03:00, undetected by the enemy, who brought the positions in the Munich position under heavy artillery fire until 05:00.¹⁵⁸ The Breslau Position split the remaining units in two, with Dinskoy Bay separating 13th Mountain Jäger Regiment, which would be transported from Maliy Kut on the southern side of the bay, from the remaining forces, which would board their transports at Iliyeh and the Kosa Chushka Spit. The final defensive lines, the Ulm and Stuttgart Positions, covered the landing stages at Iliyeh and Kosa Chushka, respectively.

During the day, the necessary transports were assembled at the three embarkation points, and loading began at 17:00. All the vehicles and artillery were successfully loaded after about 1½ hours, with the troops following. By 22:30, the last boats were

pulling away from the shore, and the fifteen landing stages that had been constructed at Ilyich were blown up after the last boat pulled away.¹⁵⁹ At around the same time, the evacuation of Kosa Tuzla began, unhindered by the Soviet troops that remained on the island.¹⁶⁰

At 00:10 on 9 October, the commander-in-chief of the Kerch Strait, Generalleutnant Walther Lucht, reported that all boats had left from Ilyich, Kosa Chushka and Maliy Kut, and by 02:00, the last of these boats had reached the mainland. The final boat from Kosa Tuzla reached Cape Ak Burun at 04:00.¹⁶¹ At 07:30 that morning, Seventeenth Army's Chief of General Staff, Generalmajor Wolfdietrich Ritter von Xylander, transmitted a lengthy communiqué reviewing the campaign in the Kuban, including the defensive battles, the withdrawal and cooperation among the army, Luftwaffe and navy.¹⁶² Stalin's order of the day commended all of the Soviet troops who took part in the battles on the Taman Peninsula, and the liberation was marked in Moscow that evening by an artillery salute of 20 salvoes from 224 guns.¹⁶³

The respite for the soldiers of Seventeenth Army who were evacuated to the Crimea proved to be brief. As stated earlier, some divisions were transferred to Sixth Army, which was attempting in vain to halt the Soviet advance in southern Ukraine. Those that remained in the Crimea became isolated for a second time within a few weeks of their arrival, when the Soviets captured Perekop and sealed off the land corridor to the peninsula on 3 November. In early November, North Caucasus Front launched a landing operation at Kerch and Eltigen, a few miles to the south. An earlier operation here, in December 1941, had been a disaster, but this time, units of 18th and 56th Armies seized a beachhead and held it through the winter.¹⁶⁴

The offensive to recapture the Crimea was launched by 4th Ukrainian Front from Perekop and the forces in the Kerch Peninsula on 8 April 1944, and Seventeenth Army was quickly pushed back into Sevastopol.¹⁶⁵ The final assault on the city was launched on 5 May and it was recaptured on 9 May. A second evacuation by sea, to the Romanian Black Sea ports, was less successful than the Kuban operation. Rather than the short hop over the Kerch Strait, this operation involved a voyage of over 200 miles. Soviet bombers sank a significant number of ships, including the *Teja* and *Totila*, which were destroyed on 10 May with losses estimated as high as 10,000.¹⁶⁶ Fewer than 40,000 of Seventeenth Army's force of 150,000 in the Crimea were safely evacuated.¹⁶⁷

The withdrawal of the last German forces in southern Russia and the final abandonment of any fanciful thoughts of a renewed offensive towards the oilfields of the Caucasus was just one of many indicators that Germany had completely lost the strategic initiative during the second phase of the war. However, the well-planned and skilfully executed withdrawal operation showed that, although weakened, the Wehrmacht was still a formidable force. Likewise, the complete inability of the Soviets to disrupt it in any way illustrated that the corresponding improvement of the Red Army's capability was far from complete.

Part V: Conclusions

The failures of the landing operation at Yuzhnaya Ozereika and the simultaneous attack by 47th Army to the northeast of Novorossiysk denied the Soviets the possibility of quickly clearing the German and Romanian forces from the Kuban region. Seventeenth Army's subsequent defence of the Kuban bridgehead can be compared in some respects with a similar campaign that occurred at the opposite end of the Eastern Front between the autumn of 1944 and the end of the war. In early August 1944, the Soviet advance in the Baltic region cut the link between the German Army Group North and the rest of the front.¹⁶⁸ When the Soviet 51st Army reached Lithuanian port of Palanga on the Baltic coast on 10 October, the German Sixteenth and Eighteenth Armies were completely isolated in the Kurland Peninsula. Of the thirty-three divisions that were originally encircled, twelve were gradually evacuated by sea, leaving twenty-one that were renamed as Army Group Kurland and eventually surrendered at the end of the war after successfully defending against six major Soviet attacks.¹⁶⁹

As with the Kuban, Hitler refused to countenance any withdrawal from Kurland, and a number of increasingly heated arguments with Heinz Guderian over the matter were a factor in Guderian's dismissal as Chief of Staff of the Army on 28 March 1945.¹⁷⁰ The reasons given for retaining the forces on the Baltic coast had been to secure the withdrawal of German forces from Norway and Finland after the Finns agreed an armistice with the Soviets in September 1944, to protect the shipments of Swedish and Norwegian ore and minerals that were so vital to the German war industries and to enable the evacuation of as many German civilians as possible from East Prussia.¹⁷¹ The bulk of the German forces in Norway and Finland remained in place until the end of the war,¹⁷² and the Swedish government halted all trade with Germany at the end of 1944.¹⁷³ The evacuation of civilians under the codename Operation Hannibal, however, continued until the very last days of the war, as an array of merchant and naval vessels, under the command of Generaladmiral Oskar Kummetz transported over two million people from ports along the Baltic coast to the German heartland.¹⁷⁴

In contrast, the rationale for the retention of the Kuban Bridgehead was ostensibly offensive, as a springboard for a renewed offensive into the Caucasus. The possibility of this occurring was small from the start and became increasingly implausible as Soviet offensives pushed westwards along large sections of the front. The complete failure of Operation Neptune showed with absolute certainty that Seventeenth Army had lost any offensive capacity or purpose in the Kuban. At the very most, it could be argued that it provided a buffer against an attack against the Crimea across the Kerch Strait, although given that the Soviets were content to wait six months after the land connection to the Crimea was severed before they launched a concerted attack on the peninsula, even after the Kerch–Eltigen Operation had gained a reasonably significant foothold, this appears not to have been a major priority. Ultimately, Seventeenth Army was one of many German units and formations that fell victim to Hitler's "stand fast" orders. The first such order was issued in January 1942 to a series of German pockets in the northern and central parts of the front that had been bypassed and isolated by the Soviet winter counter-offensive in front of Moscow. The successful defence and

relief of pockets at Demyansk, Rzhev, and Mozhaisk, among others, was ultimately due to a combination of the tenacity and skill of the defending troops and the Luftwaffe crews that supplied some of them by air and the Soviet command's over-ambitious aims for their offensives. Unsurprisingly, Hitler saw only the former and from then on became increasingly obsessive about holding ground, regardless of the ability of the forces to do so or of the resulting, often disastrous, consequences.¹⁷⁵

The failure of the Soviet spring and summer offensives to force a decisive breakthrough and push the Germans from the Kuban can be attributed to a number of factors, including a lack of forces. Through 1943, North Caucasus Front fielded four combined-armies and one air army, far below the strengths of some other Fronts at key locations and times. In early 1943, for example, Western Front, which was deployed on the vital Moscow axis, contained eleven armies, one air army and three independent tank corps. As the focus switched to Kursk in the summer, Central and Voronezh Fronts each had six armies, including one tank army, one air army and two tank corps. Armour in particular was concentrated at these key sectors: North Caucasus Front did not field any tank or mechanised unit larger than a brigade, meaning that strong armoured second-echelon forces were rarely available to exploit the penetrations that were forced in the German lines on a number of occasions.¹⁷⁶

Supplying the forces in the Caucasus was another major difficulty. At the extreme southern end of the front, the Kuban was far from the major production areas in the Upper Volga and Ural regions. Much of the equipment coming from these areas had to be shipped across the Caspian Sea, as did lend-lease supplies coming through the Persian corridor. The poor road and rail network meant that many supplies were then brought to the southern Black Sea ports and transported by ship to the ports closer to the front line, particularly during the early months of 1943, when heavy rains washed away many roads.¹⁷⁷ Food was also often in short supply, even though the Kuban Steppe is a rich agricultural area. In 1937, 409,800 hectares in the Krasnodar Krai administrative region had been given over to cereal farming, but even before the German occupation, the effects of the war had caused production to plummet, with the July 1942 harvest delivering only about ten percent of the expected yield. In 1943, although a large part of the agricultural region had been recaptured, the poor weather took a further toll on the harvest and the yields at most of the state farms remained well below expectations.¹⁷⁸ Sniper Maria Galyshkina of the 57th Marine Infantry Brigade recalled that in March 1943, rations could consist of a handful of mouldy corn and that soldiers resorted to throwing grenades into rivers to try to catch a few fish. She also described how ammunition supplies were virtually exhausted.¹⁷⁹

Finally, the performance of and quality of the Red Army must be examined. The Kuban campaign took place in what Soviet and Russian historians have termed the second period of the Great Patriotic War, which began with the counter-offensive at Stalingrad in November 1942 and lasted until the end of 1943. This was the transitional phase between the first period, in which the Red Army and the Soviet state were struggling for survival, and the third period, in which the Red Army had decisively seized the strategic initiative. It was during the second period of the war that the Red Army

restructured itself into a modern force that was capable of matching and eventually defeating the Wehrmacht, but this transition was not straightforward and there were many painful lessons.¹⁸⁰ In a rare candid passage in his book, Grechko briefly discusses some of the failings during the campaign in the Caucasus, notably the shambles of the Yuzhnaya Ozereika landing and the Krasnodar offensive operation in February 1943, in which he claims that the overly cautious approach of the North Caucasus Front command allowed the retreating Germans time to reorganise their forces and establish new defensive positions. Cooperation between armour and infantry was often poor, with tanks frequently becoming isolated from the supporting infantry.¹⁸¹

The greatest failing, however, was arguably the complete inability of the Soviet forces to disrupt German shipping between the Crimea and Kuban. On 5 February, the People's Commissar of the Navy Nikolai Kuznetsov issued a decree ordering that a blockade of all German-held ports between Anapa and Feodosiya be implemented using aircraft, surface ships and submarines. After about a month, during which these forces failed to sink even a single German vessel (a few barges and small boats sank after hitting mines), the effort was abandoned. Through the spring and summer, sporadic attempts to attack German shipping from the air and with torpedo boats were launched. This did force the Germans to restrict their use of the port at Anapa and to increase convoy protection, but the volume of traffic between the Crimea and Kuban was barely affected. As Seventeenth Army began its withdrawal, the Black Sea Fleet was given the task of attacking the convoys, but a series of attempted torpedo-boat raids into the Kerch Strait achieved nothing. Air attacks succeeded in sinking one German torpedo boat, two minelayers, two landing barges and three lighters, but this was just a tiny fraction of the 240 vessels of various types and sizes that were used in the evacuation. The final phase of the withdrawal was completely unhindered after the destroyer leader *Kharkov* and the destroyers *Besposchadniy* and *Baikiy* were sunk by a Stuka attack on 6 February, with the loss of over 650 lives. After this disaster, Stavka suspended all operations by large ships in the Black Sea.¹⁸² The Luftwaffe played a valuable role in the supply and evacuation operations, but it had lost almost 500 transport aircraft as well as many fighters, bombers and Stukas at Stalingrad and it is implausible that it would have been able to maintain supplies to Seventeenth Army if the Soviet blockade effort had been able to significantly disrupt sea transport.¹⁸³

The resources of the Caucasus, particularly its oil, were vital to the Soviet economy in the early years of the war. In 1940, for example, the Baku fields supplied just over seventy percent of all the oil extracted in the Soviet Union. These oil reserves also lay behind the planning for Operation Blue, as Germany had no reserves of its own. Ironically, before the outbreak of the war, the Western powers had briefly considered bombing the Baku fields, using British and French aircraft based in Iraq and Syria, respectively, as a means of ensuring that oil could not be transferred to Germany under the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. As the German advance began to present a serious threat in the summer of 1942, however, production was dramatically scaled back and many wells were capped. In October over 10,000 oil workers were transferred to regions including the Volga, the Urals and Central Asia to develop new fields. This enterprise was so successful that even as the threat to the Caucasus

receded and production was restarted, the relative importance of the Baku fields to the Soviet war effort and economy had already begun to decrease.¹⁸⁴ In a relatively short period of time, therefore, the combination of the declining strength of the Wehrmacht to the point where offensive operations were no longer possible and the Soviet focus on other sectors of the front as the threat to the Caucasus receded and new oil reserves were opened saw the Kuban and North Caucasus region decline from being of vital strategic importance to both sides to a secondary, almost forgotten, front that is now merely a footnote in many histories of the war.

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