

THE 18TH ARMY IN THE BATTLE FOR THE CAUCASUS IN 1942-1943

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Abstract: The article revisits the events of eighty years ago, aiming to analyze the key combat operations involving the 18th Army during the battle for the Caucasus in 1942–1943.

The 18th Army was established in the early days of the Second World War, based on the Kharkov Military District, and became part of the Southern Front.

The year 1942 proved to be particularly challenging for the Red Army. The defeats suffered during the Kharkov Offensive and the Crimean Campaign in May–July led to a strategic withdrawal toward the Volga and the Caucasus regions.

The Battle for the Caucasus commenced on July 25, 1942. For the Soviet Union, the loss of this region would have had disastrous consequences, as it was a vital source of oil, tungsten, molybdenum, and agricultural production.

Throughout the Battle of the Caucasus, eleven major combat operations were conducted, six of which involved the 18th Army. The soldiers of this unit experienced both the hardships of defeat and the triumphs of victory. Many were decorated with orders and medals, while several were conferred the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. Numerous mass graves remain along the army’s combat route, symbolizing the high cost of the struggle. The combination of these servicemen became an integral part of the overall Victory over Nazism.

Keywords: Caucasus, Great Patriotic War, 18th Army, Battle for the Caucasus, Operation Braunschweig, Armavir-Maykop Operation, Novorossiysk Defensive Operation, Tuapse Defensive Operation.

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Introduction. The ongoing War for Independence in Ukraine has overshadowed an important anniversary in European history – the 80th anniversary of the Victory over Nazism in the Second World War. However, the facts of that Great Patriotic War should not be forgotten, as the events of that period, to some extent, constitute a significant link to what is happening in Ukraine today.

The purpose of this publication is to identify and analyze the combat operations in which the 18th Army participated in the Caucasus.

Despite the extensive historiography of the subject, many aspects remain underexplored. Among such issues in Ukrainian historical scholarship is the participation of the 18th Army in the Battle for the Caucasus.

Methods. This study employs analytical and synthetic methods to isolate military operations and generalize the significance of regional resources. A problem-chronological approach reconstructs the sequence of events in 1942-1943. The historical-genetic method traces the unit’s evolution from its formation to its “landing” status, while the descriptive method records command details and geographic boundaries.

Discussion. The 18th Army was established in the early days of the war, based in the Kharkov Military District, and was subsequently incorporated into the Southern Front. Its commanding officer was appointed Lieutenant General Andrey Kirilovich Smirnov; the Chief of Staff was Major General Vladimir Yakovlevych Kolpakchi; the Head of the Political Department was Regimental Commissar Petr Petrovich Mirkin; and the member of the Military Council was Corps Commissar Tymofey Leontyevich Nikolayev.

On July 13, 1941, the army headquarters was deployed to the front in the Kamianets-Podilskyi region (now Khmelnytskyi Oblast). The units of the 18th Army were tasked with defending Bukovyna and the northern part of Moldova. It was in the areas of Sniatin and Chernovtsi that the soldiers of the 18th Army experienced their first combat engagements.

Subsequently, a difficult retreat into the country's interior began. On 8 October 1941, during a battle near the village of Popovka (now Smirnovе, Zaporizhzhia Region), Lieutenant General Smirnov was killed in action. Major General Vladimir Kolpakchi was then appointed as the new commander of the 18th Army.

The year 1942 proved to be one of the most difficult periods of the Great Patriotic War. At the beginning of that year, the 18th Army was engaged in combat operations in the eastern part of the Donbas region. In May–July 1942, the Red Army suffered devastating defeats during the Kharkov Offensive and the Crimean Campaign, which forced Soviet troops to retreat as far as the Volga River and the Caucasus.

On July 16, the troops of the 18th Army received orders from Supreme Commander Joseph Stalin and Front Commander Major General Nikolay Petrovych Ivanov to withdraw toward the Don River. The army units retreated southeastward under continuous combat, moving across the steppe amid vast clouds of dust raised by soldiers and vehicles. Initially, it was planned that by the end of July 23, the troops would occupy defensive positions along the left bank of the Don River, in the sector stretching from the stanitsa of Manychskaya to the village of Kahalnik. However, due to the deteriorating situation at the front, the army was soon forced to withdraw even farther to the east.

On July 25, a week after the Battle of Stalingrad began, the Battle for the Caucasus commenced. Historians emphasize the close interrelation between these two campaigns, which began almost simultaneously (on 17 and 25 July, respectively) and aimed to defend regions of vital importance to the Soviet Union (Beshanov, 2003, pp. 260-261; Doerr, 1957, p. 33). Due to its geographical, political, and military-strategic significance, the Caucasus occupied a special position. For the Soviet Union, the loss of the Kuban and the Caucasus would have had catastrophic consequences, since the primary sources of oil at that time were located in Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus. In addition, tungsten and molybdenum – critical materials for the defense industry – were mined in Kabardino-Balkaria. The Kuban and the Caucasus, much like Ukraine, also served as major suppliers of agricultural production. Hence, the loss of this region could have severely affected the further course of military operations on the Soviet–German front. Furthermore, the German command sought to seize the Caucasus in order to reach Transcaucasia, gain access to the Middle East, and potentially draw Great Britain into the war. For these reasons, the battles fought in this region were no less fierce than those at Stalingrad.

At that time, the 18th Army was part of the Southern Front. On August 1, 1942, it was reassigned to the North Caucasian Front, and on October 1 of the same year, it became part of the Black Sea Group of Forces within the Transcaucasian Front. At the beginning of the military campaign, the army was commanded by Lieutenant General Fedor Vasilievich Kamkov, with Major General Nikolay Petrovich Ivanov serving as Chief of Staff and Brigade Commissar Aleksey Stepanovich Kuzin as a member of the Military Council.

Having learned of the German victories in Ukraine and Crimea, on July 23, 1942, Adolf Hitler issued Directive No. 45, known as *Operation Braunschweig* (“Brunswick”). According to this plan, the Wehrmacht was to launch two simultaneous offensives – one in the Stalingrad sector and another in the Caucasus. The

commander of the 6th Army of Army Group B, General Friedrich Paulus, was ordered to seize Stalingrad and advance along the Volga River toward the Caspian Sea (up to Astrakhan). Meanwhile, the commander of Army Group A, Field Marshal Walther List, was instructed to capture the eastern Black Sea coast and the Caucasus region. More specifically, Army Group A – through the forces of Richard Ruoff's army group (the 17th German and 3rd Romanian Armies) – was to advance through the Western Caucasus toward Batumi, while the 1st and 4th Panzer Armies were to capture Maikop and Grozny, seize the passes of the Central Caucasus, and advance toward Tbilisi and Baku. In this way, Hitler aimed to gain control over the Soviet Union's oil-producing regions, thereby crippling its economy and military potential (Beshanov, 2003, pp. 261-262; Doerr, 1957, pp. 29-30).

The Soviet high command tasked Red Army units with halting the Wehrmacht's advance into the interior. On July 28, 1942, I. V. Stalin signed Order No. 227, "On Measures to Strengthen Discipline and Order in the Red Army and on the Prohibition of Unauthorized Retreat from Battle Positions," also known as "Not a Step Back!" The order stated: "To fall back under means to destroy ourselves and to destroy our Motherland along with us. Every additional scrap of territory abandoned by us will invariably strengthen the enemy and weaken our defence and our Motherland... From now on, the iron law of discipline for every commander, Red Army soldier, and political worker must be the requirement – **not a step back without an order from the highest command**" (emphasis in original – *H.D.*) (Prikaz narodnogo komissara oboriny Soyuza SSR № 227 ot 28 iyulia 1942 [Order of the People's Commissar of Defense of the USSR No. 227 dated July 28, 1942], 1942).

The Battle for the Caucasus began on July 25, 1942. It is generally divided into two main phases: from July 25 to December 31, 1942 – the Wehrmacht's offensive; and from January 1 to October 9, 1943 – the counteroffensive of the Red Army (Doerr, 1957, pp. 44, 102).

On 25 July, following heavy artillery preparation at 8 a.m., German forces launched an offensive to the south. That day, the units of the 18th Army engaged in fierce fighting in the Bataisk area. Although the Red Army soldiers managed to slow the enemy's advance, they were unable to eliminate the bridgehead captured by the Germans. Realizing the impossibility of holding their positions under intense pressure, the commander of the Southern Front, Lieutenant General Rodion Yakovlevich Malinovsky, ordered the commander of the 18th Army, Lieutenant General Fedor Vasylyevych Kamkov, to withdraw troops to the left bank of the Kagalnik River and establish a defensive line near the villages of Vasylievo and Shamshevo on unprepared positions. On July 28, the soldiers of the 18th Army again engaged in combat with German forces advancing toward the railway junctions of Kushchovskaya and Tikhoretskaya. However, even there, the Red Army was unable to halt the Wehrmacht's offensive. The situation became critical, as the Red Army units fought desperately – by August 5, each brigade had only 500–600 men remaining (*18-ya armiya*, 1982: 116). Ammunition shortages further worsened their position. Despite the retreat, by August 5, 1942, the 18th Army had succeeded in delaying the advance of the German 17th Army, which enabled the Soviet 56th Army to withdraw to the Krasnodar defensive perimeter.

On August 6, the Armavir–Maykop Operation began. The 18th Army was assigned the task of redeploying its units 80–100 kilometers southward from the Kuban River and occupying an unfamiliar and unprepared 60-kilometer defensive line. The army was ordered to delay the advance of the Wehrmacht's tank and motorized forces moving from Armavir toward Tuapse. At that time, the army comprised four divisions that were only 30–35% combat-ready (*Vosemnadtsataya v srazheniyakh za Rodinu: Boyevoy put' 18-y armii*, 1982, p. 120). In total, the army consisted of three rifle divisions and one brigade, with an overall strength of approximately 20,000 personnel (Beshanov, 2003, p. 368).

It was decided that the first echelon would include the 9th Motorized Division (NKVD), the 31st, and the

383rd Rifle Divisions. In addition, two army artillery groups were formed: the first, equipped with 120 guns and mortars, was tasked with covering the Maikop–Tuapse direction, while the second, armed with 80 guns and machine guns, was to defend the Belorechensk–Tuapse axis. One artillery regiment was kept in reserve, and several mobile anti-tank detachments were established. Due to the small number of troops and limited manpower, large gaps formed between the defensive sectors, rendering the front line highly vulnerable.

Once again, the defensive positions could not be held. Between August 10 and 12, the German 3rd Panzer Corps captured the city of Maykop and the stanitsa Belorechenskaya, while the Wehrmacht's 5th Army Corps occupied Krasnodar.

By August 17, the Armavir–Maikop Operation had come to an end. In addition to the 18th Army, the operation involved the forces of the 12th Army, the 1st Separate Rifle Corps, and the 17th Kuban Cavalry Corps. By the conclusion of the campaign, the units of the 18th Army held positions along a defensive line extending through the village of Khamyshki, the stanitsa of Samurskaya, and the workers' settlements of Neftogorsk and Khadyzhensk. During these engagements, the mobile detachments demonstrated notable effectiveness. In particular, the detachment commanded by Colonel V. A. Sledov, Chief of Combat Training of the Army, distinguished itself: on 12 August, it successfully prevented the German forces from encircling Soviet units on the right flank of the front line.

After regrouping its forces, the German Army Group A's command decided to advance toward Tuapse through Novorossiysk. At that time, Tuapse served as the principal base of the Black Sea Fleet. Military vessels and transport ships were stationed there, and the port served as a crucial logistical hub through which reinforcements, equipment, and supplies were delivered to both the front lines and the remaining civilian population.

On August 19, the Novorossiysk Defensive Operation commenced. The forces of the 18th Army took up positions along the Maykop–Tuapse axis, in the foothills of the Main Caucasian Range, near Mount Mezmay and the workers' settlement of Khadyzhensk. By August 29, the 9th Motorized Division had been disbanded, with its personnel and equipment transferred to the 31st Rifle Division.

In mid-September, as a result of the reorganization and the formation of the Black Sea Group of Forces, the 18th Army was reinforced and the 32nd Guards, 395th Rifle, and 12th Guards Cavalry Divisions, the 68th Naval Rifle Brigade, as well as artillery, mortar, and specialized units (*Vosemnadtsataya v srazheniyakh za Rodinu: Boyevoy put' 18-y armii*, 1982, p. 131). The army did not take an active part in this operation concluded on September 26. This pause enabled the strengthening of defensive lines through the construction of fortifications in rocky terrain, the installation of engineering barriers, and the creation of various defensive obstacles. During the same period, Red Army soldiers practiced combat tactics and training methods adapted to mountain warfare.

In early September, intelligence reports indicated another regrouping of Wehrmacht forces in the Caucasus and an increase in troop concentrations in the areas of Neftogorsk and Khadyzhensk. It became evident that the main German offensive would be directed along the Shaumyan axis, advancing from the Neftogorsk–Khadyzhensk area, while a secondary strike would be launched from the vicinity of the village of Goryachy Klyuch. The German command aimed to encircle and destroy the forces of the 18th Army and to capture Tuapse, which would have allowed them to block the entire Black Sea Group of Forces of the Red Army.

The units of the 18th Army were assigned the task of defending a sector stretching from the stanitsa of Nizhegorodaskaya (10 km west of Samurskaya) to the village of Bezymiannoye (10 km south of Goriachy Klyuch). The army comprised five rifle divisions and one cavalry division. It was decided to redeploy two artillery regiments, three anti-tank artillery regiments, and two separate mountain-pack batteries of rocket

artillery (Beshanov, 2003, p. 130).

The main forces of the Soviet troops were concentrated along the central Shaumyan axis – in the area of the Travalev hamlet, the stanitsa of Khadyzhenskaya, and the village of Shaumyan – consisting of the 32nd Guards, 236th, and 383rd Rifle Divisions, as well as the 12th Cavalry Division. On the left flank, the Phanagoria direction was secured by the 76th Naval and 395th Rifle Divisions, while on the right Flank, the Lazarevskoye direction was covered by the 31st Rifle Division, the 818th Rifle Regiment, and the 236th Artillery Battalion. Nearby positions were held by units of the 12th and 56th Armies and the 17th Cavalry Corps.

On September 25, following intense artillery and air strikes, German forces launched an offensive, marking the beginning of the Tuapse Defensive Operation. The first to engage in battle were soldiers of the 32nd Guard Rifle Division, commanded by Colonel M. F. Tikhonov. For several days, the fighting remained evenly matched. However, on September 28, the Germans broke through the Soviet defensive lines and, within three days, captured several settlements. The situation on the flanks became critical as the enemy attempted to encircle the Soviet troops. In response, the Soviet command redeployed reserves to the threatened sectors to prevent encirclement. Despite these efforts, the Wehrmacht's offensive on this section of the front continued.

On October 19, 1942, Major General Andrey Antonovich Grechko was appointed commander of the 18th Army. The contemporary historian Vladimir Vasilievich Beshanov describes him as a kind of “firefighter” during the years of the Great Patriotic War (Beshanov, 2003, p. 446). At that time, the troops of the 18th Army continued to retreat. The new army commander, seeking to avoid imminent encirclement, ordered a withdrawal of forces on the left flank.

On October 23, German forces captured the Perevalny hamlet in the Stavropol region, advanced toward the Semashko and Indyuk mountains, and cut the only lateral supply road. That same day, however, the German troops halted their offensive, and by October 31 they had transitioned to a defensive posture. Nevertheless, the threat of the Soviet forces being encircled and destroyed by the enemy persisted for some time thereafter.

On November 20, the headquarters of the 18th Army drafted a plan for the complete elimination of the German detachment entrenched in the area of Mount Semashkho, which posed a threat to seize the village of Georgiyevskoye.

On November 20, the forces of the 18th Army launched a counterstroke: the 383rd Rifle Division went on the offensive in the sector of the villages of Pelika and Goytkh. There, German units of Hubert Lanz's formation – two separate battalions and a reconnaissance detachment – were holding the defensive positions.

By December 20, the units of the 18th Army had reached the Phish River, marking the completion of the military operation. As a result, the Wehrmacht failed to seize the Black Sea coast in the Tuapse sector.

From that point onward, the liberation of the Caucasus and the Krasnodar region from the German occupiers began. The situation in the Caucasus was further improved by the successful Soviet offensive in the Battle of Stalingrad.

The 18th Army continued its combat operations in the Krasnodar region, participating in the Krasnodar–Tikhoretsk campaign. To liberate the region, the Soviet High Command developed a two-part strategic plan titled “Mountains” and “Sea.” The first phase, “Mountains,” envisaged advancing toward the Kuban River and liberating the city of Krasnodar. The main responsibility in this operation was assigned to the 56th Army, while the 18th Army was tasked with striking enemy strongholds in the areas of Kotlovina, Gunaika, and Shaumian. The second phase, “Sea,” aimed at liberating Novorossiysk and the Taman Peninsula.

On January 5, 1943, the entire command staff of the army was replaced: Major General Aleksei Ivanovich

Ryzhov was appointed as the new army commander, Colonel Naum Samoilovich Kristalny became Chief of Staff, and Colonel Grigory Afanasievich Komarov was appointed as a member of the Military Council.

Some units of the 18th Army took part in the liberation of Krasnodar. At the same time, the operation to liberate Novorossiysk, code-named “Sea,” failed, which necessitated the development of a new plan. This revised strategy envisaged an amphibious landing near Novorossiysk, intended to break through to the city and secure its encirclement and liberation. Initially, it was planned that the 47th Army would conduct operations in this sector. However, due to the evolving situation at the front, it was decided to also involve the 18th Army. On 15 February, it was redesignated as an amphibious army. The command structure was also changed: Major General Konstantin Apollonovych Koroteev was appointed as the new army commander, Colonel N. O. Pavlovsky became Chief of Staff, and Colonel Grigory Afanasyevich Komarov remained a member of the Military Council.

The army was assigned the task of holding the bridgehead from the southwest with the forces of the 20th and 16th Rifle Corps, and from the east and northeast with the 318th Rifle Division, to capture the city and port of Novorossiysk. Subsequently, it was to advance northwestward and, moving into the rear of the German 17th Army, cut off its routes of retreat to the Taman Peninsula. This operation, known as “Malaya Zemlya” (“Little Land”), lasted for 225 days – from February 4 to September 16 – and culminated in the liberation of Novorossiysk from German occupation.

An important role in this operation was played by the bridgehead in the Stanichka area (Cape Myskhako, south of Novorossiysk), from which the soldiers of the 18th Army launched their advance. The landing in this sector was carried out on 4 February under the command of Major Cezar Lvovich Kunikov, who successfully secured and held the position. Ten days later, he was killed in action. For his courage and leadership in this operation, Major Cezar Lvovich Kunikov was posthumously awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

In March 1943, further changes occurred in the army’s command structure. In March 15, The Black Sea Group of Forces was disbanded, and its units were incorporated into the North Caucasian Front. Colonel General Konstantin Nikolayevich Leselidze was appointed commander of the 18th Army (which in April ceased to be designated as an amphibious force). Major General Nikolay Osipovich Pavlovsky remained Chief of Staff, while Major General Semen Yefimovich Koloshyn was appointed as a member of the military Council.

During the battles for Novorossiysk, several formations of the 18th Army also participated in the Novorossiysk–Taman Operation, which commenced on 10 September 1943. On the approaches to the Taman Peninsula, the Germans had constructed a heavily fortified defensive system known as the Gotenkopf (also referred to as the Blue Line) (Horvat, 2013). This line extended between the Azov and Black Seas, with its strongest fortifications situated near the Taman Peninsula. The defense consisted of two main lines, three additional positions in depth, and several cut-off zones, with an overall depth of 60–70 kilometers (Horvat, 2013). All defensive sectors were densely reinforced with pillboxes, bunkers, machine-gun emplacements, and artillery trenches. It was along this line that the forces of the German 17th Army, part of Army Group A, mounted their defense.

The Soviet High Command assigned the 18th Army, in coordination with the forces of the Black Sea Fleet, the objective of striking toward Novorossiysk and advancing on the settlements of Verkhnebakansky and Anapa. Neighboring armies were tasked with liberating the stanitsas of Gostagayevskaya and Gladkovskaya (the 56th Army), as well as the stanitsa of Kurchanskaya and the city of Temriuk (the 9th Army). The units of the 18th Army broke through the German defenses near the stanitsa of Veselovka and liberated the stanitsa of Taman on 3 October. On 9 October, the 56th Army reached the Kerch Strait, marking the end of the Battle for the Caucasus.

Conclusions. During the battle for the Caucasus, which lasted nearly fourteen months, eleven major

combat operations were conducted, six of which involved the 18th Army. Its soldiers experienced both the bitterness of defeat and the joy of victory. Many were decorated with orders and medals, and some were awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. Thousands of mass graves remain along the army's battle path. Although the 18th Army was originally formed in Kharkov, Ukraine, it comprised representatives of many nationalities – a fact reflected even in its senior command structure. These people made an honorable contribution to the victory over Nazism and to the defense and restoration of the Soviet Union's independence.

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