

The Fighting Operations in the Caucasian Mineral Waters Area at the Beginning of August, 1942

In the course of the whole of August, 1942 while the German troops were advancing on the territory of Krasnodar and Stavropol districts farther southwards, the Soviet Command did not undertake any serious steps to reinforce the retreating North-Caucasus front. Following the South Front, the North-Caucasus front was also given up for lost. Up to its disbandment on the 1st of September it had not received either tank or mechanized units and formations capable of resisting the tank corps and divisions of the enemy. On this score one can offer even a more impressive comparison.

During the Great Patriotic War the USSR formed 10 tank armies and 30 tank corps [1]. None of those 40 large armoured troops came in to reinforce the Soviet troops during the battle for the Caucasus. And this battle lasted 14.5 whole months or 442 days!

Meanwhile, the fate of the battle for the Caucasus for both sides in many ways depended on the availability of tanks that were the main shock force in the war of movement, which the Second World War actually was.

The advantage of the German army over the Soviet troops in tanks on the eve of the battle already was overwhelming. The 3 tank and 4 motorized divisions of the group of the “A” armies numbered 643 tanks. The 4th tank army, which until July 31, 1942 was part of the forces of the group of the “A” armies, had 1130 tanks [2]. But the 5 tank brigades and 3 independent tank battalions of the South front numbered only 268 tanks in good working order. Besides, on the territory of Krasnodar district the forces of the North-Caucasus military district included: Maikop tank brigade with 27 machines and the 126th independent tank battalion numbering 36

tanks [3]. Thus, the Red Army troops of the south wing of the Soviet-German front had only 331 tanks, i.e. 3.4 times less than those of the Germans.

But two weeks later, the situation radically changed and, what's more, not in our favour. According to the reports of the army headquarters of the South front 200 German tanks were destroyed in the battles for Rostov-on-Don and Novochoerkassk. Our losses totalled 196 machines [4].

Then, in the last days of July, 1942, in the big bend of the Don, according to the German information, the Germans destroyed another 110 Soviet tanks [5]. In all, as of July 25, 1942 the seven armies of the South front had only 17 available tanks [6]. By the beginning of August 1942 when the German troops invaded the territory of Kuban and Stavropolie, the 18th and 56th armies of the North Caucasus front covering Krasnodar direction had not had a single available tank. The troops of the 12th army withstanding the enemy's pressure in Maikop direction, had only 3 T-34 available tanks, and the units of the 37th army, making a fighting retreat in the direction of Stavropol and Cherkessk, had no available tanks at all. The enemy, first of all the 1st tank army of General Kleist, still had considerable forces ready for action. By August 3, 1942 in Stavropol direction alone the enemy had concentrated over 200 tanks, all in all the divisions of the 1st tank army even after suffering heavy losses had had 410 tanks by the end of October [7].

The situation for the Soviet troops began to improve only towards the end of August, 1942. The units of the North group of the troops of the Trans-Caucasus front numbered already 133 tanks, and by October five tank brigades, four independent tank battalions and two armoured battalions numbered 302 tanks, including 132 American and English tanks which had come to the USSR via Iran by the Lend-Lease Act [8]. Hence, the allies' tanks made nearly 44 percent of the total number of the front's entire tank park. In the individual units their share was even bigger. Thus, the 5th Guards tank brigade had only 15 home-made machines out of the total 55. The 15th tank brigade received from the allies 39 tanks out of the total 40 and in the 75th independent tank battalion all the 18 tanks were of English and American make [9]. All the facts expressed in figures go to prove that the allies' aid by the Lend-Lease Act to the troops of the Trans-Caucasus front was rather appreciable. So, the hardest days for our troops retreating along the territory of the North Caucasus were the days from August 1-20, 1942 when the units of the North Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus fronts lost practically all their tanks. And it was just at that time that the German troops mostly succeeded. In his letter to Stalin, written at the beginning of August 1942, L. Kaganovich asked with bitterness: "Where is the tank industry and comrade Molotov who is in charge of it-he is unable to keep our front supplied and is leaving us without tanks"...[10].

At this very time there was a rapid accumulation of the Soviet tank forces in Stalingrad direction. Here by the beginning of August, 1942 two tank armies – the 1st and the 4th, 14 independent tank brigades and 10 independent tank battalions were already operating against the enemy [11]. A month later by September 1, 1942, 8 tank corps of the Red Army had approached Stalingrad operations area [12].

As of November 19, 1942 in the battle of Stalingrad the three Soviet fronts had 1463 tanks whereas in the battle for the Caucasus by this very time only 319 tanks of the Trans-Caucasus front had been in action [13].

In the first days of August, 1942 the situation in the retreat zone of the 37th army of the North-Caucasus front under major-general P. Kozlov extremely aggravated. Its small divisions – only 800 – 1000 strong each were incapable of withstanding the avalanche of the German tanks. Being unable to hold the line, the units of the 37th army were retreating in confusion farther south-east. In his memorandum to the secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) A. Andreev written a month after the occupation of Stavropol by the German troops, the 1st secretary of the Stavropol District Committee of the Communist Party M. Suslov gave a detailed account of the circumstances under which the retreat of our troops was taking place. One has to pay attention to his extremely negative appreciation of the fighting operations of the units and formations of the North Caucasus front. M. Suslov, in particular, noted: "Along the whole length of the district the Germans did not encounter resistance on the part of the units of the Red Army. The numerous units of the former South front without the material (as a rule) and in confusion were fleeing farther beyond the Terek, were disorganizing the defenses where there were attempts to build them and were introducing the elements of demoralization among the population" [14].

In M. Suslov's interpretation the possibilities of the defense of the two principal towns of Stavropolie – Voroshilovsk (Stavropol) and Pyatigorsk looked practically hopeless. Their garrison was small and, what's more, poorly armed. In Stavropol there were around 800 servicemen and soldiers of the destructive battalion. They were only armed with rifles. There was not a single available gun in the garrison. The 25 mortars produced in the munitions factory in Stavropol itself lacked mines. Several anti-tank guns had only 25 available live cartridges [15]. The town had only several guns of the small-bore anti-aircraft artillery to repulse the air attacks of the German air force. There was not a single available fighter on the 3 Stavropol airfields. With such an "arsenal" any serious defense of the city was certainly out of the question.

So, according to M. Suslov, the district leaders as long ago as August 1, 1942 appealed at once to the army commander of the North Caucasus front marshal S. Budyonny for aid in the organization of the defense of Stavropol. In particular they asked for weapons and ammunition, and also for additional army units. The district committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) asked to dispatch to Stavropol a commanding officer to direct the defense of the town. In response to those urgent requests S. Budyonny said, that "one should defend Stavropol, but our forces are limited" [16]. Nevertheless the army headquarters of the North-Caucasus front dispatched major-general Sergeev to the city to organize the defense of the district center. But he "...proved to be extremely passive and lacking initiative, incapable of fulfilling the mission entrusted with him", concluded M. Suslov with regret [17].

Meanwhile in August 3, 1942 the advanced guard of the 1st German tank army was approaching Stavropol from the north, from the direction of Salsk. Accord-

ing to our secret information it had "...over 200 tanks, light tanks and a great number of armoured cars, around 1 thousand motor-cyclists, up to 300 lorries with troops..." [18]. Stavropol surrendered itself to the enemy practically without putting up any serious resistance. The German sources interpret this episode in the following way: "The advanced units of the 3rd tank division in August, 3 reached Voroshilovsk. The Russian forces in this settlement did not expect the Germans to appear, and after short fighting by 4 p.m. the town had already been in the hands of the offensive soldiers of the Wehrmacht. The counter-attack of the Russians was successfully repulsed" [19].

In Pyatigorsk as of August 6, 1942 there were around 3000 soldiers and officers, and also students of Poltava tractor school. But only 1100 of them were armed with rifles, the rest found themselves completely unarmed. Nevertheless, in the course of two days – on the 9th and 10th of August there was fighting between the advanced guard of the 3rd German tank division and the soldiers and commanders of the local garrison. One has to note that the German command appreciated the capture of Pyatigorsk as a huge success of their troops. The occupation papers of the North Caucasus read as follows: "The capture of Pyatigorsk on Sunday, August, 9, is such a success of the German troops, one can hardly imagine. From Armavir captured in August, 7, Pyatigorsk, by the air line it is not less than 180 km away, besides the army's fighting advance was going on with the air temperature up to 58 degrees above zero in the thick clouds of dust and was hampered by the numerous rivers and ravines" [20].

To defend Pyatigorsk and the other towns of the Caucasian Mineral Waters area from the air attacks of the German aviation was also found impossible. The air regiment stationed on the airfield in Mineralnye Vody had only 4 available damaged aircraft [21]. Another air regiment stationed in village Blagodarnoye moved its base at the beginning of August, 1942 farther east. Besides it left behind in the airfield depot a great number of bombs that had to be quickly destroyed by the officers of the district Administration of the People's Commissariat of Home Affairs [22].

Among the exhausted subunits of the 37th army making a fighting retreat in the direction of Nalchik, confusion and panic were spreading quickly. Even civilians were involved in the attempts to introduce order in the troops. So, in the region of Pyatigorsk by order of M. Suslov five multiple rocket projectors "Katyusha" were held up and repaired in the munitions factories of the health resort, though prior to this moment the crew were intending to blow up their machines having lost every hope of their battle application. After the repairs all the five projectors with the stock of ammunition of mines – rockets numbering 3000 units were attached to the 11th division of the People's Commissariat of Home Affairs which was defending the towns of the Caucasian Mineral Waters area [23]. Simultaneously they were taking measures to detain the individual military men and groups of the Red Army men who were retreating in utter confusion. They were formed into detachments and under the officers' command sent to reinforce the defenses of the Caucasian Mineral Waters area.

In order to delay the German tank and motorized columns that were bursting to the Caucasus and cover the disorderly retreat of the subunits of the 37th army, by the decision of the General Headquarters of 28 July, 1942 the Trans-Caucasus front under army general I.V. Tyulenin was to take a number of urgent measures. First of all, to send several of its advanced detachments to meet the enemy and delay it at the rapidly built defense lines. One of such advanced detachments under major Korneev was on August 7, 1942 to hold a defensive position along the Kuma River in the area from village Pokoinoye to village Archangelskoye.

The truth is the detachment had only four rifle companies and six guns. Naturally, such forces were only able to delay the armada of the German tanks for several hours at the best.

The second advanced detachment under major-general Timofeev looked more formidable being part of Pyatigorsk group of the military force. It was formed from Poltava tractor and Novochoerkassk cavalry military training schools stationed in Pyatigorsk; the 17th cavalry border regiment, the 275th, 278th and 279th rifle regiments of the 11th rifle division of the People's Commissariat of Home Affairs; Rostov artillery training school; two machine-gun companies of Ordzhonikidze infantry training school; the "Vystrel" course; the moto-rifle and mortar battalions; the 12th training motoregiment; the 36th and 41st battalions of the armoured trains. In August 6, 1942 Pyatigorsk group of the military force by independent centres and strong points held a defensive position along the Kuma River from the settlement of Ninoy to the town of Mineralnye Vody. The 19th division of the People's Commissariat of Home Affairs was withstanding the offensive of the German troops along Pyatigorsk – Suvorovskaya highway.

In the morning of August 8, 1942 the 3rd tank division of the 40th tank corps of the 1st tank army of general Kleist attacked the defenses of Novochoerkassk cavalry training school endeavoring, without a pause, to force the crossing of the Kuma River in the area of Mineralnye Vody. However, the cavalry students successfully repelled all the attacks having destroyed in the course of two days of fierce fighting 10 tanks and over 200 soldiers and officers of the enemy.

Having failed to break through the defenses in this sector, the Germans in the morning of August 9 stroke the main blow to the orders of battle of the 11th division of the People's Commissariat of Home Affairs. This time the success was on the fascists' side who broke through the defenses of the division and assumed the offensive in the direction of Zheleznovodsk – Pyatigorsk. At the foot of mountains Beshtau and Zmeika the 17th cavalry regiment of the 11th division of the People's Commissariat of Home Affairs for two hours was withstanding the enemy's attacks. The cavalry frontier – guards destroyed up to 20 motor-cycles and 10 motor vehicles, and also around 70 soldiers and officers of the enemy. However in the middle of the day, August 9, 1942 about 50 Hitlerite tanks with the motorized infantry burst into Pyatigorsk. The occupation of the health resort began which lasted up to January 11, 1943.