

Insurmountable Frontier: Mountain Warfare in the North Caucasus in 1942-1943

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Introduction

The Battle of the Caucasus along with the Battle of Stalingrad is one of the turning points of World War II and is therefore an issue of great scientific interest for researchers from different countries. One especially significant issue relates to the reasons for the quite unsuccessful Battle for Oil by the Axis countries

The comparison between the battle of the Caucasus, which lasted from 25 July 1942 to 9 October 1943, with the Battle for Oil, is rather symbolic as this region has many other valuable products and raw materials doubly valuable in wartime. Yet local oilfields were considered by the Axis countries as a primarily important goal.

The mountain part of the North Caucasus can hardly be attributed to well examined territories where the destiny of the Caucasian oil was decided. A complex map of hostilities and clash points between the Axis troops and the Red Army, a harsh climate area, hindered the search operation. There was also the associated difficulty of historical reconstruction and other factors which leave a great space for new research. Moreover, materials and information on mountain warfare, accumulated over the years, contain scattered inaccuracies and often contradict each other. They therefore require careful systemization and analysis.

After the collapse of the USSR, Russian and European historians have received long-awaited access to previously inaccessible archives and research results. This expands the research capabilities and permits a fresh look at the problems of the Second World War. This study, based on authoritative works by Russian and European researchers, examines the key military events in the North

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Caucasus Mountains in 1942-1942, the tactical issues of mountain warfare, and finally the causes of the German mountain troops' failure in the Caucasus mountain passes.

Mountain warfare

After the war, many significant German generals in their memoirs agreed that it had been a mistake on Hitler's behalf to plan simultaneous campaigns in the Caucasus and near Stalingrad. According to Guderian, Hitler "pursued economic and political goals that he wanted to achieve even before the military power of the enemy had been overcome" [1, p. 376]. This ultimately resulted in a real disaster for Hitler.

Nevertheless, the fate of the Caucasus was decided in more or less successful counteraction. Initially, success was entirely on the side of the Germans and their allies, and the implementation of a plan to conquer the Caucasus seemed to be a success. It is worthwhile to mention that the armoured and motorized divisions of the 1st Panzer Army of General Kleist managed to cover the distance of 700 km from Rostov-on-Don to the Terek in just 20 days. Consequently, the rate of advancement of the enemy was more than 25 km per day [2, p. 66] !

The speed of movement of the mountain infantry was even more impressive. The Wehrmacht units, after taking part in the capture of Rostov-on-Don on July 24, 1942, had in less than a month later, by August 21, already planted their flags on Elbrus. The reason for such rapid progress of the main German forces and its Allies was not only in their superiority in numbers and technology over the Red Army, but also in the desire to avoid encirclement of their last major forces.

Mountain troops in the Caucasus and the chronological framework of mountain warfare

Maikop and Grozny oil wells were located on the outskirts of the Caucasus Mountain Range, while USSR's largest oil field near Baku providing 70% of black gold to the country [3, p. 9] was located behind the mountain chain.

Overcoming the highest European mountain chain and breaking through the ridge in the Caucasus were in Hitler's plans since the beginning of the campaign.

At the German front position, the 49th Mountain Corps was committed under the Gen. Rudolf Konrad commander, who was entrusted to overcome the mountain passes to Georgia and capture the Black Sea coast.

In his memoirs, Soviet Transcaucasian Front commander Ivan Tyulenev recounts that initially the troops included the 1st and the 4th Mountain Divisions and the 97 and the 101 Infantry Divisions while Karel mentions the 1st and the 4th Mountain Divisions, as well as the 2nd Romanian Mountain Division [4, p. 351].

Despite this data discrepancy, it is easy to see that both sources mention the 1st and the 4th Mountain Divisions which participated in the major actions in the Caucasus mountain front. The historical literature, especially German sources, refer to them as Edelweiss and Enzian divisions.

These military units were created on the same principles as the infantry units of the Wehrmacht, while having a smaller size and less equipment. At the beginning of World War II, the mountain division totalled an average of 13,000 troops people and the infantry division consisted of 17,000 [5, p. 5].

However, the Wehrmacht usually adjusted the numbers of its special forces. Particularly, Edelweis totalled 14,684 people at the time of the Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union [6, s. 52]. Numerous and well-trained German divisions hardly engaged in military action on the plain, as their main objective was the conquest of the mountain passes.

The plans were scheduled for the middle of August 1942. The first major combat operations were penetrations in the direction of Elbrus and Klukhorskiy Pass on 12-15 August 1942. Mountain warfare ended in early January 1943, when the mountain troops were ordered to leave their positions.

German and Soviet tactics in the Caucasus Mountains

It is quite challenging to compare the armament level of two the German divisions and the Soviet forces defending the mountain passes. Edelweiss and Enzian were confronted by a variety of Soviet troops including cavalry, infantry,

NKVD troops, guerrillas and even cadets of the Tbilisi Infantry College. At the beginning of the Battle of the Caucasus, the major part of Soviet mountain infantry divisions were destroyed or disbanded during the first months of the Great Patriotic War [7, p. 273]. Therefore, the Transcaucasia Front Command was forced to use all available forces to defend the passes.

During his visit to North Ossetia in mid-December of 1942, the former U.S. Secretary of War Patrick J. Hurley noted that the local mountain passes were "well-fortified but there were not enough cannon gunnery; the only way to ensure protection was to move available heavy guns to the battle unfolding in the one or the other direction" [8, p. 182].

Obviously, the German mountain divisions had significantly higher armament capacity. However, it was clear that it did not help them to succeed. In the mountains, the tactics of war on both sides perhaps played an even greater role in the successful outcome of battles. In particular, the use of anti-aircraft weapons had to take into account the ground profile.

The mountain front was unique in many aspects including the limited use of air warfare. Even when planes were seen in the sky, paradoxes were observed such as the one described by A. Gusev: "We would shoot down at airplanes, not up, which was not our usual idea of anti-aircraft fire" [9, p. 137].

In the mountainous conditions, soldiers faced many natural hazards. Altitude sickness and anoxia became inseparable companions at heights of over 3,000 m. Any injury resulted in significant blood loss due to blood coagulation changes at high altitude [10].

Another factor to be seriously taken into consideration by both Russians and Germans was snow. In mid-October, in passes of the Caucasian Mountain Range, the snow cover was up to 2 m. This forced 46 army commanders not only to stop offensive operations, but also to reduce the number of defensive troops. In particular, this situation occurred in the Klukhorskiy direction [11, p. 24-25]. Moreover, mountain snow complicated the movement of troops, which required additional measures. For example, the German intelligence was interested in the thickness of snow cover as movements of pack animals would be impossible in snow exceeding 16 inches [12, p. 9].

The training program for the German mountain shooters included the ability to determine signs of changes in weather conditions. Zigzag movement technique was applied in order to minimize losses in the case of an avalanche [13, p. 11]. An example of the dangers posed by avalanches was the tragedy in the Donguz-Orun Pass in the winter of 1942, when 20 Soviet soldiers were trapped in a snowdrift. According to A.Gusev, it largely happened because those who survived "were not trained to rescue people buried under an avalanche" [9, p. 162-163].

All of these aspects listed above required a specific preparation of soldiers on both sides. In this respect, the German mountain infantry divisions had a significant advantage over the Soviet forces, which, unlike the first, were not a specialized mountain division [14, s. 27]. A great variety and significant amount of literature and military journals describing in detail the German tactic of mountains war is available today.

A conspicuous place among these sources is given to a detailed study of warfare events and the German mountain troops conducted by the US War Office in 1944. It specifically notes that "the Germans believe that a reinforced battalion in most cases is the largest tactical unit, whose actions can be effectively controlled" [12. Introduction, p. VIII].

In fact, as the battles in the Caucasus show, German battalions often operated independently from each other. It was not unusual for battalions and companies from different divisions to fight in close proximity. These tactics greatly contributed to the initial advancement of the mountain troops.

The mountain troops carefully strengthened their mountain positions and equipped them with guns and arms. For example, during one of the attempts of the Soviet units to attack the enemy on the outskirts of Elbrus at the Shelter of Eleven (4,130 m), "German guns constantly threatened... with flank attacks", as Tyulenev recalls. "The enemy had clear visibility of the scene. Moreover, they were well prepared: submachine gunners every 25-30 meters, heavy machine guns every 100-150 meters, tiered, one above the other, equipped with radio connection" [15, p. 203]. This made it extremely difficult for the Soviet troops to drive the enemy from positions advancing from below. That's why some passes,

Klukhorskiy Pass in particular, remained in Germans hands up until the end of mountain warfare.

Mountain troops had five basic sets of mining outfits: dress coat, service, work, as well as a special camouflage and climbing uniform [13, p. 12]. While Soviet soldiers possessed "neither special mountaineering equipment nor uniforms... Soldiers and commanders wore boots or shoes with puttees, ordinary trousers and overcoats. This clothing and footwear was hardly suited for mountainous conditions" [9, p. 11].

The first battles in the Caucasus mountains demonstrated that the Transcaucasian forces were not ready for such powerful attacks by German mountain troops. On the one hand, it was a result of the attitude of "certain commanders who had not given proper attention to defending the passes and considered the Central Caucasian Range to be an insurmountable obstacle for the enemy" [3, p. 137]. On the other hand, the failure of the passes can be explained by the weak knowledge of mountainous terrain, as well as lack of experience and shortage of equipment from the Soviet soldiers. A.M. Gusev, a famous mountaineer and Soviet WWII veteran, had the following explanation for the poor training of the Soviet troops for mountain warfare: "It could be that some people thought that mountain warfare was unlikely in our country. Before the war, mountaineers had on many occasions appealed to the Mountain, Skiing and Physical Training Directorate of the Red Army with proposal to use their experience to train mountain troops. But the usual response was: "We are not going to fight in the mountains..." [9, p. 11].

Another secret for the success of Edelweiss and Enzian was their effective use of animal-drawn transport at the beginning of mountain warfare. German mountain divisions addressed the problem of food and equipment supplies much more seriously. For example, supplies for the troops on the Hotu-Tau Pass and on Elbrus were delivered along secure paths going down to the upper reaches of the Kuban River [16].

This route had already been used in mid-August 1942 at the beginning of the mountain warfare. The extremely knotty and difficult paths clearly demonstrated the benefits of animal-drawn transport. The almost complete lack of

suitable landing places made "donkey caravans" a major means of arms and ammunition transportation.

Passes in the Huzruk area leading to Abkhazia were seized so abruptly that Soviet intelligence initially considered the possibility of a German paratrooper operation [17, p. 90]. Later, however, it became clear that rapid advancement of mountain troops on these and other passes could be explained by the proper use of animal-drawn transport.

On August 17, 1942, following a directive of the Red Army General Staff, the Transcaucasian Front command proceeded to organize herds of pack animals to transport supplies and valuable cargo through the rugged trails. But these measures were not implemented fully and on time, which as a result caused serious difficulties with sapience [3, p. 98].

Still, German garrisons had sapience difficulties as well. For example, a supply route to the 13 Enzian division located in the valley of Malaya Laba was as long as 80 km. Thirty kilometres of it was passable only with pack animals, and in early September 1942, due to heavy rains it had become almost impassable [18, p. 36]. The natural environment in any mountainous region made all the difference.

The geography of battles and their participants

In discussing a theatre of war in a mountainous area, it is difficult to establish exactly in which administrative units the battle action took place. More than 100 km of the Caucasian Range, where the key events of the mountain war took place, stretched from the Sancharskiy Pass to the vicinity of Mt. Elbrus. Yet, taking into consideration other passes, the mountain war touched the territories of Georgia (Abkhazia as well), the Krasnodar region, as well as Adygeya, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkariya and Northern Ossetia.

Table 1 represents the basic battle locations of the mountain warfare and their main participants. The German divisions included artillery, engineer units, communication support battalions and other additional subunits. Together with the main body, they actively participated in the battle actions. However, there is not sufficient evidence to permit the tracing of their participation in the events. That is

why we are going to primarily cover the actions of the 99 and 98 mountain regiments of the “Edelweiss” division, and the 13 and 91 mountain regiments of the “Enzian” division.

The Soviet troops defending the mountain passes represented a conglomerate of mismatching forces, the basis of which was the 46th Army under the command of V.F. Sergazkov (from 28 August – K.N. Leselidze). However, the initial failures in the mountain war demanded an increase of troop contingent. Alpinists, NKVD forces, infantry school cadets, guerillas and other forces made a great contribution to the subsequent success of the Red Army. Table 1 shows the Red Army troops which were the most constant participants in the battles.

The main advance directions of the Wehrmacht mountain units were explicated in the OKW decree dated by 12 August, 1942. The 1st mountain division should have captured the passes at the outlets of the Teberda and Kuban rivers, and also the Elbrus solid. The aim of the 4th Mountain Division was to capture passes near the outlets of Bol’shaya Laba River [19, p. 42]. Practically all battles of the mountain war in August-September 1942 took place exactly in this part of the Caucasian range, to the East and as far as the Sancharskiy Pass to the West.

It is particularly hard to define the battle route of the “Edelweiss” and the “Enzian” in the Tuapse operation in October-December 1942, as the mountain troops were part of the Lanz Group. The largest group of forces acted in the mountain Semachso region and the Goytskiy Pass, which is why we will pay attention to these points (ref. Chapter 8).

The German ascend on Elbrus

Before talking about the battle actions, attention will be paid to the German ascent on Elbrus, which was, as it turned out, the most impressive achievement of the mountain troops in the Caucasian company.

According to the pre-war German principles of mountain warfare, “the question concerning the possession of mountain peaks can be raised only in the event of there being control over passes from those peaks by direct shooting or observation”. At the highest point of the Caucasian battle, on 21st August, 1942 at

11 a.m. a group of mountain troops under the command of H. Grot installed the standards of the 1st and 4th Mountain Divisions on the mountain peak. Was this act justified in this crucial moment for the 49th division?

Years later, this event was actively discussed by historians from different countries who tried to understand the reason for conquering the highest mountain of the Caucasus and Europe (according to some sources). It is difficult to determine whether the Elbrus ascent was a reason or a consequence of the mountain troops movement to the passes located in this region.

Not surprisingly, mystic explanations are popular nowadays to account for this event. They explain the Elbrus ascent within the context of Hitler's regular attempts to find mysterious artefacts scattered all over the world. However, even if we admit this version, there is a logical question as to why the news about the Elbrus conquest did not bring the Fuehrer any pleasure.

In his memoirs Albert Speer, Minister of Armaments and War Production for the Third Reich in 1942, described Hitler's reaction on the Elbrus ascent: "I often saw Hitler in a fury, but he had rarely lost his temper so much as when he got this report. For a few hours he raged furiously, as if this little liberty taken had stymied the plan of the entire campaign. A few days later he continued to abuse the "crack-brained alpinists" who "must be court-martialled": in the heat of the war they play their idiotic games, Hitler exclaimed indignantly, climbing the idiotic peak despite his orders to concentrate all forces on Sukhumi. Here, then, is a demonstrative example of how his orders are executed" [20].

Perhaps, the Fuehrer's discontent was not as strongly felt as these instances suggest. This is confirmed by his talk with List on 30th August, 1942 when Hitler "rebuked the field marshal for a mistake: it was necessary to route the corps not to Elbrus and Sukhumi but to Tuapse" [21, p. 416]. In other words, he was discontent not so much by the act of the Caucasian peak ascent as by the general direction of the mountain units' attack. Moreover, it is difficult to accept that Hitler laid a special emphasis on the climbing feat of H. Grot's group.

The initiative for the Elbrus ascent stemmed from the "Edelweiss" commander H. Lanz, who already knew about the experience of the mountain division which had planted the fascist standards on Mt. Olympus in Greece [18, s.

36]. After the war, while talking about the Elbrus ascent, he claimed that planting the standards on the highest European peak was the display of honour and duty of service for the mountain forces [6, s. 88].

However, not all his contemporaries shared this opinion. Against the backdrop of the German – fascist forces failures in the Caucasus, Lanz became the target of accusations that the ascent on Elbrus had been planned by him just to toady to high command and personally to Hitler.

Notably, R. Conrad had been initially against the plan of the Elbrus ascent seeing little sense in this act from the strategic view point [6, s. 85]. Yet, soon the commander of the 49th Corps changed his view when he saw potential benefits in installing German standards and proposed the participation of the 4th Mountain Division in the ascent. By making this weighted decision, Conrad did not derogate the soldiers' honour of the latter division [4, p. 355].

After seizing the Shelter of Eleven at the height of 4,130 m on August 17th, Grot proceeded to the implementation of the operation. However, rough weather conditions became a serious obstacle and it was only following Lanz's strict order August 20th that Grot's platoon of 18 men organized the ascent for the following day.

This time the weather was unfavourable again. As the German historian A. Bukhner mentioned, "the risky action had been justified" and the standards with the images of edelweiss and gentian to symbolize the 1st and the 4th Mountain Divisions were installed on the Western peak of Elbrus [22, s. 59].

Unlike Hitler and his servitors, the Ministry of Propaganda of the Third Reich had much more interest in the Grot group's success. Not only the central radio stations and the press, but the occupational newspapers of the North Caucasus considered the Elbrus ascent as a symbol of the Caucasus conquest. In one of the September issues of the "Stavropol'skoe slovo" ("The Word of Stavropol') was a translation of the article from the newspaper of the 1st Tank Army Panzer-Voran: "A part of the division under the command of captain Grot in the raging snowstorm planted the military flag and the pennon of the "Edelweiss" division on Elbrus. The mountain troops control all important mountain passes awaiting further orders" [23, p.18].

For the occupied population of the North Caucasus, such news provided no reassurance of imminent victory for the Red Army over the invaders. Grot's success had a great moral and psychological meaning for German soldiers and officers inspiring them in battles with the Soviet troops in the Caucasus [2, p. 73-74]. It is important to remember that despite the lack of any tactical advantage in the Elbrus ascent, the mountain troops controlling the Shelter of Eleven could both observe and threaten the Soviet troops' advance in the area.

Battles in the vicinity of Mount Elbrus

The Eastern part of the front was located in the area of Elbrus (Kabardino-Balkaria) and considering the mountain saddle reached the heights from 1,800 to 5,300 m above sea level and elevation changes in a complex relief (gorges, crests, glaciers, snow fields) reaching 3,500 m [9, p.188]. It was the highest mountain front of World War II. Moreover, as in the Klukhorskoiy direction, it was here where the first battles of the mountain war in the North Caucasus took place.

Upon arrival of the German mountain troops, five key passes in the vicinity (Becho (3,367 m), Donguz-Orun (3,180 m), Mestia (3,757 m), Tveber (3,580 m) and Tsanner (3,900 m) were under the control of the 214th cavalry regiment under the command of Major I.S. Romazov, which was part of the 63rd cavalry division of Brigade Commander Z.U. Stavchansky.

However, other crucial mountain passes including Chiper-Azau (3267 m), Chiper (3,321 m), Bassa (3,057 m) and Khotu-Tau (3,552 m) were still left unprotected. The last one, without any difficulty, was captured by the Germans on August 15th and its name changed to General Conrad's Pass [23, p. 16].

At first glance, this part of the Caucasus mountain chain was not the most important for the 49th corps, from the strategic view point, because the local snowy passes were less convenient for access to the Transcaucasia. Severe climate conditions were a strong barrier against creating and fortifying military camps.

Still, the control over the vicinity of Elbrus gave some advantages. Apart from conquering the highest European peak, the German mountain troops occupied the passes and the alpinist bases and had the chance to attack the Baksanskoye Gorge, through which, from August 1942, the important evacuation

processes from Kabardino-Balkaria to Georgia took place. Simultaneously, by fortifying their positions in this area, the mountain troops protected the left flank of the 49th Corps [4, p. 353].

The vicinity of Elbrus was kept by the units of the 99th ranger regiment of the “Edelweiss” division, which from 30th August was put under the command of K. le Sur. According to O. Opryshko’s estimation, the enemy in the region of Elbrus numbered more than 1,500 [23, p.110]. They were confronted by the units of the 63rd and 242nd mountain divisions, the Special NKVD Platoon of NKVD under the 37th Army, the Kabardino-Balkarian guerrilla fighters and other forces.

From September to October 1942, the Soviet troops conducted hard-fought battles on the highest mountain front for Chiper-Azau, Chiper, Bassy and other key strategic points. The control over them largely determined the destiny of the Passes of the Asylum of Eleven, Old Horizon, “New Horizon, Southern Shelter, Ice Base, 105th Picket etc.

The interim successes of the mountain troops in the vicinity of Elbrus, as well as in the other directions, were not taken further. With winter coming, both sides manned the defences. On the other hand, from the end of August 1942, the left flank of the 49th Corps was protected which enabled R. Conrad to perform his plans in other directions west of Elbrus.

Battles on Klukhor, Marukh and Sancharo

The operation to capture the Klukhorskiy Pass (3,292 m) became the first major success of the German troops in the mountain war. Simultaneously, this event demonstrated the full seriousness and danger of the positions of Soviet troops. The pass was seized on August 14th, 1942 but the Command of the 46th Corps learned about it only on the second day [11, p.17]. The main reason for the defeat of the 815th Regiment of the 394th Rifle Division protecting the pass was the numerical superiority of the enemy and the unexpectedness of its offensive.

For the conclusive follow-through, the Germans formed three mountain platoons of 300 people under the command of Pessinger to attack the Command of the 394th Division and cut off the Soviet units on the Marukhskiy Pass. This

impudent plan failed when Soviet reinforcement arrived in time and on August 27th the German mountain troops were defeated near Genzvisk.

However, a large new victory for Conrad's units was soon to occur. On September 5th, 1942, the Marukhskiy Pass (2,746 m) was captured, and as a result the units of the 808th regiment of the 394th Rifle Division were trapped and practically liquidated. Soviet troops lost 300 killed and 557 captured [22, s. 66]. Nevertheless, the Edelweiss units still could not conquer the height of 2,938 m (Chakhra) and 3,325 m, and consequently the Southern Gates of Marukh remained under the control of Soviet troops.

On August 25th, 1942, units of the Enzian division seized the Sancharo Pass (2,589 m), which opened the way to the Black Sea coast. The battle group in this direction ranged in numbers from 1,200 to 1,300 people [11, p. 65].

To develop their success, the mountain troops captured the Pskhu settlement in Abkhazia on 28th August, which they turned into a support point with a convenient landing field for aviation. In fact, Pskhu became the main base for the 49th Corps on the southern slopes of the Caucasus range [24, p. 110].

In September, Sancharo, Adzapsh, Allashtrakhu, Zegerker and other passes witnessed battle actions which gradually abated with the arrival of a cold spell. The liberation of the Pskhu settlement on 9th September became a major success for the Soviet army, although they did not manage to fully drive the German mountain troops from the Sancharskiy Passes. The same happened in other directions, where stationary warfare settled in beyond September. The initial success of the mountain troops was explained by the unexpectedness of their attack and the weak organization of the Soviet units. However, it was not enough for a further breakthrough to the southern slopes of the Caucasus range.

Until the end of September, it became evident that all attempts of the 49th Corps to break through the Soviet defensive line had failed. According to Hitler's order, the main forces of the 1st and 4th Mountain Divisions were dislodged from the Sancharskoe, Mukhorskoe, Klukhorskoe and other directions. They were united into the Lanz Group for participation in the Tuapsinskaya operation in the 17th Army. The command of the German divisions also changed: Edelweiss was headed by Colonel K. Le Sur, and Enzian by General-Major G. Kress [11, p. 54].

Battles for the Black Sea and Tuapse

The Western part of the mountain war was slightly different. Firstly, the Caucasus range began here, mostly its mountain-woody part, which is why its territory allowed for the use of large infantry groups and aviation. The proximity of the Black Sea formed a soft, partly subtropical climate and the height of the local passes was significantly lower than those to the East. For instance, the Goytkhskiy Pass was under 400 m which permitted the construction of a railroad and the Armavir-Tuapse highway before the war [25].

However, this did not mean that the 17th Infantry Army under Ruoff had no need of reinforcements by specialized mountain units. The extended Caucasian campaign forced the command of large military groups to concentrate extensive resources for delivering a decisive blow. For this reason, between September and October 1942, the “Edelweiss” and “Enzian” units were deployed in Tuapse for participation in a large new operation.

For creating a new main attack force of mountain troops, a special group was formed named Lanz. This involved units of the 98th and 13th Regiments from the 1st and 4th Mountain Divisions. After achieving a certain success in the Goytkhskoe and Shaumyanskoe directions, starting from October 20th the mountain troops fought hard to capture Mount Semakhsho.

This was the most gory and obstinate battle of the mountain warfare in the Caucasus. Casualties in only the units of the “Edelweiss” division, in the battle for Semakhsho, were estimated at 823 killed, 2414 wounded and 199 missing (from 21st October to 13th December, 1942) [6, s. 97]. What was the reason for these losses?

Mount Semakhsho (1,035 m) located 28 km from Tuapse was a point of the utmost importance, control over which gave both sides an opportunity to attack the enemy from the rear. After capturing the water gap of Pshish and the Goytkh pass, the mountain troops (1st and 3rd Battalions of the 98th Regiment of the “Edelweiss” division) conquered the Semakhsho peak on 23rd October, 1942. From this moment, an obstinate confrontation between the mountain riflemen and

the units of the 353rd rifle division began, during which the mountain repeatedly changed hands.

From the very beginning, both sides suffered from lack of ammunition and food supplies as practically all horses had been killed during the first battles and supplies were delivered by groups of soldiers. Soviet units had to obtain the drinking water from distant sources because the spring at the bottom of the mountain was contaminated with dead bodies of soldiers.

The German mountain troops had the same problems. The report of the Lanz Group's doctor from November 23rd informed: "Due to bad nutrition, loss of strength is observed among a great many. Fifty percent of soldiers suffer from gastrointestinal illnesses. For a few weeks, they have only had cold food (it is impossible to light a fire). Arrival of reinforcements is undesirable because it is impossible to provide food for them" [26].

German historians often see the high dispersal and lack of reinforcement in the 49th Mountain Infantry (Gebirgsjäger) corps as the main reason behind its losses in the Caucasus, notably outside Tuapse. Such an approach, however, fails when it comes to the Semashko battle. Even well-timed reinforcement would not have radically changed the situation since the conditions of warfare there were unbearable.

As R. Kaltenecker puts it, the mountain infantry were unable to ensure the mission pursuit due to the onset of autumn rains and overall physical exhaustion of the personnel [27, s. 131]. F. Matveev, a Soviet 353th Rifle Division veteran, writes: "Above our locations on the mountain ridge, heavy dark-grey rain clouds were sweeping, constantly bringing either pouring rains or day-long drizzling or even heavy snow. Early mornings often saw black frost covering everything in an icy crust. There was no shelter to get warm or dry the things. In the rain, trenches and dugouts were filled with water. Sleep or rest was almost unachievable. And in the morning the battle started again [28]"

It was only on December 12th, 1942, that the remains of the German mountain infantry finally received the order to leave their positions outside the city of Semashko. Apart from severe battlefield conditions and the desperate resistance of the Soviet troops, the tragic outcome was preconditioned by the

persistence of the German Supreme High Command. This meant Hitler firstly, who was unwilling to retreat from earlier-occupied positions. His obstinacy resulted in the fact that the casualties of the Lanz Group in September - December 1942 amounted to 232 officers, 754 non-commissioned officers and 6884 soldiers, who were killed, heavily-wounded or missing [26].

Such a heavy blow to the German mountain infantry, and the onset of winter, meant the ultimate collapse of all of the plans to carry out a breakthrough operation into Transcaucasia. Largely distracted by the Stalingrad battle, the Axis forces were unable to ensure substantial reinforcement in the Caucasus. This left the units of the 49th corps with but one alternative - to retain positions occupied in the mountain passes. The situation remained unchanged up until early January 1943, when the mountain infantry were ordered to immediately leave the Caucasus mountains. The symbolic end of the war was marked by two Soviet flags hoisted on both peaks of Elbrus in mid-February 1943, by an expedition headed by A.Gusev.

Reasons behind the losses of mountain infantry (Gebirgsjäger) in the North Caucasus

Having reviewed the preconditions and consecutions of mountain warfare in the North Caucasus, we may now pass on to the reasons for the 49th Corps debacle. We should keep in mind that no factor is to be seen as the unique one, an approach common to both Western and Soviet researchers in the period of ideological confrontation up until early 1990s. We may single out 3 basic reasons:

1) Battle-front overextension with no fresh troops. The mountain infantry had no significant reinforcement to fight the battles in a fairly extensive area of the Greater Caucasus Range.

2) Self-sacrifice and heroism of Soviet soldiers. Today the scientists both in Russia and abroad are trying to account for the phenomenon of Soviet patriotism in the Great Patriotic War, ensuring the victory at the cost of enormous human losses. The factor may well explain how virtually undrilled soldiers, often with poor knowledge of the mountains, were able to stop special Wehrmacht forces.

3) Overall failure of the German offensive in the Caucasus in autumn 1942. In separate battles on the snowy passes, and elsewhere in the Caucasus, the German offensive bogged down. This provided a chance to regroup and strengthen the defence of the southern slopes of mountain passes.

4) Growing experience of the Transcaucasian Front troops. Despite the drawbacks and failures of the first weeks of mountain warfare, the Soviet High Command was able to prevent a breakthrough of the German mountain infantry onto the southern slopes of the Greater Caucasus Range by regrouping their effective forces. Further defensive and offensive operations of the Red Army units, growing more and more accustomed to mountain conditions, eventually let the Transcaucasian Front troops win an advantage over Wehrmacht units.

Conclusion

Five months of mountain warfare took place in the area of the Greater Caucasian Range. Instructed by the German Supreme High Command, Gen. R. Konrad's 49th corps divisions launched an offensive in mid-August in four major directions: Elbrus, Klukhor, Marukh and Sanchar. It was the highest land front of World War II where the warfare was essentially affected by natural and climatic conditions.

Having achieved temporary success, the German mountain infantry faced fierce resistance from the Red Army troops, often poorly prepared for waging a war in the mountains. Any further German attempts to break into Transcaucasia undertaken by the "Edelweiss" and "Enzian" units brought no success. Similar situation was found in the Tuapse direction, where the mountain infantry was part of the Lanz Group. All in all, the warfare in the North Caucasus was waged with a basically mixed success, but the ultimate victory was won by the Transcaucasian Front troops.

Table 1

Passes of Caucasus	Passes in the area of Elbrus	Klukhorskiy Pass	Marukhskiy Pass	Sanchrskiy Passes	Tuapse Direction
German Mountain Infantry	Units of the 99 th regiment of the “Edelweiss” division	Units of the 98 th and 99 th regiments of the “Edelweiss” division	Units of the 98 th regiment of the “Edelweiss” division	Units of the 13 th and 91 st regiments of the “Enzian” division	98 th regiment of “Edelweiss” division and 13 th regiment of “Enzian” division (as part of “Lanz” group)
Soviet Troops (confronting 1st and 4th German Mountain Divisions)	214 th regiment of the 63 rd cavalry division; 897 th regiment of the 242 nd mountain rifle division; NKVD special detachment	815 th regiment of the 394 th rifle division; 121 st regiment of the 9 th mountain division;	808 th and 810 th regiments of the 394 th rifle division	Battalion of 808 th regiment of 394 th rifle division; 25 th NKVD Border Regiment; 1 st Tbilisi Infantry School	Units of 353 rd rifle division

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INSURMOUNTABLE FRONTIER: MOUNTAIN WARFARE IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS IN 1942-1943

Azamat Tatarov

(Abstract)

This article examines one of the poorly studied aspects of World War II, i.e. the fighting in the North Caucasus mountain passes on the Transcaucasian Front between the German Mountain Divisions *Edelweiss* and *Enzian* and the Soviet troops. On the basis of works by Russian and European historians, the author characterizes the military operations at the highest mountainous front of World War II touching upon the problems of geographical scope and tactics in mountain warfare. Special attention is paid to the problem of causes and consequences of the conquest of the Elbrus peak by Gebirgsjäger.

Key words: mountain passes, Edelweiss, Enzian, Gebirgsjäger (mountain troops), Transcaucasian Front, mountain warfare tactics, defence of the Caucasian ridge, Prijut Odinatcati (The Shelter of Eleven), Elbrus climbing.