

CHRISTER BERGSTRÖM

STALINGRAD

New Perspectives on an Epic Battle



Volume 1
The Doomed City

VAKTEL BOOKS

Multimedia book
with text, sound and film

KEY TO MAP SOUTHERN ZONE OF THE EASTERN FRONT IN 1942

Around rivers Donets and Don:

- 3 Kupyansk
- 4 Valuyki
- 5 Ostrogozhsk
- 7 Kshen river
- 8 Yelets
- 9 Lipetsk
- 10 Kastornoye
- 11 Liski
- 12 Davydovka
- 13 Otrozhka
- 14 Volovo
- 15 Volchansk
- 17 Nesterne & Krugle & Pishchane
- 18 Sirotino
- 19 Staryy Oskol
- 20 Dantsevka
- 21 Novaya Kalitva
- 22 Kantemirovka
- 23 Chertkov
- 24 Rossosh
- 25 Mitrofanovka
- 26 Belaya river
- 27 Boguchar
- 28 Kazanskaya
- 29 Veshenskaya
- 30 Millerovo
- 31 Bokovskaya
- 32 Astakhov
- 33 Visloguzov
- 34 Makeyevka
- 35 Morozovsk
- 36 Tatsinskaya
- 37 Novocherkassk
- 38 Zverevo
- 40 Manychskaya
- 41 Konstantinovskaya
- 42 Nikolayevskaya
- 43 Tsimlyanskaya

Kaukasus:

- 39 Bataysk
- 44 Proletarskaya
- 47 Budenovskaya
- 49 Tikhoretsk
- 50 Kropotkin
- 53 Prochnookopskaya
- 54 Tonnelnaya
- 55 Anapa
- 56 Kerch
- 57 Kerch Straits
- 58 Feodosiya
- 59 Mechetinskaya,
- 60 Novo Aleksandrovka
- 61 Khadyzhensk
- 62 Kislodvsk
- 63 Pyatigorsk
- 65 Mileralnyye Vody
- 66 Prokhladnyy
- 67 Mozdok
- 69 Terek river
- 70 Krasnogradskoye
- 71 Malgobek
- 72 Baksan
- 73 Baksanyonok river
- 74 Caspian Sea
- 94 Astrakhan

Don Bend area:

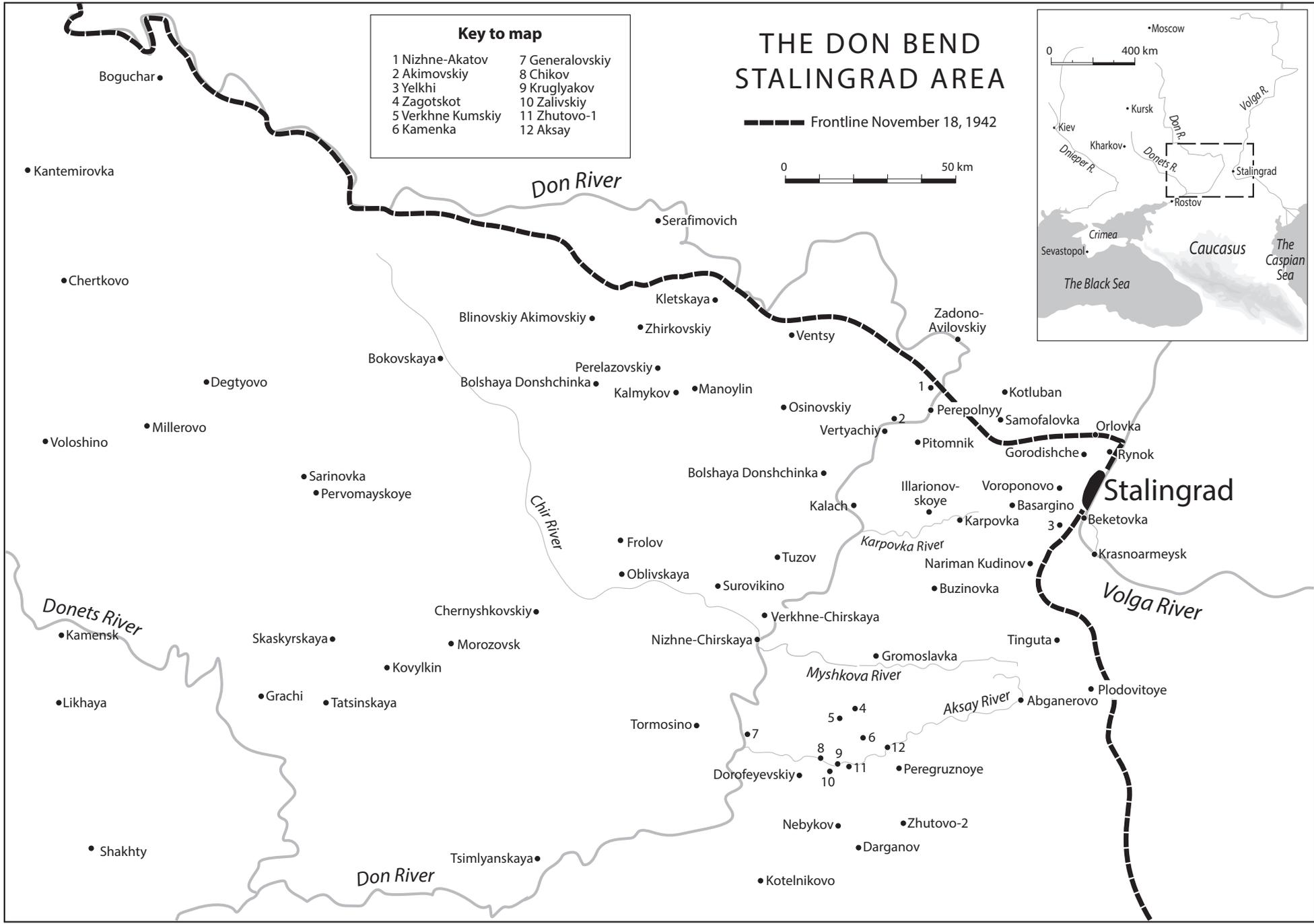
- 75 Kremenskaya
- 76 Kletskaya
- 78 Nizhne-Chirskaya
- 79 Oblivskaya
- 81 Tormosino
- 82 Krasniy Yar
- 83 Podgorenskaya

Stalingrad region:

- Stalingrad
- 84 Abganerovo
- 85 Beketovka
- 87 Kotluban
- 88 Myshkova river
- 89 Saratov
- 90 Zimovniki
- 91 Aksay
- 92 Zavetnoye
- 93 Kudinov
- 95 Gigant



THE SOUTHERN ZONE OF THE EASTERN FRONT IN 1942



Key to map

| | |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1 Nizhne-Akatov | 7 Generalovskiy |
| 2 Akimovskiy | 8 Chikov |
| 3 Yelkhi | 9 Kruglyakov |
| 4 Zagotskot | 10 Zalivskiy |
| 5 Verkhne Kumskiy | 11 Zhutovo-1 |
| 6 Kamenka | 12 Aksay |

THE DON BEND STALINGRAD AREA

--- Frontline November 18, 1942



• Boguchar

• Kantemirovka

• Chertkovo

• Degtyovo

• Voloshino

• Millerovo

• Sarinovka
• Pervomayskoye

• Kamensk

• Likhaya

• Shakhty

Don River

• Serafimovich

• Kletskaaya

• Blinovskiy Akimovskiy

• Zhirkovskiy

• Ventsy

• Zadono-Avilovskiy

• Bokovskaya

• Perelazovskiy

• Kalmykov

• Manoylin

• Osinovskiy

• Kotluban

• Perepolnyy

• Samofalovka

• Orlovka

• Vertyachi

• Pitomnik

• Gorodishche

• Rynok

• Bolshaya Donshchinka

• Kalach

• Karpovka River

• Illarionovskoye

• Voroponovo

• Basargino

Stalingrad

• Beketovka

• Frolov

• Oblivskaya

• Tuzov

• Nariman Kudinov

• Buzinovka

• Krasnoarmeysk

• Chernyshkovskiy

• Verkhne-Chirskaya

• Tinguta

Donets River

• Kamensk

• Skaskyrskaya

• Morozovsk

• Nizhne-Chirskaya

• Gromoslavka

• Likhaya

• Grachi

• Tatsinskaya

• Kovylnkin

• Tormosino

• Myshkova River

• Aksay River

• Plodovitoye

• Dorofeyevskiy

• 5

• 4

• 6

• Peregruznoye

• Nebykov

• Zhutovo-2

• Darganov

• Kotelnikovo

Don River

• Tsimlyanskaya

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INTRODUCTION

Stalingrad was the largest and most fateful defeat of the German army during World War II. Nothing affected the self-confidence of the German army and the mood of the population as much as this.

For this reason, much of the history writing about Stalingrad is largely incorrect. In the Western world, German officers came to dominate the story about the war on the Eastern Front during World War II, and as a result, historical facts have been deliberately distorted, and much has been swept under the carpet.

Soviet history writing also had a certain tendency to rectify some of the mistakes made on the Soviet side, but not to the same degree as the German revisionists, for a quite natural reason: The Soviets won the war. However, regarding the Red Army's response to the German Summer Offensive in 1942, there are some conspicuous errors in old Soviet history writing which have found their way into publications in the Western world.

The predominant story about the Battle of Stalingrad goes something like this: In the summer of 1942, Hitler launched his second great summer offensive on the Eastern Front. His goal was to capture the Soviet oil fields and surround, and annihilate, the Red Army forces in the area. All of this failed because the Soviets cleverly pulled back their units, and Hitler made the mistake of splitting his forces between the Caucasus and Stalingrad. Driven on by blocking units which opened fire at their own soldiers when these tried to retreat, the Soviet troops managed to hold out in the ruins of Stalingrad. Hitler made the mistake of positioning weak Romanian forces on the flanks, and because of this, the Soviets were able to break through and surround General Paulus's Sixth Army in Stalingrad. The fate of the Sixth Army was settled when Hitler prevented it from breaking out of the encirclement and instead tried to supply it from the air, which was doomed from the start. When General Paulus surrendered on January 31, 1943, 90,000 German soldiers were captured by the Soviets, who through a combination of sheer negligence and brutality allowed nearly 95 percent of them to die.

In fact, taken together, this is a distorted—though very common—description of the battle. Only the framework, the German summer offensive, the surrounding of Stalingrad, and the demise of the Sixth Army, is correct. Several decades of thorough research into primary sources gives the conclusion that everything else above needs to be reviewed, reconsidered and added with more perspectives, aspects, and facts. Indeed, several key facts about the battle have been omitted in previous history writing, which has often relied on sources which have proven to be inaccurate. When they are presented here, they add completely new dimensions to the understanding of the Battle. Now, 80 years after this epic battle, the author's painstaking research is presented in this book in two volumes. A new view of the Battle of Stalingrad evolves over the pages in this work.

This work on the ground war during the Battle of Stalingrad is the continuation of the author's previous book *Operation Barbarossa 1941: Hitler against Stalin* and supplements his *Black Cross/Red Star* series about the air war on the Eastern Front.

severely bombed by twenty-seven German aircraft at the Chilekovo railway station.

All of this naturally had a great negative impact on the Stalingrad Front's ability to build up its forces. But the battered Red Army troops at the Chir river southwest of Kalach still managed to tie down German 6. Armee, at the cost of atrocious losses. A German soldier commented: "Just look at how the Soviet infantry attacks! I almost went crazy from their 'hurray'! Where does this prowess and contempt for death come from? Can this be only because a commissar is standing behind him with a pistol in his hand? No, it seems to me that the Russians have something that we have no idea about."²⁷⁵

On the last day of July, the 23rd Tank Corps fed more units, the 99th and 189th Tank brigades, into the offensive. While the 189th immediately was halted, the 99th broke deep into the German rear area, but then was cut off through a German counterattack. Meanwhile the 158th Tank Brigade attacked with heavy KV tanks without any infantry support, with the result that ten KVs were lost in the German rear area.²⁷⁶ By August 1, Soviet First Tank Army had only 123 tanks remaining.²⁷⁷ All in all, this army and the Sixty-second and Sixty-fourth armies lost more than half their tanks during the last eight days of July.²⁷⁸ With just nine T-34s and seven T-70s remaining serviceable (and another 34 T-34s and 26 T-70s in repair), the 13th Tank Corps was withdrawn from combat.

Still, the Soviets continued to hold 6. Armee fighting inside the Don Bend. In this, they received an invaluable support from the aviators of 8 VA, who performed nearly one thousand sorties in support of the ground troops on the two first days of August. The German fighter pilots fought determinedly to ward off these attacks, claiming 43 Soviet aircraft shot down—30 of those by I./JG 53 "Pik As"—on those two days, but they could not be everywhere. The Soviet tactic of employing a steady stream of Il-2 Shturmoviks in formations of just three to six aircraft allowed most pilots to slip through unmolested by enemy fighters. Moreover, the German claims were significantly overrated—with only eight aircraft from 8 VA lost on August 2,²⁷⁹ against 19 reported shot down by the Germans. (On the other hand, the losses sustained by Fliegerkorps VIII on that day was limited to a single Bf 109.)

The Soviet air raids against supply columns in the rear added to already serious logistic problems and had a serious impact on 6. Armee's operations. "As a result of the great supply problems," established 71. Infanterie-Division, "the ammunition situation is becoming more and more catastrophic. Our artillery has only 10 shells available per battery." It was also noted that Nizhne-Chirskaya was relentlessly subjected to aerial bombing.²⁸⁰ In fact, the fuel shortage forced Paulus's main attack forces, the XIV. and XXIV. Panzerkorps, to refrain from any offensive action during the first six days of August, and 16. Panzer-Division was temporarily withdrawn from frontline service.²⁸¹

Because of this, much of "Group Zhuravlyov" managed to filter back to their own lines, where they continued the fight. By early August, it stood clear that the German plan to annihilate the Stalingrad Front through a pincer operation, followed by a quick dash to reach Stalingrad, would not succeed. The stamina with which the *frontovniki* fought in the Don Bend undoubtedly determined the entire course of the upcoming battle of the city of Stalingrad itself. Their sacrifices bought what the Soviets needed most of all in this situation—time. One effect of this was the arrival of a new Soviet army, the First Guards Army, to this sector in early August.

On the German side, spirits dropped because of the frustrated efforts to reach Stalingrad. Oberst Wilhelm Adam, Paulus's adjutant, had a quite revealing conversation with a wounded German soldier who hitch-hiked with him back from the front on one of these days. "Three weeks ago," said the soldier, "our company commander told us that the Red Army was completely defeated and that we would soon rest in Stalingrad. But it was not so. On July 31, the Russians really gave us a hammering. Our artillery and anti-tank defense barely managed to stop their counteroffensive."²⁸²

To make things even worse for the Germans, the simultaneous attempt by Generaloberst Hoth's 4. Panzerarmee to reach Stalingrad from the south also failed. It was here that the failed commander of Soviet Sixty-fourth Army, Vasilii Chuykov, would rehabilitate himself.



German artillery soldiers at a battery of 15-cm SFH 18 (schwere Feldhaubitze 18) heavy field howitzers during the battle of the Don Bend.



Red Army troopers and T-34 tanks during the battle of the Don Bend.



A young Soviet Serzheant in a pause in the fighting. He carries the Order of the Red Star and the guards emblem, indicating that he is serving with a Guards unit.



A Luftwaffe Junkers Ju 87 Stuka dive-bomber flies above the Don river, escorted by a group of Macchi C.200 Saetta fighter planes from Italian 21° Gruppo Autonomo.

The Failure of the Second Drive Towards Stalingrad



A formation of Luftwaffe Junkers Ju 52 transport planes.



Soviet soldiers on top of a tank. The soldier to the left carries a captured German Schmeisser MP 40 submachine gun, the others are armed with Soviet PPSH-41 submachine guns.

Vasiliy Chuykov became famous for his skillful and inspiring leadership of the defense of Stalingrad during the battle in the city, but before that he was responsible for, as we shall see in this chapter, a lesser known but probably even more important accomplishment in warding off the second German drive towards Stalingrad.

6. Armee's offensive across the Don on August 23 is often portrayed as the start of the advance towards Stalingrad. However, as we have seen, the first attempt had been made through Paulus's offensive in the Don Bend one month before that, and when that had failed, another serious effort was made, by 4. Panzerarmee from the south shortly afterward. Both of these ended in Soviet defensive victories of an importance which has been significantly underestimated in accounts published in the Western World. The reason for this is that the description of the Battle of Stalingrad in the West is based mainly on German accounts, and 4. Panzerarmee's failure in early August 1942 has to a large extent been swept under the carpet. Instead, a slanted account is most commonly given, according to which it was "madness" of Hitler to order the 4. Panzerarmee to veer towards the east after it crossed the Don.

In reality, the southern drive towards Stalingrad and River Volga was of far greater importance than the more famous northern drive in the fourth week of August, since only a front south of Stalingrad could really prevent the Soviets from sending reinforcements across the Volga at Stalingrad to attack Heeresgruppe A's vulnerable (north-) eastern flank.

In fact, 4. Panzerarmee—at that time subordinated to Heeresgruppe A, according to the original plan—was already aimed against Stalingrad in the third week of July. As we have seen (p. 112), advancing from the north, Generalmajor Max Fremerey's motorized 29.

Infanterie-Division reached the area of Tsimlyanskaya on the northern side of Lower Don, 145 km ENE of Rostov, on July 16. Supported by Luftwaffe ground-attack planes, the troops seized a bridgehead across the river which was supposed to be the springboard for the first major attempt to seize Stalingrad, located on the other side of the steppe.

One fundament in the popular but erroneous version of the history is that it was only on July 31 that Hitler ordered the 4. Panzerarmee (by that time reverted back from Heeresgruppe A to Heeresgruppe B) to turn east and northeast towards Stalingrad. The roots of this story are undoubtedly to be found in the Situation Conference in the Führer's Headquarters on July 30. However, what took place there has been altered in Halder's famous diary, where he blew a statement by Generaloberst Alfred Jodl—the Chief of the Operations Staff of the German High Command—at this conference out of proportion: “The fate of the Caucasus will be decided at Stalingrad.”

It has been interpreted as though this made Hitler “change his mind,” completely changing the course of the operation. Even historians David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House assert that with this, “for the first time, Hitler had explicitly made Stalingrad a priority,” and that “the next day, OKH translated Hitler's new offensive concept into a formal order to the two army groups.”²⁸³ However, the reality was in fact the opposite. The reason why the referenced OKH order was issued was that Heeresgruppe A—not Heeresgruppe B—received a new priority order (the seizure of the Soviet Black Sea ports). As far as Heeresgruppe B was concerned, it was merely stated that “the task of Heeresgruppe B *remains unchanged*” (author's italics), and this was specified in the next sentence: “Heeresgruppe [B] shall have the units mentioned under 2.a) [4. Panzerarmee with 14. Panzer and 29. motorized divisions, IV. Armeekorps, and Romanian VI Corps] for an advance south of the Don towards Stalingrad.”²⁸⁴

Indeed, this was “unchanged” with Führer Directive No. 41 of April 5, 1942 stating that “formations thrusting down the Don river can link up in the Stalingrad area with forces advancing from the Taganrog - Artemovsk area between the lower waters of the Don river and Voroshilovgrad across the Donets river to the east. These forces should finally establish contact with the armored forces advancing on Stalin-

grad.” This task was repeated in Hitler's order on July 17, which has often been omitted in history writing:

“To cover the main operation [against the Caucasus] it is necessary to extend the security on the Don by swiftly sliding the forces in this sector sideways and to take control of the land bridge between Don and Volga and seize Stalingrad as soon as possible. If that does not succeed through a surprise strike, the most important goal remains to take control of the Volga south of Stalingrad and to hold that position in such a way that all shipping on the Volga to and from the Caspian Sea is prevented.”²⁸⁵

Directive No. 45 of July 23 confirmed this plan: “The task of Heeresgruppe B is, as previously laid down, to develop the Don defenses and, by a thrust forward to Stalingrad, to smash the enemy forces concentrated there, to occupy the city, and to block the land communications between the Don and the Volga, as well as the Don itself.” It also said that “two armored formations of Heeresgruppe A [...] will come under command of Heeresgruppe B for further operations southeastwards.”

Unfortunately, the so-called diary of Generaloberst Franz Halder, the German Army's Chief of Staff, is too often taken ad verbatim. What many believe is his original diary is a post-war edited version with the apologetic intention to distance Halder himself and the General Staff from the Nazi regime. This has had a strongly negative impact on the understanding of the war on the Eastern Front and is further discussed in Appendix VI.

Indeed, on July 16, the motorized 29. Infanterie-Division's reconnaissance battalion took the bridge across the Lower Don at Krasniy Yar, about 10 km southeast of Tsimlyanskaya, but fuel shortage prevented the bulk of the division from closing up immediately. Although Soviet Northcaucasian Front had only one single division, Fifty-first Army's 91st Rifle Division with 11,000 troops, to defend the 80-km wide sector of the Lower Don from the area west of Nikolayevskaya to the area east of Tsimlyanskaya, they managed to prevent 29. Infanterie-Division (mot.) from carrying out a swift coup de main. Already that same evening, the 3rd Battalion of the 91st Rifle Division's 561st Rifle Regiment counterattacked and pushed the Germans back across the river again.

The battle was now concentrated on the Cossack village of Tsimlyanskaya itself. By that time, only 1st Battalion of the 561st Rifle Regiment was at the little settlement, but these troops held out for three days. Again, the Luftwaffe decided the outcome. Since German aircraft destroyed the wooden pontoon bridge, no reinforcements could be brought across the river. Tsimlyanskaya itself was also severely hit, “burning like candle,” according to an eyewitness. On July 19, when more elements of Generalmajor Fremerey’s division had arrived, the Germans attacked and captured the village of 5,000 inhabitants.

On the southern side of the river, opposite the village, there were only two Soviet battalions at that time. However, on July 19, Chuykov, who by that time still commanded the Sixty-fourth Army—in a position east of the Fifty-first Army—ordered a detachment of 500 men from the 29th Rifle Division, supported by the 2nd Battalion of the 137th Tank Brigade with 20 T-34s, to regroup to this sector.²⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the Germans struck first. At 0300 hours on the night of July 20/21, Infanterie-Regiment 15 under Oberst Max Ulich managed to cross the river undetected in inflatable rubber boats, crossing in a gap between a company of the 613th Rifle Regiment and the 2nd Battalion of the 561st Rifle Regiment—both of the 91st Rifle Division.

The commander of the 91st Rifle Division, Polkovnik Yefrem Makarchuk, was blamed for this and replaced by General-Mayor Nikolay Kalinin. However, the detachment from Sixty-fourth Army made a successful counterattack on July 21 and managed to oust the Germans from the village of Krasniy Yar (today part of the city of Volgograd) on the Don’s left bank—at a cost of four T-34s.²⁸⁷ Without Krasniy Yar, the German offensive could not be expanded from the bridgehead, so a fierce battle over this village commenced. During the following night, a company from 29. Infanterie-Division crossed over to the left side of the Don, while two other companies attacked from the north. They managed to wrest all but the southern parts of the village out of Soviet control, but in the morning tank fire from the T-34s of the 137th Tank Brigade halted the advance.²⁸⁸

Attempting to surround the little Sixty-fourth Army detachment, the Germans instead attacked Podgorenskaya, three kilometers south-east of Krasniy Yar, on July 23, but were again halted by the T-34s.

Meanwhile, a Soviet counterattack resulted in bitter street fighting in Krasniy Yar again. At nightfall, the positions were the same as 24 hours previously although the Sixty-fourth Army detachment was all but obliterated in this battle. Having lost 299 out of its original strength of 500 troops, the remaining elements of the 29th Rifle Division were integrated into the 138th Rifle Division. Having lost five T-34s with another fifteen put out of action, the 2nd Battalion of the 137th Tank Brigade was also neutralized. However, this defensive fight had successfully held up the 29. Infanterie-Division, enabling the Soviets to bring forward more reinforcements. All the surviving tank commanders of the 2nd Tank Battalion received military awards. During the following three days, eleven of the T-34s could also be repaired.²⁸⁹

At this stage, General-Mayor Nikolay Trufanov, Fifty-first Army’s commander, had marched up the 91st, 138th, and 157th Rifle divisions with around 20,000 troops against the bridgehead at Tsimlyanskaya. Realizing that the intended coup de main south of Tsimlyanskaya had failed, the Germans decided to reinforce the bridgehead. But where to find these forces? Indeed, Romanian VI Army Corps (with four infantry divisions) had been shifted over from 1. to 4. Panzerarmee on July 19 and followed in the tracks of 29. Infanterie-Division (mot.), but it was still occupied mopping up the rear area of dispersed Soviet troops.

In its rapid advance towards Lower Don, 29. Infanterie-Division (mot.) had been operating in coordination with the 3. and 23. Panzer divisions, but at this stage, the latter two were occupied at the Nikolayevskaya bridgehead (see p. 125) and tasked to cover the eastern flank of Heeresgruppe A. The only option available was to shift some of the units that were engaged in the battle of Rostov to Tsimlyanskaya. The choice fell upon IV. Armeekorps—with 94. and 371. Infanterie divisions—and 14. Panzer-Division. These were transferred to the Nikolayevskaya bridgehead, some 30 km west of the Tsimlyanskaya position, and shifted to 4. Panzerarmee.

As seen above, the shifting of units from the Rostov area towards Tsimlyanskaya was ordered by Hitler already on July 17. Before that, however, an attempt was made by the forward elements of 23. Panzer-Division to break the deadlock at Tsimlyanskaya. Since 3. Panzer-Division had made a successful dash to the south from Nikolayevskaya

on July 23, and 23. Panzer-Division's advance units in that bridgehead were supplied with more fuel on July 25, the latter division's Kampfgruppe Zejdklik (Kradschützen-Bataillon 23 plus a Panzerjäger company, two artillery batteries, and a pioneer company) attacked towards the east on the southern side of the Don on July 27. This attempt, however, was repelled by Soviet 302nd Rifle Division.

No more attempts needed to be made in this direction, since Romanian VI Army Corps arrived at Tsimlyanskaya on July 27, while 14. Panzer-Division and IV. Armeekorps began to settle in south of the Don. With 3. and 23. Panzer divisions shifted to 1. Panzerarmee, Generaloberst Hermann Hoth's 4. Panzerarmee now consisted of IV. Armeekorps, Romanian VI Army Corps, the motorized 29. Infanterie-Division, and 14. Panzer-Division—the two latter organized into XXXXVIII. Panzerkorps under General Werner Kempf. With this, 4. Panzerarmee had a strength of around 150 tanks.²⁹⁰

Repeated attempts to break through, however, were fought back by the Fifty-first Army. A Soviet report read: "For four days, intensive battles raged in the area of Verkhne-Kurmoyarskaya and Boguchar [the frontline of the bridgehead]. These settlements changed hands several times, but the troops of the Army fought to the last and did not take one step back without an order. The artillerymen especially distinguished themselves. In just two days, the Fifty-first Army annihilated up to 4,000 enemy soldiers and officers, and knocked out and burned 32 tanks, 36 armored personnel carriers, 7 guns, 46 mortars, and 41 machine guns in the Tsimlyanskaya sector."²⁹¹ Although these figures were highly inflated, they reveal the intensity of the fighting. On July 29, Soviet artillery even succeeded in blowing up the bridge that German engineers had constructed at Tsimlyanskaya.²⁹²

What Halder wrote in his diary for July 29 seems quite plausible: "Conference at the Führer Headquarters: Great excitement because 29th Motorized Division has not started off, and fuel supply to 6. Armeekorps is not functioning." Apparently, there was some harsh communication between the Führer Headquarters and 4. Panzerarmee, for Halder's entry for July 30 reads: "The attack at Tsimlyanskaya will get under way tomorrow." But as we now know, this was not a new order.

The commonly held view that Hitler "turned" 4. Panzerarmee from its position down south in the Caucasus, to the northeast and towards Stalingrad, in a breathtaking detour that consumed much of the army's precious fuel reserves, must also be dismissed. In view of the fact that 4. Panzerarmee's 3. and 23. Panzer divisions raced towards the south from the Nikolayevskaya bridgehead, it may appear to be so. But this disregards the flexible shifting of German divisions between various army commands as the situation on the ground changed. 3. and 23. Panzer divisions had started the summer offensive under the command of 6. Armeekorps, but were shifted to 4. Panzerarmee, and then, in the Caucasus, handed over to 1. Panzerarmee. Hoth's 4. Panzerarmee, on the other hand, completely changed subunits. The forces with which it began its drive towards Stalingrad were in no way "turned north" from the Caucasus but moved eastwards south of Lower Don in coordination with 6. Armeekorps's advance inside the Don Bend. At the same time, 4. Panzerarmee was shifted back to Heeresgruppe B.

The breakthrough was achieved on July 31, when a concerted attack was made by 29. Infanterie-Division from the east and IV. Armeekorps and 14. Panzer-Division from the west against 91st Rifle Division's positions at Boguchar in the southwestern corner of the bridgehead. Under the threat of becoming surrounded, the Soviets made a hasty withdrawal. The battered 91st Rifle Division was pushed down to River Sal, 80 km further south—thus removing this threat against 4. Panzerarmee's right flank.

It must be emphasized that this breakthrough had been attempted by the Germans for ten days, and it was only now that it succeeded. The defensive fight at Tsimlyanskaya during these ten days gave the Soviets absolutely crucial time to bring up new forces to meet Hoth's mighty Panzer Army. The 208th Rifle Division arrived at Stalingrad by train on the very same day as 4. Panzerarmee broke through at Tsimlyanskaya. Within hours of the arrival, the divisional commander, Polkovnik Konstantin Voskoboynikov, was ordered to embark his troops on trains again and set off for the Tsimlyanskaya sector via Kotelnikovo. By that time, his division mustered 13,360 troops. General-Mayor Fyodor Tolbukhin's Fifty-seventh Army was also taken out of the reserve in the

area. Although it only had two divisions, it was ordered to establish a defensive line towards the west south of Stalingrad.

Fifty-first Army had indeed made a great sacrifice. With less than 40,000 troops against both 4. Panzerarmee and elements of 1. Panzerarmee, it was torn to pieces. Leaving most of its heavy equipment behind, its battered 138th and 157th Rifle divisions retreated to the east and the north, while the rest was pushed to the south. Hoth's forces streamed through the gap, heading east and northeast into the wide steppe. Virtually nothing stood between them and Stalingrad in the northeast.

Feldwebel Karl Roth of 14. Panzer-Division's armored regiment recalled, "The weather was stifling hot as [we] struck out across the Kalmyk Steppe towards Stalingrad. The II. Abteilung encountered enemy tanks at the approaches to the Sal tributary, but Soviet resistance was light and easily brushed aside. Our Panzer-Regiment 36 was supposed to be on the outskirts of Stalingrad by August 3, but instead the advance was delayed because of the heat, engine stress, and problems navigating across the endless steppe. Even so, they racked up more driving hours and miles than any other tank regiment in Russia at the time, most of it done at night due to the soaring temperatures and limited resources."²⁹³

Von Richthofen's Luftflotte 4 provided the units which surged across the treeless steppe with invaluable information from reconnaissance planes which flew over the heads of the troops and dropped small canisters with handwritten information about the locations of Soviet troops. Meanwhile, Messerschmitt fighters swept through the skies, its pilots eagerly searching for Soviet aircraft, and Stukas and ground-attack planes were ready to strike down on any serious resistance on the ground.

However, von Richthofen's greatest contribution to the German efforts against Stalingrad was probably his strong measures to improve the supply situation in the area. One of the main reasons why the Germans were unable to make any further advance towards Stalingrad, was the poor roads in the area, which created logistical bottlenecks and caused desperate shortages in fuel, ammunition, spare parts and other vital means at the frontline. Most of the Ju 52s in Luftflotte 4—altogether

more than 300 aircraft—were concentrated at this sector. III./KG 4, whose He 111s had converted from bomber operations to mainly transport flights, also was sent southwards from Kharkov to Makeyevka. All of these were brought together into the so-called "Stalingrad Transport Region." Historian Robert Forczyk's conclusion is that it was only due to the air supply "that Heeresgruppe B could maintain any offensive momentum at all."²⁹⁴ Karl Roth said, "After being refueled by air, the advance continued northeast, paralleling the Stalingrad - Caucasus railway that ran through Kotelnikovo, bypassing isolated pockets of dug-in Soviet infantry."²⁹⁵

In this situation, Vasiliy Chuykov re-entered the stage. He had just been removed from his position as the commander of the Sixty-fourth Army for the failed operation in the Don Bend on July 26-27. Hoth's breakthrough on the last day of July probably saved Chuykov from being court-martialed—at this time he was compiling a report to explain how the bad organization of the river crossing at Nizhne-Chirskaya resulted in the bridge collapsing, which in turn led to a whole brigade being isolated and annihilated. On August 2, Chuykov received an order that would change his entire future: General-Leytenant Mikhail Shumilov, his successor as Sixty-fourth Army's commander, called him. Chuykov found Shumilov greatly worried:

"The situation was alarming: Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army had crossed the Don at Tsimlyanskaya, concentrated eight divisions on the left bank of the Don, and launched an offensive which smashed the Fifty-first Army's defenses and cut the Stalingrad - Salsk railway. It was safe to assume that the enemy would direct the main blow of the Fourth Panzer Army towards Stalingrad to help Paulus's army. With this blow, the left flank of the Sixty-fourth Army and the entire Stalingrad Front was threatened from the south."²⁹⁶

Shumilov knew of Chuykov's mistake, but he had no one else to ask. He ordered the perplexed former Army commander to go south to the combat area, investigate the situation, and organize the defense. With Shumilov's consent, Chuykov formed an ad hoc unit, the Southern Operational Group, based on the 29th Rifle Division, which he ordered to take up defensive positions along River Aksay, 80 km southwest of Stalingrad. The river was not particularly wide but had steep

banks. The 255th Independent Cavalry Regiment was ordered to cover the division's western flank, and 154th Naval Rifle Brigade, which had arrived in the area only on the day before, was dispatched to the eastern flank.

Meanwhile, 50 km to the south, 29. Infanterie-Division swept into Kotelnikovo and its large railway station, where two trainloads of troops from the 208th Rifle Division were just arriving. In a scene of utter chaos, the Germans completely overwhelmed the Soviets. Two other trains with troops and two trains with ammunition for the 208th Rifle Division were destroyed by Stukas on the rail line just north of Kotelnikovo. In a matter of hours, around half of Voskoboynikov's division was annihilated. The remainder, in two troop trains, detrained at other, smaller stations further up the line. Without knowing anything of the fate that had befallen on their comrades, these troops nevertheless regrouped and set up defensive positions which halted 29. Infanterie-Division north of Kotelnikovo.

Also on August 2, the 14. Panzer-Division passed south and east of Kotelnikovo and reached Darganov, another 35 km east-northeast. The clash between Chuykov and Hoth drew closer as 14. Panzer-Division took Zhutovo-2, about 15 km south of Aksay, on the next day, August 3.

Chuykov still did not have much to face Hoth with. Only a fraction of 29th Rifle Division's 11,000 troops had yet arrived at River Aksay. He was promised the 6th Guards Tank Brigade, mustering 44 tanks, but it would take some time for these to reach the frontline in the south. Nevertheless, Chuykov set out to complete his mission with great energy. Having spent the night with the commander of the 29th Rifle Division, Polkovnik Anatoliy Kolobutin, on the morning of August 3 he set out to the south with a couple of vehicles and an armed escort on the western road towards Kotelnikovo. "The visibility in the steppe was perfect —eight to ten kilometers," wrote Chuykov.²⁹⁷ As he approached the collective farm Verkhne-Yablochnyy, 22 km north of Kotelnikovo, he spotted two columns of infantry with artillery approaching from the south. These were the remnants of the 138th and 157th Rifle divisions retreating towards the north. Even though only 4,200 and 1,500 troops respectively were what remained of these two divisions, Chuykov grate-

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“Our company commander told us that the Red Army was completely defeated and that we would soon rest in Stalingrad.”

– A German soldier, July 31, 1942.

“We are holding on to our existing positions and are successfully repelling all enemy attacks on the approaches to Stalingrad.”

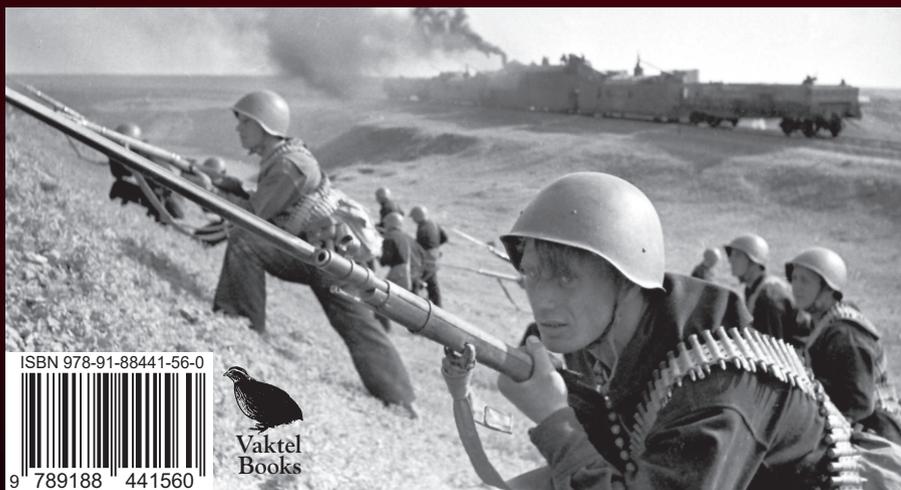
– Soviet Army report, September 4, 1942.

Stalingrad was the largest and most fateful defeat of the German army during World War II. Nothing affected the self-confidence of the German army and the mood of the German population as much as this. For this reason, it is still surrounded by many myths and misconceptions.

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