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The effect of water bodies and water courses on WWII warfare in the Black Sea area between 1941 and 1942

Keywords: Black Sea, Barbarossa, military operations, bodies of water, water courses

One of many studies on WWII¹ is how military operations and army movement were affected by bodies of water and rivers during the Russo-German campaign. This paper deals with the period of the beginning of the „Barbarossa”² operation till the capturing of Crimea by Wehrmacht in July 1942. The research was limited to the Black Sea region, together with its rivers, and the area of the warfare in the southern part of the eastern front.³

To discuss the matter first an explanation of basic terms, such as military operations, bodies of water, or watercourses is needed. The term military operations or warfare means battles, combat actions, and non-combat actions of the fighting sides. There are also offensive actions, defensive actions, and withdrawal. Other actions are special actions and delaying actions. Military operations are carried out by armies in theatre of war and theatre of operations. Military strategies and tactics deal with organization and conduct of military operations. Thus, military operations can be seen as actions on three different levels: strategic, operational, and tactical.⁴

Bodies of water are located in natural depressions and filled with standing water.⁵ This paper deals mainly with intercontinental seas, the Black Sea and the Azov Sea, both enclosed by land. Watercourses are rivers, streams and canals where water flows. They have their own sources and vary in size.⁶ The rivers in the area of interest of this paper are Prut, Danube, Dniester, Boh, and Dnieper, all of them together with their tributaries.⁷ Those natural obstacles affected military operations of the Soviet and German armies to a great extent.⁸

A conquest of the Black sea area was important for Germany. Apart from gaining lebensraum, a living space, the Nazi wanted to have an access to Ukrainian cereal, coal, and iron ore. An occupation of the Black

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¹ War is a state opposite to peace. It is part of human history from the beginning of culture and society. It is a continuation of politics, using violence in order to achieve specific ideological, economic or political aims. With the development of technology, military methods have expanded and war without modern arms is not possible now. As a result of the development of nuclear weapons and their means of delivery, the ability to wage war has been extended to any place of the world. By examining the concept of war, let us remember that this term specifies first of all organized armed struggle between individual states, blocks of countries, nations, or social groups. KRUPA (2007) 456; BIELAN, DOBROWICZ, CAPE (1971) 494. Compare ‘armed conflict’: a fighting between states or coalitions of states. A conflict is settled by using armed forces, which means using violence. The forms and methods of armed violence in armed conflicts are: war, intervention, military incident, military blockade, military coup or a show of power. KACZMAREK, ŁEPKOWSKI, ZDRODOWSKI (2008) 64.

² The codename of the German attack on the USSR carried out on June 22, 1941. Armed forces of the Third Reich began the bloodiest and largest campaign in the history of the Second World War. ALEXANDER, KUNZE (2012) XI, 9; BISHOP (2009) 72; CARELL (2000) 22, 31; GUDERIAN (1991) 124; SWEETING (2007) 25, 38. Compare. GRZELAK (2010) 302.

³ KRAUSE, SCHELBNER (1941) 19, 23. Compare. SEATON (2010) 42, 95, 184; SWEETING (2007) 20; GLOCK (2011) 91.

⁴ BORODZIŁOWSKI, BEDNARZ, BIENÍ (1967) 354; KRUPA (2011) 212; Compare. KACZMAREK, ŁEPKOWSKI, ZDRODOWSKI (2008) 34, 35.

⁵ SOBOL (2000) 1257.

⁶ CHOIŃSKI, KANIECKI (1996) 158.

⁷ SEATON (2010) 184.

⁸ The terrain significantly affects the course of clashes, which was taken into account by both the attacking and defending side. CARELL (2006) 43; HALDER (1974) 43, 56, 79, 112; OLSZAŃSKI (2005) 27-28, 29, 32; SOŁONIN (2007) 25, 95, 120.

Sea coast and Crimea also meant protection of Romanian oil deposits. From that country German industry received about 3 million tons of oil a year. Further on, a taking over of Caucasian oil fields was planned, with a movement of troops towards the Iraq-Iran border, along the Kerčeńska straight, the shortest route there. Additionally, the control of the Black Sea meant that Germany would be able to press Turkey, remaining neutral so far, to support the Axis countries in strengthening the ties between Romania, Bulgaria on the one hand and Germany on the other.⁹

If Germany succeeded at the Black Sea, they would be able to destroy those Soviet forces that might threaten the southern flank of the German Army (the Army Group South) and the German eastern front. To conquer the Black Sea region, the fortress of Sevastopol with its Black Sea fleet should be captured first.¹⁰ It would increase the chances of getting control of the sea routes in that area with taking over enemy ships, and would allow attacking the coast from the sea. The conquest of the fortress would eliminate the Soviet Navy in that area, forcing Russians to move their fleet somewhere else.¹¹ All that meant that operations at the Black Sea were important to the Germans and Soviets, and their fighting forces were going to engage significant resources.¹²

Starting the invasion on the USSR, the German armed forces attacked from three principal directions: northern, carried out by the Army Group North, central, with the Army Group Middle, and southern, with the Army Group South.¹³ While the German front, implementing tasks, moved forward towards the Black Sea in June 1941, the Eleventh Army together with supporting Romanian troops stopped moving on 1 July 1941. They occupied positions along the Romanian-Soviet border, on the left side of the river Prut, while the Red Army stood on the opposite side.¹⁴ The Eleventh Army at that time was not involved in major battles, apart from blowing up a watchtower in the attack of the 198 Infantry Division and the capturing of the village of Sculeni, located on both sides of the Prut River. In addition, reconnaissance activities were carried out. Among the hypotheses explaining the end of the offensive in the South while the rest of the German army moved to the East, the following are often quoted: the existence of obstacles in the form of rivers perpendicular to the attacking forces, possibility of the counterattack of the Red Army, which would threaten Romanian oil fields,¹⁵ and the fact that armoured forces from the Eleventh Army had been moved to the First Panzer Army.¹⁶ The Germans waited for a success of the Army Group South that was carrying out their plans to surround a substantial part of Russian forces.¹⁷ After the Wehrmacht reached Kremenets, Dubno and Rowne on 1 July 1941, German and Romanian forces attacked in the direction of the river Dniester.¹⁸ The Russians had decided to send about twelve well trained and well organised divisions against them.

„However, eight days after the outbreak of the war it was not possible to carry out a surprising attack. The 170 Division managed to capture a wooden bridge on the Prut River near the village of Tutora. In a bold and clever action Lieutenant Jordan with his platoon succeeded in marching through Spanish Horses, anti-tank obstacles of the Soviet border defence system. The Soviet advance guard was defeated in hand-to-hand

⁹ Bessarabien, Ukraine-Krim (1943) 9; KONECKI (1987) 5; BIESZANOW (2009) 105; HALDER (1974) 69; VON MANSTEIN (2001) 197.

¹⁰ The city was built on the site of a 16th century Tatar village, Achiar, in 1785 by G. A. Potemkin. In 1804 it received a status of the main port of the Black Sea fleet, and in 1826 it was rebuilt as a fortress which successfully influenced the development of the area. CHLEBOWSKI, WALEWSKI (1889) 460; PETROZOLIN-SKOWROŃSKA (1996) 815.

¹¹ SWEETING (2007) 11; BIESZANOW (2009) 105; VON MANSTEIN (2001) 197, 199.

¹² SCHEERBARTH (1943) 258; WEBERSTEDT (1942) 3; К населению Крыма (1942) 1; Degeto Weltspiegel nr 34, *Kampf um Sewastopol*, 1942. Degeto Weltspiegel nr 35, *Einnahme Sewastopols, der stärksten festung der welt*, 1942. Die Deutsche Wochenschau nr 590, 1941. Die Deutsche Wochenschau nr 617, 1942.

¹³ Information on the Army Group South is important to analyze military operations in the Black Sea area. Under the command of Gerd von Rundstedt, the Army Group South attacked Russia from Poland and Romania. At the start of the fighting, the Army Group consisted of the First Panzer Group, commanded by Ewald von Kleist, the Sixth Army, under the command of Walter von Reichenau, the Eleventh Army of Eugen von Schobert, the Seventeenth Army of Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel, and the Third and Fourth Romanian Armies. For detailed composition of the Army Group South see: <http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Gliederungen/Heeresgruppen/HeeresgruppeSud-R.htm>, a paper read on 06.02.2016 r.

¹⁴ Bessarabien, Ukraine-Krim (1943) 9; KONECKI (1987) 7-8; CARELL (2000) 31, 42.

¹⁵ The Prut river was used as a natural obstacle in the border defence system of that strategic area. KONECKI (1987).

¹⁶ HALDER (1974) 30; See: The composition of the Eleventh Army. <http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Gliederungen/Armeen/11Armee-R.htm>, a paper read on 06.02.2016 r.

¹⁷ SEATON (2010) 185; CARELL (2000) 42.

¹⁸ HALDER (1974) 40; KONECKI (1987) 7; SEATON (2010) 189. Compare. (HALDER) 1974: 40, 60, 62.

combat. In the morning forty Russians lay dead with their machine guns in front of the bridge in the swamp. It is true that Jordan's platoon paid a high price, twenty-four killed and wounded".¹⁹

Soldiers of Eugen von Schobert went 12 km deep into the enemy territory, attacking the point where the Soviet South-Western front, commanded by Mikhail Kirponos, and the South front, commanded by Ivan Tiuleniew, met. The attacking army was going to cover the right wing of the Army Group South during the attack in a pursuit of the retreating enemy. Yet, the aggressive attitude of the rear of the Soviet troops, the open terrain, and repeated air strikes slowed the pace of the attack. Frequent rainfall, wet ground, and enemy fire from new models of Soviet tanks were other causes of the slow movement. While German movement proceeded slower than expected,²⁰ the Red Army, after counterattacks, was withdrawing in a flexible and orderly manner in the direction of the river Dniester, capturing that new foothold. Fights for the Dniester started when the Germans captured a bridgehead near Mohylow on July 7, 1941.²¹ After crossing the river, ten days later, the German army marched to Pierwomajsk, pushing the Eighteenth Soviet army before them. The town was captured at the beginning of August,²² and on August 8 German troops crossed the Boh and captured Human. Then they attacked in the direction of Dnieper and crossed it at the beginning of September in the area of Kachowka and Berijslaw, thus threatening the Crimean peninsula and the coalmines of Donieck.

Leaving the territory of Romania, suppressing enemy resistance, and travelling more than 600 kilometres took the German-Romanian army two months. The Russians oppose effectively, and the invaders were fighting in difficult field conditions. It was very important for the Germans to cross the rivers, which is confirmed by the Chief of the Army General Staff, Franz Halder,²³ who wrote about it in his diary. Crossing the watercourses allowed the implementation of subsequent concepts of war. On the other hand, the Red Army fought bravely no matter what natural defence was. The burden of the fighting moved to shore-based operations and had a direct impact on the war in the Black Sea and its coasts. The Germans were aware that the Soviet fleet in the Black Sea posed a threat to their troops and would have a huge impact on the course of the campaign in the peninsula. Operations in the Black Sea basin developed rapidly with the start of the operation "Barbarossa" and grew to an enormous size. As the naval force of the Axis was inferior to the Black Sea fleet, the role of the offensive was taken over by the Luftwaffe.²⁴ It is worth mentioning that 250-ton U-boats,²⁵ trawlers and chasers were transported by water and rail. Sea vessels were delivered in two ways, firstly, through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, and, secondly, across the Baltic and the North Seas, and then by land on enormous platform trailers in the direction of Ingolstadt, and they were transported to the Black Sea along the Danube.

In addition, construction of smaller vessels was carried out on the coast of the Black Sea. The Axis warships had been in Romanian, Bulgarian ports but also in the Soviet ones previously captured by the Germans.²⁶ The fortress of Sevastopol, with its naval base, was attacked by the German air force on June 22, 1941, becoming a regular target until it was captured in July 1942. In response to the German air raids, the Soviet leadership decided to carry out an attack on Constanta in Romania. On 26 June 1941 the Black Sea fleet attacked the city, which brought about severe losses to both the attackers and the defenders. Constanta was prepared for a defence with marine mines and with ports equipped with long-range artillery.²⁷

The land offensive of the Third Reich and its allies posed a threat to the Soviet ports and sea routes. At the beginning of August, after crossing the river Dniester, the Germans blocked Odessa, and in the middle of the month, after crossing the Boh, they besieged Nikolaev, in which the most important shipyard of the Soviet Black Sea Navy was located. With the involvement of significant resources, effectively tying German forces and holding back their deployment in the Crimean peninsula, Odessa held out till mid-October

¹⁹ CARELL (2000) 43.

²⁰ SEATON (2010) 189; CARELL 2000: 43; HALDER (1974) 66, 77, 80.

²¹ HALDER (1974) 82.

²² SEATON (2010) 194.

²³ See: HALDER (1974) 105, 107, 115, 123, 130, 136, 145.

²⁴ Air force of the Third Reich. Luftwaffe: <http://www.luftwaffe.de/portal/a/luftwaffe>, a paper presented on 06.02.2016; <http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/inhaltsverzeichnisLw.htm>, a paper presented on 06.02.2016.

²⁵ Unterseeboot - the term used by the Germans to refer to German submarines. PEREPECZKO (2006) 6; TROJCA (2004) 3.

²⁶ LIPINIŃSKI (1995) 143; PERTEK (1983) 98,110; PIWOWOŃSKI (1959) 5, 6.

²⁷ PERTEK (1983) 102; KONECKI (1987) 9, 13; SEATON (2010) 141.

1941. When the situation was getting worse, the soldiers defending the city were withdrawn to Crimea by sea, to defend Sevastopol. Since then, fierce battles had focused on the Crimean peninsula, and in particular in the area of the fortress. The location of Sevastopol and its defensive conditions made an effective defence possible for a long time.

When Wehrmacht captured the Perekop Isthmus, Crimea was blocked. German troops entered its operational area on October 28, 1941 after heavy fighting. In the meantime, the command of the Eleventh Army was taken over by Erich von Manstein. It is worth mentioning that in the course of the clashes, Perekop was well protected by the creation of a strong defensive line, stretching from the Black Sea to the muddy swamps of the Azov Sea. Being 15 km wide, they consisted of minefields, trench lines, shelters, and anti-tank trenches. Meanwhile at the Azov Sea, after elimination the Soviet counteroffensive, the First Panzer Army (renamed from the First Panzer Group), under the command of P. von Kleist, marched along the coast towards Rostov.²⁸

Sevastopol was surrounded on 10 November 1941. Until then, the Crimea was overrun by the Germans completely, and Soviet naval units were withdrawn to Caucasian bases. From the West the access to Sevastopol was hampered by the Black Sea, and the coast within the fortress was full of mine fields. From the North, East, and South there were mountains with a ring of permanent fortification, which both made the defence easier. The circuit of the fortification was about 35 km. Defence was carried out in the mountains, slopes and caves, where the Soviets built fire positions for machine guns and artillery.²⁹ The defence of the fortress required a coordination of land and sea forces. Because of an imminent threat to Sevastopol, an intensive and effective supply of the city started by sea and air, mainly from Novorossiysk and Tuapse in Kuban. At the time of the strengthening of the fortress by the defenders, until March 1942, the Luftwaffe sank 40 and damaged 60 vessels of the Soviet fleet. The unloading of materials and the loading of wounded soldiers and civilians in the Sevastopol bays were often done under enemy fire and raids. Despite many attempts the Axis fleet and German aircraft, mainly supporting military action, did not interrupt Soviet supply routes. By June 1942 the surrounded fortress received support in the form of new soldiers, food, and ammunition.³⁰

The fortress was attacked three times. The first attack took place in November. Sevastopol was going to be captured off-the-cuff, after coming closer to the fortress. The overall situation of the units, unfavourable weather, and the fatigue of soldiers did not allow that to happen. The second attack was launched on December 17, 1941, from the North and North-East. The direction of the German movement prevented the Russians from using the Black Sea fleet, while the Germans got an access to the North Bay. Its capture and the acquisition of nearby hills opened before the German artillery an opportunity to fire at the city, blocking the supply of the fortress and creating a direct threat to the port, which in turn reduced the Soviet advantage at the Black Sea. However, the overall advantage of the attacking forces was soon to lead to their total disaster.³¹

At the end of 1941, a Russian sea invasion at Teodozja and Kercz started. Then, in 1942, the Russians landed in the area of Yevpatoria, Sudak and Balaklava,³² in order to divert attention from their main intention, namely capturing operational space on the East side of the peninsula. The landing took place in extremely adverse weather conditions. Due to a storm many landing vessels could not sail to the shore, and the soldiers had to jump into water. After getting to the shore the foot soldiers got frozen. The Soviet troops going to Crimea also moved through the partially frozen Kerczeńska Strait, but in May those troops were defeated by the German-Romanian forces.

”Due to our attacks the Russians suffered huge losses of life and material. It's horrible! The fields were already covered with the bodies of people killed in previous raids. Never before during this war have I seen something so awful”.³³

²⁸ BATOW (1968) 179; VON MANSTEIN (2001) 200-206; SEATON (2010) 204, 205, 206; SWEETING (2007) 81, 87, 91; GUDERIAN (1991) 142, 158.

²⁹ FRANZ (2011) 116; PERTEK (1983) 108, 116.

³⁰ PERTEK (1983) 133; KONECKI (1987) 71; VON MANSTEIN (2001) 212, 216-217.

³¹ VON MANSTEIN (2001) 212, 217; SWEETING (2007) 91, 96; See. KONECKI (1987) 65.

³² See further: FRANZ (2011) 116-117, 118-120.

³³ MURAWSKI (2008) 33.

After this success, the Wehrmacht dealt the third blow on Sevastopol in June 1942.³⁴ It was planned to strike from the North and North-East, through the North Bay, together with a capturing of the mount of Sapun.

"It was obvious that the task of storming the fortress will be heavier than in December last year. The enemy had had half a year to strengthen its fortifications and to send material reserves by sea. Especially the whole area between the Belbeku Valley and North Bay constituted a strongly reinforced obstacle. The central stretch of the front was not suitable for a decisive attack. Fighting in forested area would result in many casualties, because there were no conditions for effective use of artillery and aviation, which are our main asset. What was left was an attack from the North and North-East, as well as the southern part of the eastern section. The main impact again should be from the North. However, it was obvious that the attack in the South is equally important".³⁵

Objectives were implemented at the beginning of July, 1942. One of the commanders of the defence of Sevastopol, Red Army General I. Petrov described these days as follows:

"Eighty-seven years ago each month of a defence was compared to one year. Now one day should be compared to one year. The size and density of the fire that the enemy directed at the town was beyond anything that had happened in previous wars. The city is almost none existent".³⁶

The seizure of the Crimea allowed Germany to control the Black Sea and the implementation of further concepts in the war against the USSR.³⁷ However, the current fighting caused major damage to warring armies. Despite the fact that Nazi Germany seized the Crimean peninsula and one of the strongest fortresses in the world, the value of the German army there was low. General Erich von Manstein's units lost experienced combat soldiers, plenty of combat equipment and thus could not take on new tasks. The divisions required replacement of the losses, especially officers and non-commissioned officers. During the battle of Sevastopol, the Wehrmacht was effectively evolved in fighting, and these troops could not be used to fight in the eastern front. It is worth noting that the German soldiers fighting in the Crimea and the German allies were awarded with a special decoration called the Crimea Shield, in the form of a blade. It was introduced by regulation of Adolf Hitler of July 25, 1942. To receive it, certain conditions had to be met, namely, taking part in the battles of the peninsula on land, sea, or in the air.³⁸ Additionally, many places in the Crimea became resorts, where soldiers of the Third Reich rested after fighting at the front.

The resistance of the Red Army in the Black Sea basin was one of the reasons for the failure of the spring offensive of the German army. During the Great Patriotic War, the defence of Sevastopol was of political, military, and moral importance. It lasted longer than Germans had thought. The Soviet-German conflict showed that rivers in the Black Sea basin played an important role as a defensive barrier of the Red Army. The German army, on the other hand, had shown great potential combat during river crossings. The operations carried out in the Black Sea basin became an essential element of fighting in the southern sector of the eastern front. The assets involved and human and material losses proved the significance of the Black Sea and ruthlessness of clashes. The effort and dedication of soldiers in the Black basin are important in the history of the Second World War.

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34 See: ŻUKOW (1970) 480.

35 KONECKI (1987) 95.

36 KONECKI (1987) 102.

37 See further: GLOCK (2011) 300; BISHOP (2009) 99; BIESZANOW (2009) 279.

38 GRZEŚKOWIAK (2007) 21-22; WEBER (2005) 10.

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Summary

The effect of water bodies and water courses on WWII warfare in the Black Sea area between 1941 and 1942

The subject of the analysis is German and Soviet military operations in the southern sector of the eastern front, with a particular emphasis on the role of rivers and the Black Sea, during these operations. The time frame of the paper includes the beginning of Operation Barbarossa, in June 1941, until the capture of the Crimean peninsula by the Wehrmacht, in July 1942. The article begins with an attempt of defining concepts relevant for further study of the issues mentioned in the title. The role of the Black Sea and its watercourses is discussed and the fact that they played a very important role as defensive lines of the Red Army. The German army showed its huge military potential when crossing rivers. Military operations performed at the Black Sea became an integral element of the fights in the southern sector of the eastern front. The means of warfare involved as well as human and material losses may indicate a ruthlessness of the fighting and importance of the Black Sea theatre of war. Efforts and dedication of the both warring sides in the area of the Black Sea made history.

Keywords: Black Sea, Barbarossa, warfare 1941-1942, water body, watercourse