
Too Little, Too Late: An Analysis of Hitler's Failure in August 1942 to Damage Soviet Oil Production



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EVEN before Operation Barbarossa petered out in December 1941, Germany's oil reserves were severely depleted. Adolf Hitler worried that his armed forces would soon grind to a halt for want of petroleum products. During the last months of 1941 and the first of 1942, economic considerations played as much of a role in the formulation of a new strategy as did the run-down state of the eastern armies and air fleets. Hitler feared heavy Soviet bombing attacks on Rumanian oilfields, his main source of oil, and knew that the Reich's reserves were almost exhausted. Consequently, he considered the protection of the Rumanian oilfields and the acquisition of new sources of oil crucial if he were to wage a prolonged war against the growing list of nations he opposed.¹

He therefore formulated *Fall Blau* (Case Blue), a major campaign for summer 1942. This aimed first, through preliminary offensives in the Crimea, to protect Rumanian oil centres from Soviet air attacks, and second, through a powerful thrust to the Don River and then into the Caucasus, to deliver that oil-rich region into German hands. The capture of

1. Readers wanting an analytical account of the actions which form the background to this article should consult two new studies: my own book, *Stopped at Stalingrad: The Luftwaffe and Hitler's Defeat in the East 1942-1943* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), which focuses mainly on air operations; and Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege, 1942-1943* (New York: Viking, 1998), which focuses mainly on the land war. Those who want more information on Hitler's strategic ambitions in this period, and the importance of oilfields in those ambitions, should consult my article, "Hitler's Quest for Oil: The Impact of Economic Considerations on Military Strategy, 1941-42," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 18 (December 1995): 94-135.

the Caucasus oilfields, he believed, would relieve Germany's critical oil shortages and deliver a massive, and hopefully mortal, blow to the Soviet economy and war effort.

The consequences of that ill-fated campaign are well known, and need little discussion here. Hitler became distracted by Stalingrad (which was not even a main campaign objective) and lost an entire army trying to take it. Soviet forces also drove his armies from the Caucasus and pushed them back to the line they had held before *Blau* started nine months earlier.

This study analyses a little-known and poorly documented aspect of the 1942 campaign: Hitler's employment of airpower in the Caucasus region. It focuses on his reluctant admission in October that his ground forces would probably not reach the main oilfields before adverse weather conditions forced them to take up winter positions, and on his subsequent decision to have the Luftwaffe attempt the oilfields' destruction. He believed that if he could not have the oilfields (at present, anyway), he should at least deny Josef Stalin's agriculture, industry, and armed forces their vast output.

The essay argues for the first time that the Luftwaffe could have dealt the Soviet economy a major blow, from which it would have taken at least several months to recover, if Hitler had not been so obsessed with Stalingrad and wasted his airpower assets on its destruction.² During August and early September 1942, the Luftwaffe possessed the means to inflict heavy damage on Baku, the Caucasus oil metropolis that alone accounted for 80 percent of all Soviet production. The Luftwaffe still possessed a strong bomber force and airfields within striking range and the Soviet Air Force's presence in the Caucasus was still relatively weak. By October, however, when Hitler finally ordered attacks on oilfields, the

2. Hermann Plocher's influential three-volume study of the Luftwaffe in Russia (*The German Air Force Versus Russia*, U.S. Air Force Historical Studies, Nos. 153–55 [Maxwell Air Force Base (AFB), Ala.: USAF Historical Division, Air University, 1965–67]), remains the foundation of the relevant historiography. Yet Plocher's work, which does not deal with the issues under discussion in this article, is now outdated, having been superseded by several books based on a far wider range of sources than Plocher had access to. Easily the best book on the Luftwaffe's eastern offensive is Richard Muller's *The German Air War in Russia* (Baltimore: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Co., 1992), which provides a thoughtful analysis of the Luftwaffe's strategic bombing campaigns, but even Muller misses the significance of Hitler's lost opportunity in August 1942 to inflict a punishing blow on the Soviet war economy and effort. My argument is consistent, however, with Muller's main thesis that the German High Command's emphasis on providing air support to ground forces, with that emphasis's corresponding influence on the development of operational art and aviation technology (including aircraft types), inhibited its ability to undertake strategic campaigns even after Luftwaffe commanders began attempting them in the east in the second half of the war.

Luftwaffe's eastern bomber fleet was much reduced and most forward airfields had been badly damaged by Soviet air forces which were then far stronger. The conclusion is unmistakable: Hitler had missed a golden opportunity to hurt the Soviet economy and war effort.



The need for oil was a prime motive for launching Operation Barbarossa, as Albert Speer, Hitler's Armaments Minister, later admitted.³ Indeed, even during initial discussions of his plan to invade the Soviet Union, Hitler had stressed the necessity of seizing key oilfields in the Caucasus region, which accounted for 90 percent of all Soviet oil production. On 31 July 1940, for example, he revealed to senior commanders his intention to shatter Russia "to its roots with one blow."⁴ After achieving the "destruction of Russian manpower," he explained, the German Army would strike to the Baku oilfield, the richest in the Caucasus and one of the most productive in the world.

Despite Hitler's bold claim, the 1941 campaign—which opened along a 2,000-kilometer front and involved 148 combat divisions—failed to achieve the Red Army's defeat and, consequently, the occupation of the Caucasus. Reverses during the winter of 1941–42 then left the Wehrmacht without the means to undertake another wide-ranging offensive along the entire front. The summer campaign of 1942, although still immense, was necessarily less ambitious. It opened along a front of 725 kilometers and involved sixty-eight German and twenty-five allied divisions. Soviet oil remained a major attraction for Hitler, whose new offensive aimed to destroy the Red Army in the Donets Basin, capture the crossings into the Caucasus and then seize the rich oilfields. Their perceived importance to the German economy, and hence the war effort, cannot be overstated. On 1 June 1942, four weeks before the summer campaign began, Hitler told the assembled senior officers of Army Group South: "If I do not get the oil of Maikop and Grozny then I must end this war."⁵

3. SHAEF, Office of Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, Subject: Interrogation of Albert Speer, Former Reich Minister of Armaments and War Production; 5th Session—10.30 to 12.30 hrs, 30 May 1945, 506.619A, U.S. Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, Alabama (hereafter cited as USAFHRA).

4. F. Halder, *Kriegstagebuch: Tägliche Aufzeichnungen des Chefs des Generalstabes des Heeres, 1939–1942*, ed. H.-A. Jacobsen (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1965), 2: 50; see also, W. Warlimont, *Im Hauptquartier der deutschen Wehrmacht, 1939 bis 1945* (1962; reprinted, Augsburg: Weltbild, 1990), 1: 126–29.

5. *Der Prozeß gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof, Nürnberg, 14. Nov. 1945–1. Okt. 1946* (Nürnberg: Internationales Militärtribunal in Nürnberg, 1947–49), 7: 290.

The specific oilfields that Hitler mentioned lay in the North Caucasus, a region in present-day Russia comprising mainly steppes, rolling hills and desert lands. During the Second World War it produced grain, cotton, and heavy farm machinery. Its two main oilfields—Maikop, near the Black Sea, and Grozny, near the Caspian—produced about 10 percent of all Soviet oil.⁶ South of the Caucasus Mountains lies the densely populated region of Transcaucasia, today comprising the nations of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. In 1942 this heavily industrialized region had a population density almost as great as the state of New York.⁷ Baku, capital of Azerbaijan and situated on one of the world's richest oilfields, alone produced 80 percent (in 1942, twenty-four million metric tons⁸) of all Soviet oil. Baku's oil flowed by pipeline westward through Tbilisi, capital of Georgia, to Batumi, a major oil transit port on the Black Sea. Oil going to Moscow, Gorkii, and the main industrial centres in the west went by ship to Astrakhan at the mouth of the mighty Volga River, then up the Volga to its destinations. Oil bound for the industrial areas of the Urals and Siberia went by ship up the Caspian to Gurev, where it travelled by pipeline to Ufa, almost a thousand kilometres to the north. From there it went by rail to its destinations.⁹

During the winter of 1941–42, Hitler had managed to convince his senior military advisors that his plan to occupy the Caucasus and seize the oilfields made perfect sense. Germany's armaments industry, they came to believe, would benefit considerably from the seizure of the manganese deposits at Chiaturi in Transcaucasia. They were the richest single source in the world, yielding 1.5 million tons of manganese ore in 1940 (over half the Soviet Union's total¹⁰). The oilfields, though, were the

6. "Strategic Value of the Caucasus," [U.S.] *Air Forces General Information Bulletin* 3 (12 August 1942): 14, 142.0372, USAFHRA; "Caucasus Oil," [British] *Air Ministry Weekly Intelligence Summary* [cited below as *AMWIS*], No. 156, Up to 1200—26 August 1942, 3 (on microfilm 32770), 512.607, USAFHRA; see also, "The Grozny Oil District," *AMWIS* No. 159, Up to 1200—18 September 1942, 24 (on the same microfilm), 512.607, USAFHRA. For very similar German estimates, see *Der Oberbefehlshaber der Luftwaffe, Führungsstab Ic/IV Nr. 3500/41 Geheim! Orientierungsheft: Union der Sozialistischen Sowjetrepubliken (U.d.S.S.R.), Stand: 1.2.1941*, 88–93, K113.106-153, vol. 11, USAFHRA; *Der Chef des Wehrwirtschaft- und Rüstungsamts beim OKW, an den Chef des Generalstabes der Luftwaffe, Herrn Generaloberst Jeschonnek, Berlin, den 31.3.1942*, 10, 11, K113.106-153, vol. 11, USAFHRA.

7. "Strategic Value of the Caucasus," 14, 142.0372, USAFHRA. For the population statistics of Baku (809,347 citizens in 1939) and the other major Transcaucasian cities, see *Der Oberbefehlshaber der Luftwaffe, Führungsstab Ic/IV Nr. 3500/41 Geheim! Orientierungsheft: Union der Sozialistischen Sowjetrepubliken (U.d.S.S.R.) Stand 1.2.1941*, 9, 10, K113.106-153, USAFHRA.

8. "Caucasus Oil," 3, 512.607, USAFHRA.

9. "Strategic Value of the Caucasus," 15, 142.0372, USAFHRA.

10. A. Grechko, *Battle for the Caucasus*, trans. D. Fidlon (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 11, 12.

real goal. Their seizure would relieve Germany's critical oil shortage and enable it, if necessary, to continue fighting in a drawn-out war of economic attrition. Their seizure would also greatly offset the constant danger of Allied air attacks against the Ploesti oilfields in Rumania and the Reich's own synthetic oil plants. More importantly, the capture of the oilfields, the severance of the railways between them and the main Soviet industrial regions, and the blocking of the vital Volga River system would deliver a powerful blow to the Soviet economy and war effort.

Throughout this period Hitler and his military advisers apparently never discussed in detail the important question of how Caucasus oil would be transported to the Reich. A quarter of a century earlier, this problem had also vexed General Erich Ludendorff and the German High Command, who never arrived at an adequate solution.¹¹ The over-worked Führer may not even have realized the importance of this matter, considering it best simply to cross that bridge when he came to it. Apparently he supposed Axis convoys would carry much of the oil across the Black Sea to Rumanian ports, while the rest would travel by ship across that sea, through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles into the Aegean Sea. From there it would continue on to Italian and occupied Greek ports.¹²

Hitler had almost certainly not read the March 1941 report by Lieutenant General Hermann von Hanneken of the War Economy and Armaments Office, which was appended to a letter sent by *Generalfeldmarschall* (Field Marshal) Wilhelm Keitel to the High Command of the Army (OKH). This report warned that, even if the Caucasus oilfields could be captured intact, very little oil (only ten thousand tons per month) could be carried overland to Germany.¹³ Moreover, even if the Black Sea could be made safe for shipping, there would be no ships available for the transport of Caucasus oil up the Danube because the Danube river tankers were already working to capacity transporting Rumanian

11. See E. Ludendorff, *My War Memoirs, 1914–1918* (London: Hutchinson, n.d.), 2: 658–60.

12. In February 1941, for example, Admiral Erich Raeder and Hitler discussed the need to fortify and patrol the Greek coasts in order to keep the British out of the Aegean and to protect both oil shipments from the Black Sea and exports from Turkey. See Report of the C.-in-C., Navy, to the Fuehrer on the Afternoon of February 4, 1941, in H. G. Thursfield, ed., "Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs, 1942," *Brassey's Naval Annual, 1948* (London: William Clowes, 1948), 174–79.

13. Quoted in B. A. Leach, *German Strategy Against Russia, 1939–1941* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 146. Similarly, a report of the War Economics and Armaments Office, dated 16 February 1942, warned that transportation of significant quantities of oil overland from the Caucasus was "impossible." *Wi Rü Amt Stab Z/SR, Die deutsche Treibstoffversorgung im Kriege. Abgeschlossen um die Jahreswende 1941/42*, RW 19/202, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (Federal Military Archives), Freiburg, Germany (hereafter cited as BA/MA).

oil.¹⁴ The only remaining route was across the Black Sea, through the Dardanelles, and on to Mediterranean ports. Accordingly, the report concluded, “the opening of the sea routes and the security of the tankers in the Black Sea is the prerequisite for the use of Russian supply sources in sufficient quantity to support the further continuation of the war.” Clearly, to attain this prerequisite was virtually impossible by early 1942; the Germans would have had to wipe out the powerful Soviet Black Sea Fleet (which still had, according to *Großadmiral* Raeder, “naval supremacy . . . [allowing] great freedom of movement”¹⁵) and to eliminate British air and sea power from the eastern Mediterranean.

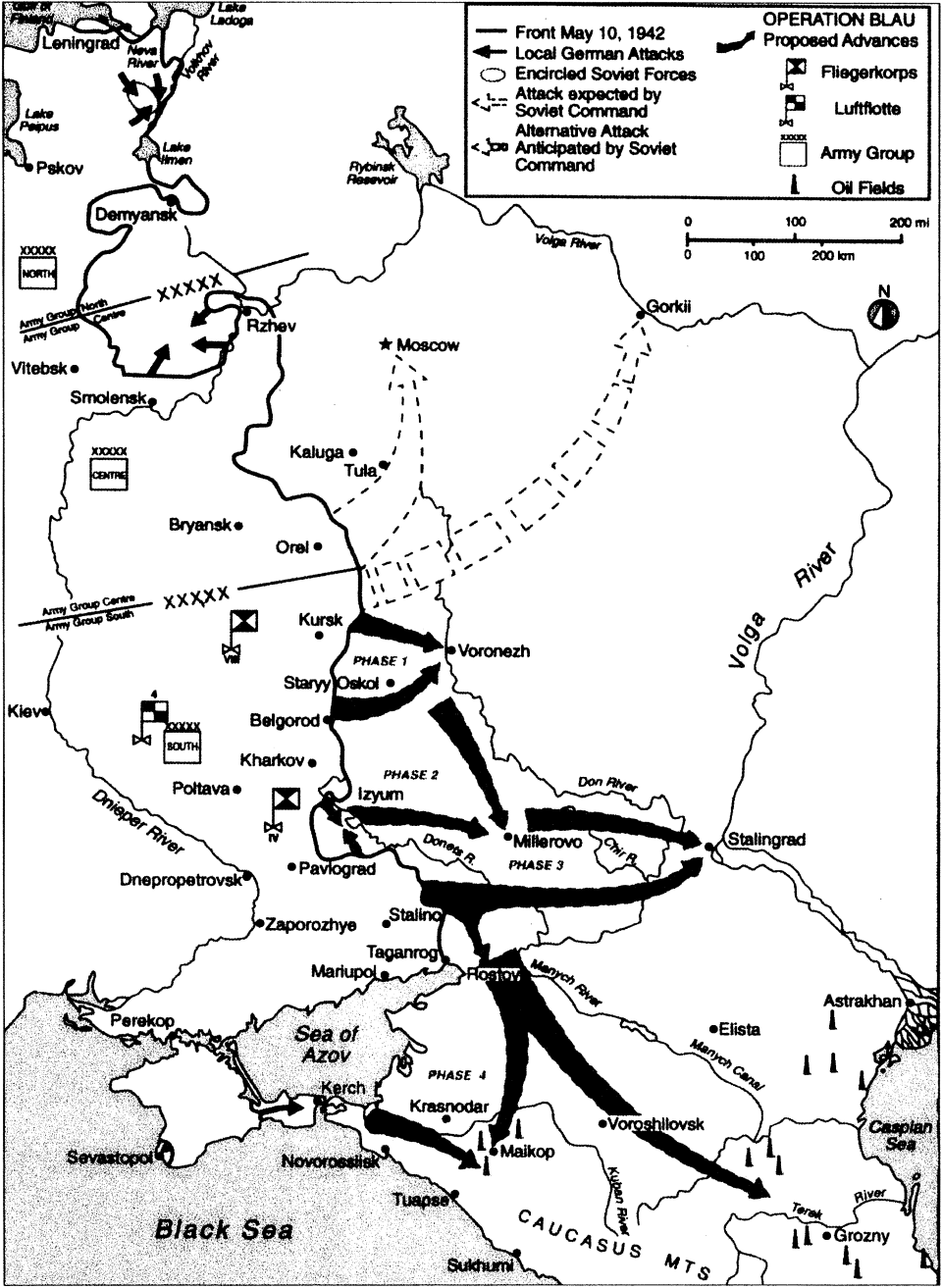
Despite not considering how best to solve this logistics nightmare—which never occurred, because, as shown below, the German Army captured only the already-wrecked Maikop oilfield—Hitler and his courtiers were not entirely lacking in forethought. When planning the forthcoming campaign during the first months of 1942, they stressed the crucial need to reach the Caucasus oilfields so rapidly that the Soviets would not have time to destroy permanently the oil wells and refineries. If the latter were destroyed, the bulk of the Caucasus oil would have to be refined elsewhere until new refineries could be constructed. Only Rumanian refineries, which still had a considerable surplus refinement capacity,¹⁶ could handle large quantities of additional crude, but (for the reasons mentioned above) it would be extremely difficult to ship significant amounts of oil from the Caucasus to Rumania.

The High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW) had established an “Oil Detachment Caucasus” a year earlier, in the spring of 1941, when the capture of the oilfields was still a principal objective of the forthcoming attack on the Soviet Union. Its purpose was quickly to repair damaged wells and refineries so that exploitation of the oilfields could be

14. An OKM (High Command of the Navy) memorandum of 9 May 1941 makes the same point about there being no available transport ships because all oil tankers were fully occupied with the transport of Rumanian oil up the Danube. Cited in N. Rich, *Hitler's War Aims: The Establishment of the New Order* (London: André Deutsch, 1974), 498.

15. The Commander in Chief, Navy, and Chief, Naval Staff, to Naval Group South: 1/Skl I m 275/42 Gkdos. Chfs. 23 February 1942. Subject: Operations in the Black Sea (note: this translated document is from vol. 2 of the unpublished “Fuehrer Directives and other Top-Level Directives of the German Armed Forces,” compiled by the USAF), 180.642A, USAFHRA.

16. The surplus refinement capacity of the plants at Ploesti was no secret. For example, in early 1942, British Air Ministry intelligence staff accurately calculated it to be four million tons per year. Whilst they noted that Germany did not have a tanker fleet sufficient to transport the oil from the Caucasus to Rumania, they did warn that it could probably also use part of Vichy France's large fleet in the Mediterranean. “German Plans for Russian Oil,” *AMWIS*, No. 134, Up to 1200—25 March 1942 (on microfilm 32769), 512.607, USAFHRA.



Fall Blau. Map by Michelle Rogan in Hayward, *Stopped at Stalingrad*, 24.

commenced as soon as possible. Now, in early 1942, when the capture of the oilfields became the forthcoming campaign's main objective, the OKW greatly expanded the detachment and renamed it the *Mineralöl Brigade Kaukasus* (Oil Brigade Caucasus). The expansion was necessary because recent "scorched earth" experiences in the Ukraine and the Donets Basin clearly indicated that the Caucasus oilfields would probably *not* be captured before at least some attempts were made to destroy existing wells and refineries. As a result, the OKW raised this unusual paramilitary force to a strength of 10,794 men, issued it 1,142 vehicles and six aircraft, and ordered it to stand by, ready to move into the Caucasus oilfields immediately behind the combat troops.¹⁷



The *Mineralöl Brigade* did not have long to wait. Operation *Blau* commenced on 28 June 1942 and, aside from a brief setback at Voronezh, made rapid progress. Within a month the Wehrmacht bulldozed Soviet forces back beyond the Don River and seized Rostov and the main bridges into the Caucasus. Hitler was delighted; his courageous troops had captured a huge area and smashed open the gateway to the oil-rich Caucasus, which lay before them bare and, to all appearances, only lightly defended. When his generals pointed out that they had actually bagged surprisingly few prisoners, Hitler accused them of pessimism and lack of "the bigger picture." The disappointing prisoner haul did not prove, he insisted, that his grand encircling operations had failed and that broken Soviet formations had merely withdrawn in order to regroup for new defensive operations (the truth, as it turned out). No, he claimed, it proved that Soviet resistance had been truly shattered and any panic-stricken forces managing to escape were on their last legs anyway.

On 23 July, Hitler's mistaken assessment of the Red Army's present state prompted him to issue a war directive that deviated substantially from *Blau's* original conception. "The broad objectives I had set for the southern wing of the Eastern front," he trumpeted in War Directive 45, "have been largely achieved. Only weak forces from [Soviet Marshal Simyon] Timoshenko's armies succeeded in avoiding encirclement and reaching the southern bank of the Don."¹⁸ Now, he continued, it was time to finish the task.

17. G. E. Blau, *The German Campaign in Russia: Planning and Operations (1940-42)*, Department of the Army, Study No. 20-261a (Washington: Department of the Army, 1955), 109, 130.

18. Weisung Nr. 45, in W. Hubatsch, ed., *Hitlers Weisungen für die Kriegführung, 1939-1945. Dokumente des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht* (Koblenz: Bernard und Graefe, 1983), 196-200.

No longer deeming it necessary to secure the northern flank and pound Stalingrad with artillery and airpower and then head south into the Caucasus, he stipulated that both operations be undertaken at the same time by the two new army groups recently formed from Army Group South. In Operation *Fischreiher* (Heron), *Generaloberst* (Colonel-General) Maximilian von Weichs's Army Group B would construct a solid front along the Don. Then, by thrusting forward to Stalingrad, it would smash the enemy forces concentrated there, occupy the city, and block the land bridge between the Don and the Volga. Meanwhile, fast-moving troops were to advance southeastwards along the Volga to Astrakhan, thereby cutting off this valuable waterway. Reflecting his growing fixation on Stalingrad, formerly not even a main target, Hitler ordered the transfer of a Panzer corps from Fourth Panzer to Sixth Army (and thus from the Caucasus to the Stalingrad theatre).

In Operation *Edelweiss*, *Generalfeldmarschall* Wilhelm List's Army Group A was to encircle and destroy the Soviet formations that fled across the Don into the northern Caucasus. It was then to carry out its most important task: the occupation of the entire Black Sea coastline, including its naval bases. This would effectively put an end to the Red Fleet. At the same time, mountain and light infantry divisions (including some brought across the Kerch Straits from Eleventh Army) were to take the high ground around Maikop and Armavir and close the passes in the western Caucasus. Finally, a mobile force was to head south and east to close the military road between Ossetia and Grozny, and to strike along the Caspian coast to the great oil metropolis of Baku.

The *Luftwaffe*, Hitler stated, was to continue providing close and strong support to both army groups. "The early destruction of Stalingrad is especially important," he said.¹⁹ As opportunities present themselves, attacks should be made on Astrakhan and mines laid in the Lower Volga. In view of the Caucasus oilfields' critical importance to the prosecution of the war, he stressed, air raids should immediately be launched against railways and pipelines being used by the enemy. However, attacks on refineries, storage tanks and ports used for oil shipments should only be carried out if circumstances on the ground made them absolutely necessary.

Hitler's new instructions flew in the face of traditional military doctrine. First, they did not involve a reorganization of the army groups in keeping with their allotted tasks. The specialist Italian Alpine Corps, for example, was not sent to the Caucasus. It remained under the command of General Friedrich Paulus's Sixth Army, still rolling eastwards across flat steppes. Frittered away as infantrymen, these excellent alpine troops should have been transferred to List's Army Group A, where they were

19. *Ibid.*

sorely needed. Hitler assigned List the task of conquering the Caucasus but allocated him only three mountain divisions and several infantry divisions totally unsuited in both training and equipment to the task.

Second, rather than work towards a single *Schwerpunkt* (point of main effort)—as espoused by traditional German strategists—Hitler's two groups would diverge at a right angle to one another, thus dissipating their strength. Their divergence would open a large and vulnerable gap between them and, even worse, necessitate separate logistics routes. Supply lines were already stretched to the breaking point, with both army groups experiencing fuel and ammunition shortages. Now Hitler wanted one group to push eastwards to Stalingrad, which was possible (but only just) at the present fuel consumption and supply rates. He wanted the other to plunge southwards to the distant oil-rich cities of the southern Caucasus, a highly improbable (if not impossible) task at the present rates. Even Maikop, the nearest oilfield, was—as the crow flies—335 kilometers away from Rostov, where List's armies stood ready for their drive south. Grozny was almost twice that distance, and Baku, Hitler's ultimate goal, was no less than 1,200 kilometers away. The latter, to illustrate the significance of these distances, was as far from Rostov as that city was from the Polish-Soviet border.

Still, the following few weeks seemed to support his bold "strategy." By 9 August 1942, vanguard units of the Seventeenth Army had reached their first major objective: Krasnodar, the oil refining city on the Kuban River's north bank. Four infantry divisions moved up and took the city, strongly supported by *Fliegerkorps IV* (Fourth Air Corps).²⁰ *Generaloberst* Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen, who commanded all Luftwaffe forces in southern Russia, noted in his personal diary on 8 August: "Bombers performed extremely well against thick enemy columns there."²¹ The infantry footsloggers had made impressive progress. In

20. The largest operational commands within air fleets were the *Fliegerkorps* (air corps). These commands, always designated by roman numerals (*Fliegerkorps I, II, III, IV*, and so on), normally functioned under the authority of the air fleet in the region. On numerous occasions throughout the war, however, the Luftwaffe High Command directed certain *Fliegerkorps* to operate independently and under the direction of their own commanders, who were usually of *Generalleutnant* or *General der Flieger* rank. Air fleets seldom controlled more than one *Fliegerkorps* at a time, although in critical theaters or during major offensives a fleet might assume control of two (and sometimes even elements of a third). *Fliegerkorps* differed markedly in size and composition, depending on the importance of theaters and the nature of operations each air corps was called upon to perform, but "typical" corps during the first two years of war in the east possessed between 350 and 600 aircraft of different types (bombers, fighters, and so on).

21. *Dr. Wolfram Frhr. von Richthofen, Generalfeldmarschall. Persönliches Kriegstagebuch: Band 9: 1.1.–31.12.1942* (cited below as *Richthofen Tagebuch*), entry for 19 April 1942, N671/9, BA/MA.

blazing heat, they had covered fifty kilometers per day as they marched past seemingly endless fields of sunflowers.²² On the opposite flank, Panzer and mobile units of Fortieth Panzer Corps had swept through Voroshilovsk and on to Pyatigorsk, 425 kilometers southeast of Rostov. They captured the city the following day and rumbled into the Caucasus foothills. Between these two groups, the Third Panzer Corps crossed the Kuban River, took Armavir, and bore down upon Maikop, the first of Hitler's great "oil objectives."²³ On the evening of 9 August, the 13th Panzer Division stormed Maikop, taking around a thousand prisoners and capturing fifty undamaged aircraft.

The Führer's initial joy at Maikop's seizure was shared by many of his cohorts. According to Count Galeazzo Ciano's diary, Mussolini "attributes a great deal of importance" to its capture. It will have the effect, the Italian Foreign Minister wrote, "of relieving the Axis, but not immediately, and not altogether, of the pressing oil problem."²⁴ However, their delight soon turned to bitter disappointment when they learned that Soviet rearguards had already destroyed hundreds of wells, wrecked oil storage facilities, and crippled the refineries by removing vital components.²⁵ Although this was always a likely result, the damage was far more extensive than the Axis leaders had naïvely hoped. Twelve days after the city fell, the Inspector of Air Defenses reported that only two oil wells were "capable of being developed for use. One well is still burning, although it may soon be possible to extinguish the fire. The other wells have been rendered useless by having cement poured down the bores."²⁶ The Soviets had also destroyed the large refinery in Krasnodar, he added.

Bringing Maikop back into production would prove difficult and time-consuming, despite the *Mineralöl Brigade* going to work almost

22. Halder, *Kriegstagebuch*, 3: 501 (entry for 8 August 1942); E. Ziemke and M. Bauer, *Moscow to Stalingrad: Decision in the East* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1987), 370.

23. *Die Kampfhandlungen im Osten während des Jahres 1942 (Quelle: Studienentwurf der 8. Abt., Chef Genst. der Luftwaffe, 1944, microfilm T971/18/652-662, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. (cited hereafter as NA).*

24. G. Ciano, *Ciano's Diary, 1939-1943*, ed. M. Muggeridge (London: Heinemann, 1947), 494 (entry for 10 August 1942).

25. According to the official postwar Soviet history, "it was necessary to blow up 38 industrial enterprises in Krasnodar, 755 oil wells, 11 compressor installations and a pipeline." *History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941-1945*, trans. U.S. Army Center of Military History (Scholarly Resources, on seven microfilms), 2: 458. See also, P. E. Schramm, ed., *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Wehrmachtführungsstab) 1940-1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard und Graefe, 1961) (hereafter cited as *KTB OKW*), 2: 581 (entry for 13 August 1942).

26. *Der Inspekteur des Luftschutzes, Az. 41 Nr. 2099/42, g., den 21.8.1942, Betr.: Meldung der Luftflotte 4 vom 19.8.1942. "Schäden auf den Ölfeldern von Maikop and Krasnodar,"* K113.106-153, vol. 14, USAFHRA.

straight away. At the end of August, Georg Thomas, head of the War Economy and Armaments Office, noted in his monthly situation report to the OKW that “only insignificant amounts of oil were found” when Maikop fell.²⁷ The extensive damage inflicted on extraction and processing installations and the sporadic fighting still taking place in the region made it impossible at the moment to conduct a thorough investigation of the oilfield. Yet only after specialists conducted such an investigation, Thomas pointed out, could they determine how soon and to what degree the field could be exploited.

On 8 September 1942—that is, a full month after German troops first entered the Maikop oilfield, choking on thick smoke billowing from burning storage tanks—Dr. Schlicht of the *Mineralöl Brigade* reported to Thomas on progress at Maikop.²⁸ Difficult terrain (“extremely suitable for partisan warfare”) prevented the transportation of cumbersome drilling equipment, at least until new transportation routes could be created. In the meantime, Schlicht said, German specialists had to determine which wells would be easiest to unblock. This would not be easy; the Soviets had inflicted massive damage, even to pipelines. “Until now,” he emphasized, “only 4,000 cubic meters of oil stocks have been uncovered. It will take at least another six months until regular production can resume.” Accordingly, “it is essential we give the *Reichsmarschall* [Imperial Marshal—Hermann Göring, Plenipotentiary of the Four Year Plan and, in effect, Germany’s economics czar] a completely accurate picture of Maikop.” Göring’s understanding of the situation, he added, was grossly over-optimistic: “questions are already being raised about whether the southern army groups can now be supplied with fuel directly from Maikop.”

Schlicht was right: Göring’s grasp of matters relating to oil production was extremely weak. For instance, two months later, on 21 November, he presided over an oil conference in Berlin. Maikop, which had yet to produce oil for Axis troops (and never would, except a few dribbles), remained at the forefront of his mind. “I’m fed up,” he exclaimed. “Months have passed since we captured the first oil wells, yet we still aren’t getting any benefit.”²⁹ He astounded his audience of technical experts when, referring to the concrete plugs dropped down the bores, he naïvely demanded to know: “Can’t you just drill them out with something like a gigantic corkscrew?”

27. *Wi Rü Amt Stab Z/SR, Nr. 1754/42 gKdos, Berlin, den 1. September 1942: Kriegswirtschaftlicher Lagebericht Nr. 36, August 1942, gez. Thomas, RW 19/199, BA/MA.*

28. *Auszüge aus KTB, Wi Rü Amt/Stab (nur Mineralöl-betreffend), Beginn: 9.1.41. Vortrag Dr Schlicht (Mineralöl Brigade) beim Amtchef, 8.9.1942. Bericht über Maikop, RW 19/202, BA/MA.*

29. D. Irving, *Göring: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 367.



Hitler had long known that the Soviets would not give up their oilfields without a fight, and would certainly not let them fall into German hands intact. In January 1942, he had received the text of a “secret” speech made during the previous month by Marshal Timoshenko to the Supreme Defence Council. “If Germany succeeds in taking Moscow,” Timoshenko said,

that is obviously a grave disappointment for us, but it by no means disrupts our grand strategy. . . . Germany would gain accommodation [that is, shelter from the cruel Russian winter], but that alone will not win the war. The only thing that matters is oil. As we remember, Germany kept harping on her own urgent oil problems in her economic bargaining with us from 1939 to 1941. So we have to do all we can (a) to make Germany increase her oil consumption, and (b) to keep the German armies out of the Caucasus.³⁰

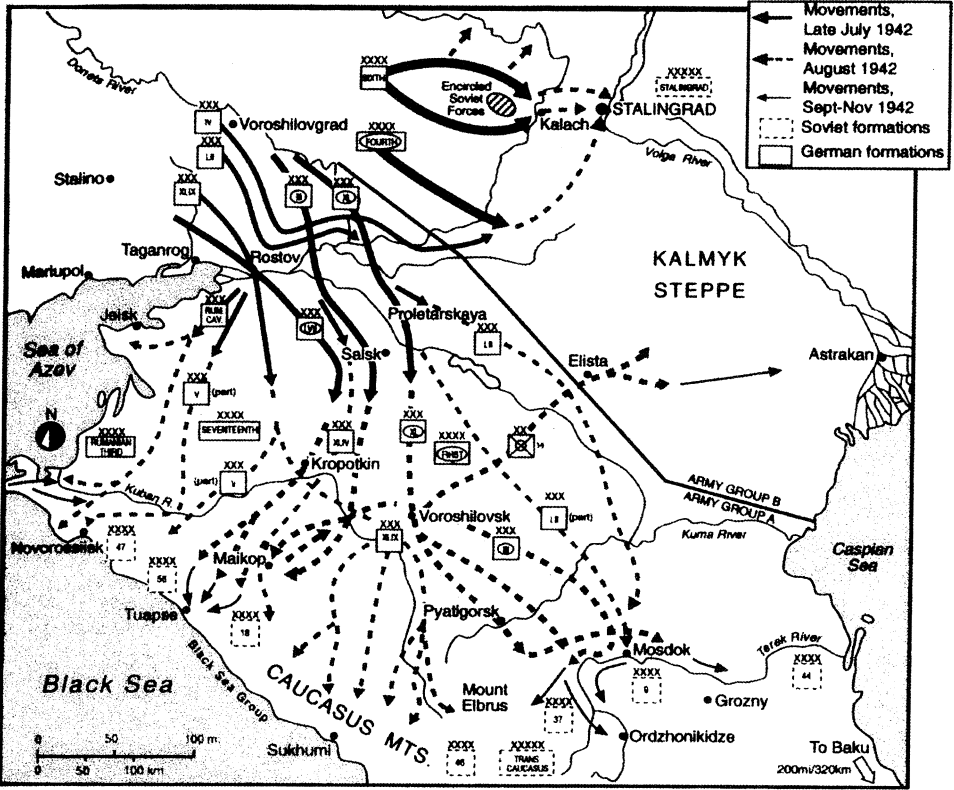
The Führer had foiled Timoshenko’s plan—after all, his troops were deep in the Caucasus and already held the first of the oilfields—but he could hardly consider this a success. That oilfield had been left aflame.

Not only was Hitler promptly informed—and in detail—of the Maikop oilfield’s destruction,³¹ but he also received frequent “updates” from Thomas and his staff on efforts to repair the wrecked facilities and clear the blocked wells. On or shortly after 10 August, therefore, Hitler should have reached the obvious conclusion that his army would not be able to capture the main oilfields intact or only lightly damaged. It had raced with surprising speed to Maikop, the closest of the oil centres, only to find its oilfields extensively damaged and rendered worthless by Soviet engineers and army rearguards. It had little likelihood, therefore, of ever reaching Grozny, on the near side of the Caucasus, and absolutely no chance of reaching Baku, on the far side and far beyond the Wehrmacht’s current logistical reach, before Soviet forces also rendered their oilfields worthless.

The steadily stiffening resistance of Soviet formations in the Caucasus should have reinforced the verity of that conclusion. By mid-August (that is, within only a week of Maikop’s capture) the rapidly declining pace of the German advance, coupled with the steadily mounting losses caused by increasingly strong Soviet defensive operations, began to cause the German High Command grave concerns. *Generaloberst* Halder, Chief of the Army General Staff, noted in his diary on 13 August that “it is becoming increasingly apparent that the enemy intends to hold the northern Caucasus and is forming a group around the Terek River in

30. D. Irving, *Hitler’s War* (London: Papermac, 1977), 348.

31. *KTB OKW*, 2: 581 (entry for 13 August 1942).



Map by Michelle Rogan in Hayward, *Stopped at Stalingrad*, 157.

order to defend the southern Caucasus.” Five days later he complained of the “slow advances” caused by “the enemy’s growing resistance.”

Even Hitler could see that his grand plans for the Caucasus were rapidly proving illusory. On 23 August, two weeks after Maikop fell, Halder recorded that Hitler was “extremely frustrated” by the rate of progress. His frustration intensified on 26 August when List, Commander in Chief of Army Group A in the Caucasus, reported that, unless his forces received reinforcements, fuel, and air support, they would soon have to take up winter positions.³² Yet Hitler failed to come to grips with reality. After seeing that he had no chance of gaining the main oilfields intact or with little damage, and little chance of even *reaching* them during 1942, whatever their state, he should have made the hard but logical decision to order their destruction, or at least their disablement, by air attacks.

32. Ziemke and Bauer, *Moscow to Stalingrad*, 375.

It is actually surprising that he did not reach this decision. He was fully aware of airpower's ability to damage or destroy oil production and refinement facilities. In fact, for almost two years he had held grave fears for the safety of Rumanian oilfields, which provided most of the Reich's oil. Soviet bombers, he repeatedly told his courtiers and military advisors, could destroy the German war economy if they hit those oilfields in sufficient mass. For example, on 20 January 1941 he told his generals: "Now, in the era of air power, Russia can turn the Rumanian oilfields into an expanse of smoking debris . . . and the very life of the Axis depends on those fields."³³ Attacks on those oilfields and refineries were clearly still preying on his mind after he launched Barbarossa, because he emphasized in his supplement to War Directive 34, dated 21 August 1941, that "the capture of the Crimean Peninsula is of extreme importance for safeguarding our oil supplies from Rumania."³⁴ The next day he returned to this theme in a different document:

Apart from the fact that it is important to capture or destroy Russia's iron, coal and oil reserves, it is of decisive importance for Germany that the Russian air bases on the Black Sea be eliminated, above all in the region of Odessa and the Crimea. This measure is absolutely essential for Germany. Under present circumstances no-one can guarantee that our only important oil-producing region is safe from air attack. Such attacks could have incalculable results for the future conduct of the war.³⁵

Similarly, two days later he explained to *Generaloberst* Heinz Guderian, his ablest panzer commander, the absolute need to neutralize the Crimea, "that Soviet aircraft carrier for attacking the Rumanian oilfields."³⁶ The significance of Hitler's constant fear of Soviet air attacks on his main source of oil by Crimea-based bombers has already been noted: it led him to order a large campaign (successfully executed in May and June 1942) to defeat the strong Soviet forces that still held ground at each end of the Crimea. It is remarkable, therefore, that he did not order the Luftwaffe to wreck the Caucasus oilfields as soon as he realised in August 1942 that his army could not capture them intact.

33. Doc. 134-C, OKW/WFSt. Nr. 8/41 gKdos. *Chefs. Ausführungen des Führers am 20.1.1941*, IMT, 34: 469. See Hitler's earlier comments to Ciano on the danger to the Ploesti refineries: "Conversation with the Fuehrer in the Presence of the Reich Foreign Minister, von Ribbentrop, Salzburg, 18th November 1940", in G. Ciano, *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers*, ed. M. Muggeridge, trans. S. Hood (London: Odhams Press, 1948), 408.

34. Halder, *Kriegstagebuch*, 3: 192.

35. *KTB OKW*, 1: 1063-64.

36. H. Guderian, *Erinnerungen eines Soldaten* (Heidelberg: Kurt Vowinckel, 1951), 182.



In August, the possibility of wrecking the oilfields from the air still existed. *Generaloberst* von Richthofen's *Luftflotte 4* (Fourth Air Fleet)³⁷ had two air corps in the southern sector of the Russian front: *General der Flieger* (Air General) Karl Pflugbeil's *Fliegerkorps IV* and *Generalleutnant* (Lieutenant General) Martin Fiebig's *Fliegerkorps VIII*. Since late July, following Hitler's decision to split the main eastern offensive into two simultaneous campaigns, Richthofen had deployed one air corps in support of each army group. Pflugbeil's air corps supported List's drive to the Caucasus oilfields while Fiebig's air corps supported Weichs's drive (spearheaded by the ill-fated Sixth Army) to Stalingrad. Richthofen regretted splitting his air assets in this manner, but believed that he could still create significant *Schwerpunkte* (points of main effort) in each of the combat zones. In any event, he could swap units back and forth between Stalingrad and the Caucasus as opportunities arose or crises developed.

By the time the army occupied the Maikop oilfield on 9 August, Richthofen's *Luftflotte 4* was no longer in good shape. Recent fighting and related missions had taken a heavy toll. In the four weeks before 20 July 1942, for instance, the air fleet's total complement had dropped from 1,610 aircraft to 1,359, and its operational readiness had dropped from 71 percent (which, although not as high as that of the air forces in western Europe, was excellent for the eastern front, where logistical, geographical, and climatic problems proved difficult to overcome) to a mediocre 56 percent in the same period.³⁸ By 20 August the fleet's strength had decreased further. Its complement had fallen to 1,071 aircraft, 643 (or 60 percent) of them operational.³⁹

Because of this drop in strength and serviceability, Richthofen's air fleet was not capable during August 1942 of concentrating bombers in

37. By the time the war in Europe finished in May 1945, the Luftwaffe had organized all its operational aircraft into seven *Luftflotten* (air fleets), three more than it had when hostilities broke out six years earlier. They were designated *Luftflotten 1, 2, 3, 4* (the original four), 5, 6, 7, and *Reich* (created during the war, the latter being responsible for home air defense). Each *Luftflotte* was similar to an individual "Air Force" in the United States Army Air Forces; that is, it was a self-contained air command, comprising all types of combat units (bomber, dive-bomber, ground-attack, fighter, and reconnaissance) as well as transport, flak, and signals units. Senior operational commanders—usually of *Generaloberst* or *Generalfeldmarschall* rank—headed the command staff of each air fleet, exercising full authority over subordinate *Fliegerkorps*.

38. *Einsatz fliegende Verbände der deutschen Luftwaffe an der Ostfront*, 20.6.1942, and *Die Stärke der deutschen Luftwaffe (Ostfront)*, 20.7.1942, K113.309-3, vol. 6, USAFHRA.

39. *Die Stärke der deutschen Luftwaffe (Ostfront)*, 20.8.1942, *ibid.*

sufficient mass to inflict heavy damage on the main Caucasus oilfields. On 20 August it had only 247 medium bombers (Heinkel He 111s and Junkers Ju 88s), a mere 143 of them operational.⁴⁰ Its dive bomber and destroyer (fighter-bomber) units added extra weight, but not much: they totaled 149 Stukas and Me 110s, 81 of them airworthy. *By themselves*, these bombers, dive-bombers, and fighter-bombers probably could not have wrecked the oilfields and refineries to Hitler's satisfaction. Yet they were not the only aircraft available for such a mission. *General der Flieger* Robert Ritter von Greim's *Luftwaffenkommando Ost* (Air Force Command East) operated in the relatively quiet central zone before Moscow with a strong bomber force of 450 medium bombers, 275 of them airworthy. It also possessed over a hundred operational dive-bombers and fighter-bombers.

Hitler and his Air Staff could have ordered raids on the Caucasus oilfields by a strong combined force of bombers formed from Richthofen's *Luftflotte 4* and Greim's *Luftwaffenkommando Ost*. This would have necessitated a temporary but extensive transfer of bomber units from the Moscow and Stalingrad sectors to airfields in the northern and central Caucasus (with "stopovers" at established German airfields in the Crimea and the Don Basin). This was difficult, but, as Hitler well knew, entirely possible. He had personally ordered⁴¹ a very similar set of aircraft transfers only three months earlier, when he hastily transferred units from Richthofen's air corps in the Crimea and Greim's from the Moscow sector to the area around Kharkov, where they helped Pflugbeil's air corps and two German armies repel a powerful Soviet offensive.⁴²

On that occasion, Richthofen and Greim had sent Pflugbeil numerous air units and as much aviation fuel as they could spare, as well as transport aircraft and many trucks to carry it, and even teams of their own ground personnel to help unload the fuel and supplies and construct makeshift airfields and facilities. These transfers had exhausted the aircrews, who received no rest from combat in their own sectors before making the long and arduous flights to the Kharkov region. They also taxed the energy and resources of service, maintenance, and labour battalions, who worked ceaselessly in chaotic conditions to organise and equip airfields (including several new ones, hastily transformed from large stretches of grassy plain) and prepare arriving aircraft for their new missions.

Because several of the airstrips were not near German railheads and established supply routes, and some lacked decent roads, *Luftwaffe*

40. Ibid.

41. *Richthofen Tagebuch*, entry for 13 May 1942, N671/9, BA/MA.

42. Joel S. A. Hayward, "The German Use of Air Power at Kharkov, May 1942," *Air Power History* 44 (Summer 1997): 18–29.

construction, supply, and maintenance personnel had to move their equipment forward by air. Supply units struggled to carry out these missions, pushing themselves and the Junkers Ju 52 work-horses to the limits of their endurance. But it all paid off; despite the great difficulties, the transfer of air units, labour teams, fuel, and equipment from the Crimea and from the Moscow sector gave beleaguered German ground forces at Kharkov what historians Ziemke and Bauer later called “an extraordinarily powerful concentration of air support.”⁴³ This air support proved crucial to the attainment of the Wehrmacht’s victory at Kharkov. So, then, with this successful operation as his “model,” Hitler could have created a force sufficient for raids on Grozny and Baku.

Reaching Grozny presented the Luftwaffe with no difficulty during August and early September. Fully-laden Junkers Ju 88s and Heinkel He 111s could easily have reached it from *Fliegerkorps IV*’s forward airfields around Voroshilovsk and in the region between the Kuma and Terek Rivers. The short flight distances would have made it possible for bombers to conduct several raids each per day (if ground personnel could keep up, that is). Fighters could also have escorted them both there and back. Reaching Baku was more problematic. Ju 88s and He 111s could reach Baku from those airfields, but only by the most direct routes to keep the entire two-way flights within range. This would have made their flight paths predictable, thereby creating greater risks of losses to flak “curtains” and interception by Soviet fighters. German fighters could not have reduced the latter threat; their limited range prevented them escorting bombers all the way to their targets, thus leaving them exposed to Soviet fighter attack as they approached their targets.

Actually, had the Luftwaffe attacked Grozny and especially Baku during August, it would have faced little opposition from the *Voyenno-vozdushnyye sily* (VVS—the Red Air Force). The VVS had few aircraft in the Caucasus, and most were obsolete models. On 29 July, *Luftflotte 4* reported to the OKW that “the Russian air force facing Army Group South’s right flank demonstrates its weakness. Stukas even carry out their attacks without fighter escorts, and don’t get attacked by Russian fighters.”⁴⁴ This situation remained constant throughout most of August, as Richthofen’s diary and the official OKW war diary both reveal.

By the end of August, however, it had begun to change. Soviet ground forces in the region around Grozny requested and received additional fighter, ground-attack, and bomber units, which commenced combat operations in the last days of August. They were soon joined by air units that had earlier been savaged by the Luftwaffe and forced to with-

43. Ziemke and Bauer, *Moscow to Stalingrad*, 275.

44. *KTB OKW*, 2: 537; *History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union*, 2: 455, 456.

draw, with high losses and their formations scattered, to a variety of airfields in the southern Caucasus. By the middle of September, they had been repaired, strengthened by replacements, reorganised into proper formations, and placed back into combat. They wanted revenge, and quickly began gaining it.⁴⁵

Of course, even if the Luftwaffe had struck Baku in August, when the Red Air Force remained very weak, it would not have done so without losses. Strong anti-aircraft defences protected the oil metropolis. In the spring of 1942, "the Soviet High Command, continuing to strengthen the Soviet armed forces' defensive capabilities, devoted special attention to the strengthening of anti-aircraft defences at critically important industrial-economic centres, particularly Moscow, Leningrad, and Baku."⁴⁶ The latter received the least attention, due to the Soviet High Command's mistaken belief throughout the first half of 1942 that the Germans would launch another major campaign against Moscow.⁴⁷ Even so, by July 1942 fighters units formed part of Baku's anti-aircraft defences, which included searchlights, early-warning systems, balloons, and numerous flak batteries. By the beginning of September, as the Germans inched towards Grozny, additional fighter units arrived in the southern Caucasus for Baku's defence.

Richthofen and his two air corps commanders knew something of these anti-aircraft defences, as did the Luftwaffe High Command (OKL). Daily reconnaissance flights over important Caucasus cities, ports, and naval bases had been occurring routinely for several months before German troops even entered the Caucasus at the end of July.⁴⁸ They had taken many thousands of photographs of Novorossiisk, Tuapse, Sukhumi, Poti, Krasnodar, Astrakhan, Grozny, and even distant Baku. German cartographers had already incorporated valuable information from these photographs and aircrew reports into the new maps then being spread before the staff and field officers directing the Caucasus campaign.

Baku's anti-aircraft defences would not have prevented all, or even most, Luftwaffe aircraft from unloading their bombs over the oilfields and installations had these missions been ordered in August. Experience during 1941 and the first half of 1942 showed Luftwaffe observers that Soviet flak batteries generally performed well but failed to prevent or curtail German attacks. Moreover, Allied air raids on *German* cities convinced them that even their own flak gunners, supposedly better than

45. Hayward, *Stopped at Stalingrad*, 164ff.

46. T. Erofeev, "Razvitiye organizatsionnoi struktury voisk PVO strany," *Voennistoricheskii zhurnal* 12 (1973): 59–64.

47. Hayward, *Stopped at Stalingrad*, 13, 14.

48. I have covered these missions in *Stopped at Stalingrad*.

the Soviets, were incapable of bringing down a high number of aircraft or preventing widespread damage.



So, then, why did Hitler not order the Luftwaffe to attack Grozny and Baku during August, when he had the means to do so and little chance of capturing the oilfields intact or with minor damage? Two reasons exist. First, he failed entirely to grasp the significance of Maikop's destruction by Soviet rearguards, and seems to have naïvely considered it possible that the other oilfields, even if they also suffered attack, could be exploited within a comparatively short period if captured promptly. Accordingly, even after the advance of List's army group slowed to a crawl in the face of inadequate air support, dwindling fuel and ammunition, and stiffening Soviet resistance, Hitler refused to terminate the Caucasus offensive, or even allow a pause for regrouping and the establishment of winter positions. When List failed to increase the tempo in early September, Hitler dismissed him and announced to his stunned entourage that he would take personal charge of Army Group A.

Tormented by a growing realisation that his Caucasus campaign was almost over, and filled with disappointment, mistrust, and anger at his general staff, he directed his hostility towards Halder, whom he repeatedly accused of lacking National Socialist ardour and finally sacked two weeks later. He replaced him with Kurt Zeitzler, who was not only a fervent Nazi but a dynamic leader whose exceptional organizational abilities, assertive manner, and boundless energy had earned him the nickname "Thunderball" (*Kugelblitz*).

Neither Zeitzler's "thunder" nor "Field Marshal" Hitler's long-distance command of exhausted Army Group A compensated for the group's acute shortages of supplies, reinforcements, and air support. (The latter was Hitler's own fault; he wanted the Caucasus campaign to succeed, but devoted no airpower to it. He wasted it at Stalingrad instead.) As autumn wind and rain replaced summer sun, the Caucasus campaign steadily petered out, with only very minor changes in the line occurring after the middle of September. By early October, Axis forces were barely moving—and barely surviving, in many cases, due to fierce resistance and shortages of fuel and provisions. Yet, although they almost had Grozny, they were still nowhere near achieving Hitler's major campaign goals.

It was only at this point (as shown below) that Hitler finally embraced reality and, realising that his dream of capturing and exploiting the Caucasus oilfields (at least in the short to medium term) was over, ordered the Luftwaffe to attack the oilfields. He did not, however,

order his armies to withdraw behind the Don. They remained in the Caucasus, apparently until a new campaign towards the oilfields could be launched. As it happened, Soviet forces almost encircled them as they did Sixth Army at Stalingrad. Zeitzler persuaded Hitler to pull them back in the nick of time, and they escaped in December 1942 and January 1943 with reasonable losses.

The second reason for Hitler's failure to issue timely orders for air attacks on Grozny and Baku is that in August he became obsessed with capturing Stalingrad and consequently gave it far higher priority than the seizure or destruction of the oilfields. The Luftwaffe's primary function in the southern sector ceased to be support of the armies in the Caucasus (where they would be available for raids against oilfields), and instead became "flying artillery" in support of Sixth Army as it struggled to take Stalingrad.

After Hitler divided his main campaign into two simultaneous offensives in July, Richthofen possessed nowhere near enough aircraft to provide adequate support for both army groups and was soon no longer able, as a result, to create major *Schwerpunkte*. He spent the next three and a half months hastily swapping units back and forth between Stalingrad and the Caucasus as he attempted to create "local" *Schwerpunkte* as opportunities arose or crises developed. Those transfers over long distances steadily reduced operational rates. Moreover, air units encountered increasingly numerous Red Air Force units, which proved better trained and equipped than hitherto. To overcome them cost time, effort, and high losses. Luftwaffe units also often had to operate from inadequate airfields, sometimes far from their targets, which were widely scattered over a large area.

Consequently, the level of support for most army formations dropped dramatically, with the exception of ground forces attacking Stalingrad itself, which received strong support in accordance with Hitler's personal orders. As early as 11 August (only two days after Maikop's capture, in fact), Richthofen realised that the Führer's attention had shifted to Stalingrad and, in order to satisfy his desire for the strongest possible air attacks on that city, began pulling air units out of the Caucasus. This left two complete armies with a rapidly diminishing level of air support. Richthofen's decision to strip units from Pflugbeil's *Fliegerkorps IV*, the air corps operating in the Caucasus, was doubtless influenced by his 10 August meeting with Hans Jeschonnek, the Luftwaffe's Chief of General Staff, who emphasised Hitler's growing infatuation with the city bearing Stalin's name.⁴⁹

By early September, the army's wide dispersion across the width of the Caucasus and *Fliegerkorps IV*'s much-reduced complement left

49. *Richthofen Tagebuch*, entry for 10 August 1942, N671/9, BA/MA.

Richthofen unable to create even minor *Schwerpunkte* in that large region without first having to “borrow” units from Fiebig’s *Fliegerkorps VIII*, then busy wrecking Stalingrad. With Hitler constantly demanding an intensification of effort at Stalingrad, against which Fiebig’s air corps committed almost all its aircraft, Richthofen was seldom able to send air units south. Even when he managed to divert units to the Caucasus, he had to dissipate their strength by committing half to each of the army’s critical sectors: the forested hills around Tuapse, where Soviet defenders withstood Seventeenth Army’s repeated attempts to break through to the Black Sea coast, and in the Terek bend, where First Panzer Army encountered fierce resistance as it tried to push through to Grozny. He had nothing to deploy in mass against oilfields and other economic targets.

Fliegerkorps VIII performed well against its primary target, Stalingrad, pounding it into rubble during heavy raids, but its continued bombardment of the ruins in accordance with Hitler’s insistence that every street be cleared of the enemy led to a great waste of resources. For two months, Fiebig’s units rained hundreds of tons of bombs on the ruins each day, turning small heaps of large rubble into large heaps of small rubble but achieving nothing substantial. This was neither Fiebig’s nor Richthofen’s fault. Hitler wanted Stalingrad taken, and insisted that all efforts be directed to that end. Hence, no raids against Grozny or Baku could be contemplated. Hitler only changed his mind in October, when a temporary lull in fighting at Stalingrad occurred as both sides, exhausted and in need of reinforcements, took a “breather.” On most days between 6 and 14 October, Richthofen noted in his diary: *Bei Stalingrad absolute Ruhe*—“Absolute quiet at Stalingrad.”



This lull in fighting at Stalingrad coincided with the Führer’s eventual realization that his forces in the Caucasus would not reach the main oilfields before winter weather forced them to take up winter positions. On 7 October, therefore, he ordered Richthofen, whose units had temporarily suspended attacks on Stalingrad’s ruined suburbs, to attack oilfields at Grozny and other central Caucasian centres as strongly as possible. If he could not have the oilfields—at present, anyway—he should at least deny Stalin’s agriculture, industry, and armed forces their vast output.⁵⁰

Richthofen realised that this would be no easy task, especially as Hitler had not ordered Greim’s units in the Moscow sector to participate (apparently because Soviet pressure in that sector was also mounting

50. Irving, *Hitler’s War*, 437.

and Hitler wanted Greim's forces kept there to prevent any Soviet attacks). Richthofen therefore ordered the transfer of almost every available bomber and dive-bomber unit in the Stalingrad sector to airfields around the northern Caucasian towns of Krasnodar, Maikop, and Armavir, where they were made ready for their first "strategic" bombing mission in months. Some units, including the 3d Group of the Fifty-fifth Bomber Wing (*III./K.G. 55*), had to operate from airfields at Saki in the distant Crimea.⁵¹ Even reaching Grozny from Saki would prove difficult for them. Reaching Baku was impossible. Aircraft could no longer operate from *Fliegerkorps IV*'s forward airfields around Voroshilovsk and in the region between the Kuma and Terek Rivers; they had proven too vulnerable to Red Air Force attacks and had mostly been abandoned during September in favour of airfields further north.

On 10 October, Richthofen hurled almost every operational bomber his air fleet possessed against the Grozny refineries.⁵² Bomber units, like those of the other aircraft types, were now in poor shape. Richthofen had started Operation *Blau* with an impressive force of 480 bombers, of which 323 (a reasonable 67 percent) were serviceable.⁵³ Now he had only 232 bombers, of which a mere 129 (55 percent) were serviceable. They could still deliver reasonable blows to single targets, however. The damage they and dive-bombers inflicted on Grozny reminded Richthofen of attacks on Sevastopol during June 1942; huge flames leapt from shattered fuel tanks and burst pipes, and dense clouds of smoke rose high into the air.⁵⁴ He was delighted, joyfully noting in his diary the following evening that smoke clouds were still 5,500 meters high. He repeated the attacks two nights later, with equally pleasing results.⁵⁵

These raids on Grozny's oil refineries, though, marked the sum total of *Luftflotte 4*'s "strategic" attacks on Soviet industry in the Caucasus.⁵⁶ Richthofen simply could not spare aircraft from the Stalingrad sector to carry out further such raids. He certainly had no chance of conducting

51. *III./Kampfgeschwader 55-Kriegstagebuch Nr. 8*, entry for 10 October 1942, microfilm T971/16/114-232, frames 140-42, NA.

52. *Richthofen Tagebuch*, entry for 10 October 1942, N671/9, BA/MA.

53. *Zusammenstellung der Ist-Stärken und der einsatzbereiten Flugzeuge an der Ostfront 1942*, K113.106-153, USAFHRA.

54. Irving, *Hitler's War*, 437.

55. *Ostfeldzug. Luftwaffeneinsatz (OKW Berichte)*, microfilm T971/18/644-646, NA. H. Boog et al., *Der globale Krieg: Die Ausweitung zum Weltkrieg und der Wechsel der Initiative, 1941-1943*, vol. 6 of *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1990), 951.

56. H.-D. H. von Rohden, *Europäische Beiträge zur Geschichte des Weltkrieges II, 1939/45*, vol. 1, *Die deutsche Luftwaffe im Kriege gegen Rußland, 1941-1945* (manuscript in the USAFHRA), 117.

the “massive attacks” on Baku’s oilfields, for instance, that Hitler ridiculously ordered on 22 October.⁵⁷

By that stage, Richthofen’s bomber strength had risen slightly to 186 airworthy He 111s and Ju 88s,⁵⁸ but Hitler’s own illogical prioritising, and its consequent impact on the employment of those bombers, offset this small gain. Even after ordering the “massive attacks” on Baku and Astrakhan, Hitler still insisted that the destruction and capture of Stalingrad remained his highest priority. Thus, Richthofen felt unable to commit his bomber forces to attacks on the oilfields. In fact, he could only temporarily reduce the bombardment of Stalingrad and send bomber forces south when bad weather at Stalingrad curtailed operations there.

Hitler’s continued emphasis on Stalingrad can be explained. During October intelligence reports revealed strong Soviet build-ups on either side of the city and warned that a major counteroffensive loomed. Hitler remained convinced that the best means of preventing a Soviet breakthrough would be the rapid capture of Stalingrad, which would release the bulk of Sixth Army for defensive duties in and behind the vulnerable sections of the front.⁵⁹ Hence, even though he wanted—and ordered—the Baku oilfields destroyed to deny Stalin their vast output, he kept the air units that could have attempted it tied up at Stalingrad.

In any event, even though Hitler ordered Baku’s destruction by *Luftflotte 4*, he never ordered Greim’s *Luftwaffenkommando Ost* to participate or transfer units south temporarily for the undertaking. Without this reinforcement, Richthofen’s 186 airworthy bombers, scattered throughout *Luftflotte 4*’s vast combat zone, could not possibly have been organised into an attack force and deployed in sufficient mass to significantly wreck Baku’s oilfields, refineries, and storage facilities—even if they could reach them; and by October they could not. Most forward airfields in the central Caucasus had been badly damaged by Soviet air forces (which were then far stronger), placing Baku well outside the range of bombers operating from even the closest secure German airfields. Perhaps most importantly, by the last week of October Richthofen had a far more pressing mission: the deployment of every spare aircraft against the Soviet forces revealed by his reconnaissance units to be preparing a massive offensive to snare Sixth Army at Stalingrad.⁶⁰

57. *KTB OKW*, 2: 849.

58. *Einsatz fliegende Verbände der deutschen Luftwaffe an der Ostfront*, 20.10.1942, K113.309-3, vol. 6, USAFHRA.

59. Hayward, *Stopped at Stalingrad*, 218.

60. *Ibid.*, 218–21.

Conclusions

Richthofen's eventual air attacks on Grozny did considerable material damage, but placed no strain whatsoever on the Soviet economy and war effort. After all, the combined production of both Maikop and Grozny only amounted to around 10 percent of the Soviet Union's total output. Maikop's capture and Grozny's wrecking doubtless annoyed the Soviet leadership, but, with Baku's immense output left untouched, these losses were certainly not going to plunge the Soviet military and civilian economies into a period of hardship. In fact, the *threat* of a German advance to Baku had already done far more damage; before the Germans even entered the Caucasus that threat had caused the evacuation of much machinery and the closure of many wells.⁶¹ The German entry into the Caucasus then placed great strains on Soviet logistical capabilities, having made necessary huge detours. Oil had to travel across the Caspian Sea to Krasnovdsk and up through Turkmenia to Orenburg in order to arrive back in the nation's interior. A lack of vessels, trains, and storage facilities exacerbated these problems. Thus, the loss of Maikop and Grozny paled into insignificance compared to these difficulties. Only Baku's loss or heavy damage could have crippled the Soviet Union, and Hitler had wasted his opportunity in August.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is now reasonable to argue that Richthofen's air fleet could have dealt the Soviet economy a major blow, from which it would have taken at least several months to recover, if it had unloaded as many bombs on Baku as it did on Stalingrad. Heavy damage to that oil metropolis, which alone accounted for 80 percent of all Soviet production, was possible during August and early September. Richthofen still possessed a strong bomber force and airfields within striking range, Greim had many other bombers he could have transferred south for such a mission, and the Red Air Force's presence in the Caucasus was still relatively weak. By October, when Hitler finally ordered attacks on oilfields, Richthofen's bomber fleet was much reduced, most forward airfields had been badly damaged by Soviet air forces, which were now far stronger, Baku was no longer within range, and Richthofen was desperately trying to stave off the looming Soviet counterattack at Stalingrad. The opportunity had been missed.

Of course, such arguments are the luxury of historians with hindsight allowing them vantage points not possessed by the participants themselves. The reality is that Hitler wanted Stalingrad captured more than he wanted oilfields destroyed (or even captured, judging by his decision to send Fourth Panzer Army from the Caucasus to Stalingrad in

61. M. Harrison, *Soviet Planning in Peace and War, 1938-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 171.

July and his subsequent unwillingness to reinforce his Caucasian armies). He therefore insisted on the continued heavy bombing of Stalingrad, despite its limited propaganda, strategic, or tactical value. Even after he realized that the oilfields could not be gained in 1942 and ordered Richthofen to destroy them from the air, he still insisted that Stalingrad's capture remained his highest priority.

Richthofen could do little about Hitler's illogical prioritising, despite "suggesting" on several occasions that his air assets could be employed more effectively if given other missions. Although he was one of Hitler's favourite air commanders, he suffered from the same problem as almost all other commanders at the front: Hitler usually preferred the counsel of his closest military advisers—especially Jodl and Keitel, who hardly ever visited combat zones—to that of his men at the front, whom he often accused of lacking the "big picture." This unfortunate state of affairs became obvious again in November 1942, when Hitler ignored Richthofen's repeated and emphatic statements that the Luftwaffe could not keep Sixth Army alive and combat-worthy at Stalingrad.

As it happened, then, Hitler's illogical prioritising effectively prevented Richthofen from committing his bomber forces to attacks on the oilfields. In fact, even in October he could only temporarily reduce Stalingrad's bombardment and send bomber forces south when weather conditions curtailed operations there. On those occasions, he usually had to deploy them in support of the beleaguered armies still stretched out across the width of the Caucasus, and could seldom spare them for missions against economic targets. When he did, the raids were too little, too late. Although he inflicted pleasing damage on a few refineries and oilfields, particularly at Grozny, he proved woefully incapable of crippling Soviet oil production.