

KERCH-ELTIGEN OPERATION IN THE WAR DIARIES OF THE GERMAN NAVY

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DOI: 10.55535/RMT.2022.4.20

Almost in parallel with the withdrawal of the Axis troops from the Taman area in the Caucasus, the Soviets prepared a bold landing action on the Kerch peninsula in Crimea. The landings, carried out in two areas, south and north of the city of Kerch, were aimed at supporting the offensive from the north of the Sea of Azov and capturing Crimea.

The present study focuses on the naval actions that took place predominantly in the area of the southern bridgehead, where the Axis naval forces were able to block the supply of enemy troops.

Keywords: Second World War; Germany; USSR; Black Sea; landing;

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1943, the strategic situation deteriorated rapidly for the Axis forces in the USSR. On 5 July, the great battle of Kursk began. The resounding failure there meant that the German troops had to withdraw all the way to the Dnieper line until October. The front stretched in the South to Melitopol, on the western side of the Sea of Azov. It meant that the Crimean Peninsula was threatened and the forces left in the Taman area (the 17th Army) were in danger of encirclement (Ruge, 1979, p. 110). Most of the units of the Army Group A, which had operated in the Caucasus, were pushed back through Rostov to the West, before the Soviets could re-conquer the city. Still, important forces of the 17th Army remained in what was called the “*Kuban bridgehead*”, the least piece of land in the Caucasus held by Axis troops. The frontline stretched from Temriuk, on the Sea of Azov, to Novorossiysk, on the Black Sea. The frontline was defeated by German and Romanian troops until their final evacuation, in the autumn of 1943 (Sichigea, 2017, p. 57).

The withdrawal and then encirclement of a new army, after the catastrophe of Stalingrad, must have caused negative feelings for the Germans and it is still criticized by modern military historians (Forczyk, 2018, p. 9). On the other hand, the options left for the Germans were limited. In January 1943, it was impossible for the 17th Army to withdraw to the north, via Rostov. The 1st Tank Army barely managed it. A naval evacuation, over the Kerch Strait, was also impractical, because the Axis naval forces were not amassed for such a difficult operation (Ib., p. 9). That is why it was decided for the 17th Army to remain in Taman area, as a rear guard for the withdrawal actions in the Caucasus, until it could be evacuated in Crimea.

Holding on in the Taman area, the so-called “*Kuban bridgehead*”, in German, “*Gotenkopf*” (Goth’s head) was also caused by Adolf Hitler’s wish to have a base for future offensive actions in the Caucasus, once the front would be stabilized in Southern Ukraine. It is clear he was still thinking of attacking the Soviet oilfields in the Caucasus, in 1943 (Ib., p. 25). There was also the argument that the Soviets would not dare to attack the Crimea as long as there were still Axis forces in their rear-guard, in the Taman area, threatening their supply lines. Supplying the 200,000 Germans and Romanians in the 17th Army was, however, a herculean task for the Axis Navy in the Black Sea.

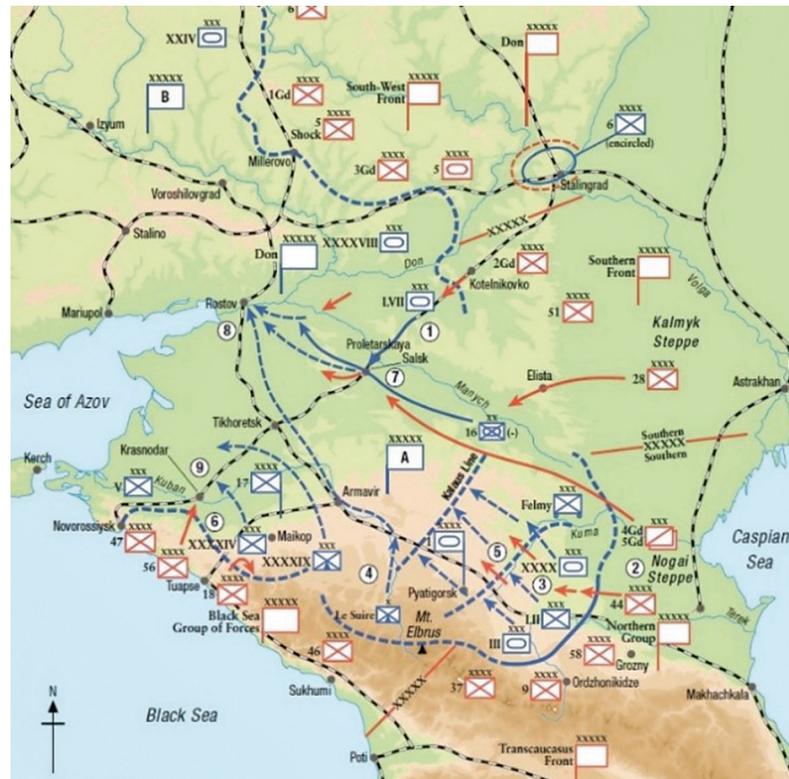


Figure no. 1: The Axis troops withdrawal from Taman area (lb., p. 8).

THE ROLE OF THE ADMIRAL SCHWARZES MEER IN COORDINATING THE NAVAL ACTIONS

At the end of August 1943, the German High Command realized the futility of the "Gotenkopf" position. Therefore, they started to prepare the evacuation of the bridgehead in the Caucasus, Operation "Brunhild". As the units of the 17th Army made obvious preparations to withdraw, the Soviets were stepping up their aggressive pushes. The focal point became the landing operation at Novorossiysk (Sichigea, 2017, p. 62). On 15 September the Germans were pushed out of the city, but their withdrawal was executed in a coordinated manner. They had already received permission to abandon the Kuban bridgehead and cross into the Crimea. This operation, which lasted a month, was uncontested by the Soviets. There were only minor assaults. Most of the forces and equipment were saved: 240,000 soldiers, 16,000 wounded, 27,000 civilians, 21,000 vehicles and over 115,000 tons of supplies. The Germans also decided to withdraw their Azov flotilla for good – about 240 smaller vessels, with only two losses (lb.).

Starting in September, the German General Staff planned the eventual evacuation of the Crimea, but political and military complications caused by a premature withdrawal from the peninsula, resulted in the plan being postponed. One consideration was the fact that leaving the area would not have led to a shorter front, because the area could be used as a staging ground to threaten the coasts of Romania and Bulgaria. In such a case, Germany would have needed to actually increase its commitment on the southern flank.

On 7 November the Chief of Army Group South, Field Marshal E. von Manstein, tried to persuade the political leadership to accept the evacuation of the Crimea and the redeployment of the 17th Army in Ukraine, where the Axis needed fresh reserves. Hitler was again adamant that the area must be kept, because an Axis debacle would make a negative impression on Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania (Frieser, 2007, p. 367). At the same time, the Soviets reached the Perekop Isthmus, thus isolating the Axis forces in the Crimea. Those units thus depended solely on naval supplies.

The task to supply the German and Romanian forces in the Crimea was passed to the *Admiral Schwarzes Meer (A.S.M.)*, the naval structure that the Germans had created back in 1941 to coordinate the naval forces in the Black Sea area. In the first part of the war in the East, the A.S.M., based in Romania, had to rely on the Romanian naval forces, because Germany had no warships in the area. The Naval Staff did not consider necessary to undergo the arduous task of transporting ships in the Black Sea. The sea access was also problematic. Moreover, the German Naval Staff hoped that its speedy land offensive would manage to occupy the coastal bases of the Soviet Union, in the Crimea and in the Caucasus. After the first year of the war, however, the German Navy was forced to accept the need to transfer some smaller warships for mining actions and torpedo attacks against the enemy's communication lines: motor torpedo boats, minesweepers, minelayers, landing craft and even some submarines.

Since the start of October 1943 the A.S.M. reported that the enemy, from his bases in Taman, was preparing a landing operation against the Crimea. There were several possible targets, with many points on the coast very vulnerable to such actions, such as the isthmus of Ak-Monay (War Diary of Admiral Black Sea, October 1943, p. 3). At that time the Germans expected the attack to come from the north, from the Sea of Azov against the north-east coast of Crimea.

On 5-6 October, it took place one of the most important actions in the Black Sea during the Second World War. Three Soviet destroyers, "Kharkov", "Besposhchadny" and "Sposobny", tried to harass the Axis convoys on the coast of the Crimea

and clashed with German M.T.Bs. After they were reacquired by the Axis air forces, they were subjected to waves of bomber attacks. The diving bombers managed to sink them all. After this catastrophe, Stalin prohibited any surface ship action without his consent (Rohwer, Hummelchen, 1992, p. 239).

The A.S.M. was pleased by the success of Operation "Brunhild", which saved most of the forces of the 17th Army and 1,500 guns, 18,000 vehicles and over 25,000 wagons and horse drawn carriages (War Diary of Admiral Black Sea, ib., p. 37). In the report to the superior echelons, it was pointed out that "along the transport missions, which were the focal point, we were focused also on securing our lines of communication on the coast against enemy surface ships attacks and against landings" (ib.). Their optimism seemed merited, especially since in the next day the A.S.M. managed to withdraw its 240 ships used in the Kuban operation "Wiking" with only a naval ferry barge and an assault craft (from the Army engineers) lost (Rohwer, Hummelchen, 1992, p. 240).

It did not mean the Germans did not anticipate a Soviet landing operation against the Crimea. The A.S.M. had expressed worries that the Feodosia Bay was vulnerable. It was the area where the Kerch Peninsula was at its narrowest. On the east side of the isthmus, there were hills near the beaches, but on the west side, there were areas favourable for a landing operation (War Diary of Admiral Black Sea, October, II, p. 1).

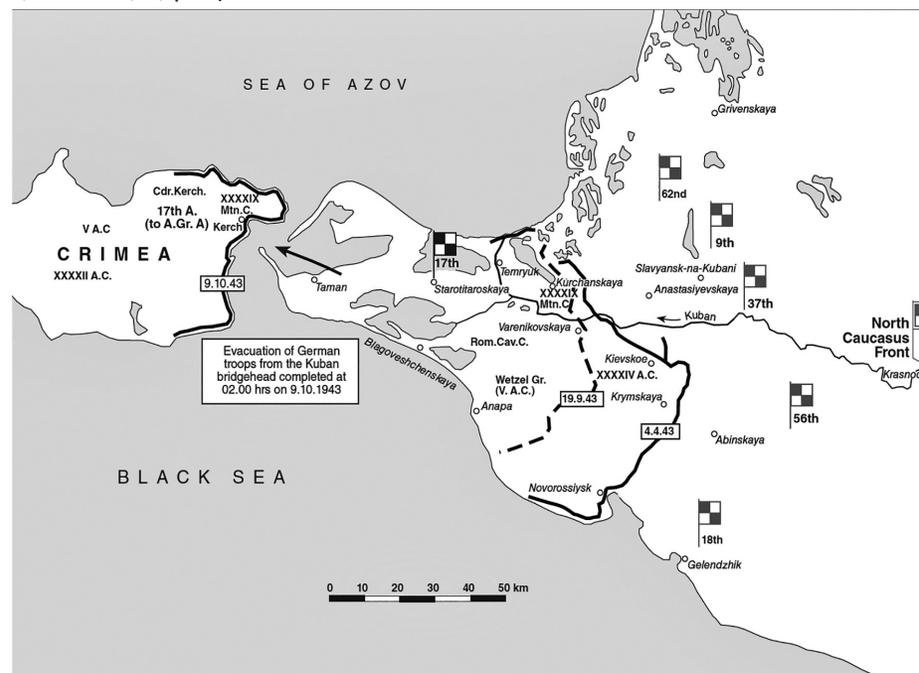


Figure no. 2: The stages of the Taman bridgehead evacuation (Frieser, 2017, p. 448).

For the forces withdrawn from the Kuban, the operational break did not last long. A part of those divisions was transferred to the north, to Ukraine. Those that stayed in the Crimea were isolated a few weeks later, landing in another encirclement. Worse, once the Soviets started to land at Kerch and Eltigen, those German units rushed into combat to annihilate the enemy bridgeheads (Galbraith, 2014, p. 46).

The first Soviet landings, albeit small, actually took place on 20 October, at Cape Chauda, in the eastern extremity of the Feodosia Bay. Those were clearly limited actions and the Germans were correct in treating them as such. Much more worryingly, the Soviets were amassing a huge number of small ships for further operations. The German air reconnaissance identified a large number of landing craft at Anapa and Gelenjik, which indicated an offensive operation at Kerch (War Diary of Admiral Black Sea, October, II, p. 31).

It is interesting to point out that the A.S.M. anticipated the eventual targets of the Soviet landings. On 30 October, it was reported to the 17th Army that the enemy would not seek to consolidate its position in the Bay of Feodosia and would commence new landings "in the narrowest part of the Kerch Peninsula, between Chuska and Yenikale" (War Diary of Admiral Black Sea, II, p. 51).

The representative of the Soviet General Staff in the Caucasus area, Marshal A. Vasilievski wanted to keep a small blocking force in the Taman. That would allow the Soviet fronts to focus their efforts on the north side, at the Perekop Isthmus, for the liberation of Crimea. It was eventually decided to follow both directions: while the Crimea would be attacked from the north, the Red Army would land forces at Kerch, to divert the Axis units there, with support from the Black Sea Fleet (Shirokorad, 2005, p. 478).

The Commander of the North-Caucasus Front, General I. Petrov, ordered, on 12 October 1943, to commence the preparation of the Kerch landing operation with forces from the 56th and the 18th armies. On 14 October the two task forces were readied:

"1). 1st and 2nd landing forces (56th Army) – the Azov Flotilla, with 2 patrol boats, 16 armoured gunboats, 7 minesweepers, 6 torpedo boats, 8 tugs and 5 barges. To reinforce the Black Sea Fleet, 12 barges, 7 patrol boats and 20 assault boats were added.

2) 3rd landing force (18th Army) with six detachments (12 patrol boats, 50 trawlers, 5 river trawlers, 15 other small boats, 15 motor boats, 20 boats and 3 armoured gunboats" (ib.).

On 31 October both task forces landed simultaneously their forces northeast of Kerch and in the village of Eltigen, to the south. Two days later, the A.S.M. did not seem too concerned with those events, probably still under the effect of the former

smaller landings, which were easily countered: *“We have received reports that on 1 November, at 03:00, a Russian regiment landed at Ianis-Takil in the Kerch Strait and at Eltigen. At 05:00, another landing took place at Lenikale. The enemy was met with powerful fire from our coastal batteries and had to withdraw behind a smoke cover. By the evening, the bridgehead was reduced to a strip of land 3 km long along the coast, although it could not be annihilated. The smaller force that landed at Ianis-Takil was eliminated. A second landing at Lenikale was countered. Our patrol boats could not observe what was taking place at the Eltigen bridgehead because they were in the Kerch Strait, where the threat was considered greater”* (War Diary of Admiral Black Sea, November 1943, p. 3).

On 2 November, the A.S.M. noted a further reduction in the Eltigen bridgehead, to approximately 1.5 km of coast, manned by just 1,500 enemy soldiers, with little change of receiving reinforcements. Still, the Soviet air superiority was tightening and it was a factor contributing to the slowness of the process of destruction of the enemy bridgehead (Ib., p. 7).

The same day the Naval Staff was informed of the Soviet landing operations and ordered intensified patrols along the Crimean coasts. The forces at the A.S.M.'s disposal were considered *“inadequate”*, but it was argued that they would be able to confuse the enemy and delay the transport of fresh troops from the Taman area (War Diary, Naval Staff Operations Division, November 1943, p. 38). The records of that day showed a certain anxiety at the higher levels of the German Navy. That was enforced by a flow of orders to the A.S.M.: to install new mine barrages, to ready urgent plans for patrols with the ships of the 3rd Minesweeper Flotilla. The A.S.M. was to add to its daily reports proposals for more aggressive actions with its operational forces. There was also the idea of reorganizing the whole German naval structure in the Black Sea *“under the pressure of current events”* (Ib.).

During the night of 2-3 November, there were the first clashes between the A.S.M. ships and the Soviet ones. The latter were trying to resupply the Kerch bridgehead. Unexpectedly, for the Germans, the *“stars”* were the naval ferry barges (*M.F.P. – Marinefahrprahme*), better armed than the light craft the Soviets had. An enemy landing ship was sunk and three others were set ablaze, including a small tug. The German captains reported that most of the fighting took place at close quarters, with machineguns and grenades. The Germans suffered low casualties (War Diary of Admiral Black Sea, November 1943, p. 9).

Even in this first phase of the operation it was clear that, for the Axis, the dangerous area was the northern bridgehead. The Eltigen bridgehead was under

constant bombardment and it was difficult to maintain for the Soviets. In the north, however, they not only managed to fortify their position, but even expanded the bridgehead and moved to the west. On 3 November, the A.S.M. estimated the number of Soviet troops in the northern bridgehead at over 3,000.



Figure no. 3: German naval ferry barges “M.F.P.” (Weapons and Warfare).

The Naval Staff ordered further measures to be taken, including the increase in the forces allocated to land units in the Crimea. The A.S.M. had to supply a few coastal batteries and infantry units from the coastal commandments to the 17th Army, along with its transport battalion in the area. As for the German ships, it was decided to challenge the Soviet naval presence in the Kerch Strait with all of the available forces. After a high-level meeting, where the Chief of the Naval Staff was present, the A.S.M. was ordered to commit its forces. The strategic importance of the Crimea was again stated:

“1) The enemy landings in the Kerch Peninsula could be decisive for our control over the Crimea. If our armed forces had to withdraw to the Feodosia Strait, the Russians would have better chances in their other offensive operations against the Crimea. The same goes for the coastal area. If we are not able to hold on in our positions in the Kerch area, we will be in danger of losing Crimea with the known consequences, especially considering our southern front and the encirclement of Crimea.

2) All services must make all the efforts to throw the Russians back into the sea from the Kerch Peninsula and to prevent further landings. As long as we have

seaworthy forces, they must be used. As for the number of naval ferry barges, torpedo boats and minesweepers, using just seven barges at this vital point is insufficient.

3) All attack opportunities to at least damage the Russian forces transported on water must be exploited.

4) All of the enemy reinforcements for the bridgehead as well as subsequent landings are being carried out on the sea. This is why there are always targets. The motor torpedo boats and the minesweepers and naval ferry barges will probably have the best chances to engage these targets during night and day actions using concentrated artillery fire. The enemy air force and its capabilities are known.

5) The operational command must direct our forces to the enemy. They will be sent, obviously, against enemy shipping, but, if need be, they will attack the enemy land forces in the bridgeheads. The attack plans will be coordinated with our air force.

6) We are sure that the gravity of the situation is known by our local forces and that no effort will be spared" (War Diary, Naval Staff, Operations Division 1943, pp. 59-60).

The A.S.M. reported that its forces were not enough and the crews were exhausted. The Germans had to cover the area from Feodosia to the south, to the northern entry into the Kerch Strait, which was about 140 km of coast and almost all of it was vulnerable to enemy attacks. More than that, the A.S.M. had to organize the garrisons in the harbours and manage the convoys to and from the Crimea along the coasts, with minelaying and minesweeping operations.

Despite the overstretch, at that moment the patrols began with the ships of the 3rd Minesweeper Flotilla, motor minesweepers of the "R" class, armed with two 20 mm or 37 mm cannons. The flotilla was able to disrupt, if not fully interrupt the sea supply of the northern bridgehead. During the night of 5 November, an enemy tug and two barges, each with 20 soldiers, were sunk. That time the German barges took some hits and suffered casualties.

The Commander of the 3rd Minesweeper Flotilla, Kapitanleutnant H. Klassmann, who proved an able tactical officer throughout the Kerch-Eltigen operation, even suggested a German landing behind the Soviet positions in the northern bridgehead, between Yenikale and Cape Fonar. The A.S.M. appreciated the suggestion and it was forwarded to the higher echelons, including the 17th Army Command. It was rejected however, on the basis of lack of troops. The naval officer at the Army HQ even noted: "Shame!" (War Diary, Admiral Black Sea, November 1943, p. 16).

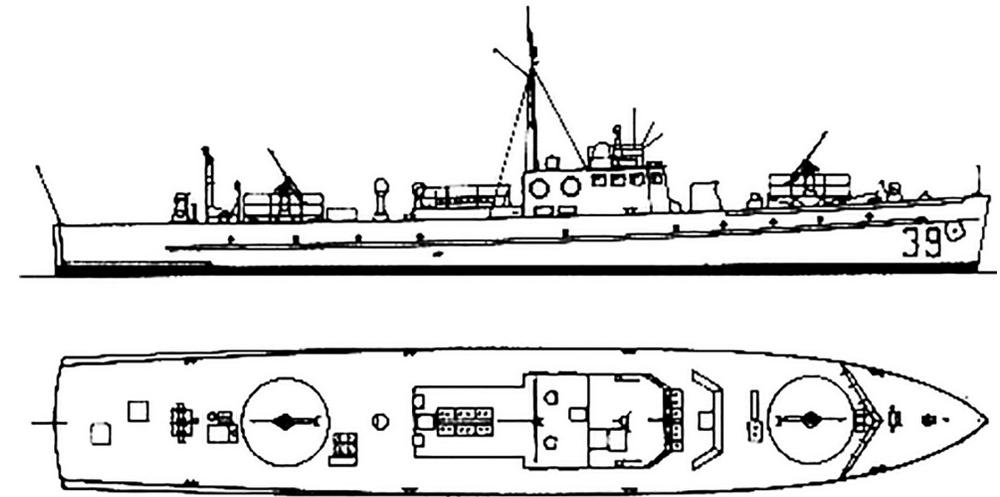


Figure no. 4: Motor minesweeper type "R" (Groner, 1983, p. 202).

At the same time, the Soviets started building searchlight and artillery positions on the Kossa Chuska strip, forcing the A.S.M. to adopt a more aggressive posture in its patrols. The German light craft (motor torpedo boats and minesweepers, barges etc.) were ordered to attack regardless of weather and sea conditions and even target land positions.

Naval clashes continued each day, and more intensively at night. One of the most important ones took place on the night of 7 November, when the motor minesweepers detected a towed convoy with about 25 ships. The German precise artillery fire prevented the landing and the Soviets withdrew. However, after some screens cleared, their transport ships attempted to land one by one through the German blockade. After several hours of naval engagements, three ships packed with troops were sent to the bottom, along with a motor torpedo boat (Ib., p. 27).

The German successes in the Kerch Strait were noticed by the Naval Staff in Berlin. For the first time since the start of the Eastern Campaign, the German Navy in the Black Sea had naval superiority over the Soviets, even if in just a small area as the strait. On 10 November, Admiral K. Donitz sent his congratulations to the naval commanders in the Black Sea, with a message to the A.S.M.:

"The successes of our naval forces fighting on the coasts of the Crimea had an important contribution on the positive outcome of our fight on land. I wish to express my appreciation for all of the forces involved, especially the 3rd Minesweeper Flotilla. The fight must be carried out with tenacity and determination" (Ib., p. 40).

The A.S.M. noted in its diary that day that the commendations were well deserved. The northern bridgehead was virtually blockaded and in the last few days German ships were able to harass all of the enemy's transport of troops and supplies. Those actions were pursued in the next days, since the Soviets were determined to run the blockade. Inevitably, casualties mounted on the German side as well. "R 204" was badly damaged on 10 November, and the ship had to be towed to Feodosia for repairs.

Still, the consequences of the successes of the last week were felt on 12 November. German ships reported that no enemy vessel was able to pass to Eltigen. As a result, German motor torpedo boats and motor minesweepers attacked enemy boats anchored near the shore: 3 smaller boats, 1 barge with ammo and another one with fuel and 2 armoured boats. The Soviet troops on the shore were also hit. The firing distance, of about 1 km, allowed for a good accuracy with machineguns, light artillery and even rockets (Ib., p. 47).

After a few relatively quiet days, the Soviets resumed their attempts at strengthening the Eltigen bridgehead during the night of 15-16 November, when 4 German motor minesweepers were attacked by a large number of armoured gunboats. The A.S.M. reported their number as 20, with air support. Nonetheless, such a concentration of naval forces seemed unlikely, especially since the Germans suffered damage on only one boat, "R 207" and reported eight enemy attempts to land.

The rest of November saw constant naval fights, as the Germans continued to strangle the Soviet supply traffic in the southern part of the Kerch Strait. The German blockade remained efficient and it forced the enemy to resort to air supply. The Soviet managed to hit a few German ships, especially in port, where they were most vulnerable.

At the beginning of December, the German army attacked the bridgehead, making constant gains. The Soviets were desperate to bring reinforcements and supplies, with heavy casualties (Ruge, 1979, p. 117). On 11 December, the whole area came under German control. The A.S.M. used 31 naval ferry barges, 6 motor minesweepers, 6 motor torpedo boats in a total of 355 sorties during the blockade. Among them, there were 11 barges lost, with other 16 damaged. The Germans also lost 1 motor torpedo boat and 4 minesweepers. While the losses due to naval engagements were relatively light, the Soviet airpower proved to be the biggest threat (Rohwer, Hummelchen, p. 244).

CONCLUSIONS

Soviet losses are still debated. Some authors suggest 150 small boats and other craft used for supply transport, damaged or sunk. Even if this number does seem exaggerated, it is clear that their losses were significant. In the case of larger ships, definitive losses number 12 patrol boats, 3 minesweepers and 3 armoured vessels (Ruge, 1979, p. 117).

The naval actions in the southern Kerch Strait area could be described as a full-fledged naval blockade, which lasted for a month. Using motor minesweepers and torpedo boats, armed with large calibre guns proved to be an ingenious solution and the winning one for the Axis. The absence of the large Soviet warship was surprising even for the German side. Most likely, due to political reasons, it was decided not to risk the destroyers and cruisers for fear of the German bombers. On the other hand, as the German commanders insisted, the Soviet air superiority was tightening, causing most of their casualties and that situation would only get worse in the next months.

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