INTRODUCTION: THE PATH TOWARDS THE TOP SUMMITS OF WORLD WAR II

Gde snega tropinki zametaiut,
Gde lavinvy groznye gremiat,
Etu pesn' slozhil i raspevaet
Al'pinistov boevoi otriad.

[A unit of military mountaineers
Wrote this song and sang it
While climbing under the roar of terrifying avalanches
Along snow-covered paths.]

Andrei Griaznov, Liubov' Korotaeva, and Nikolai Persiianov, 'Baksanskaia' (1942)[1]

When I started to participate in sport expeditions in the early 1970s, I heard the 'Baksanskaia' and other wartime songs[2] telling the story of Soviet climbers who had defended the Caucasus during World War II. These songs, written by military mountaineers, were enormously popular among Soviet climbers, rafters, skiers, and trekkers who wandered across remote Soviet regions after the war. The wartime songs triggered a folklore that glorified Soviet mountaineers as a vital component of the formations that fought the Germans in the high Caucasus. In 1966, Vladimir Vysotskii, the most popular Russian bard ever, visited a mountaineering camp in the Caucasus. After he heard wartime songs and stories about the battle of the Caucasus, he added another dramatic and emotional spin to the Soviet narrative: his 'Edelweiss Troops' song described Soviet and German climbers who had been partners in joint Soviet–German expeditions before the war and had developed strong

personal bonds but were pitted against each other by war in a bitter, almost fratricidal fight:

> *A do voiny vot etot sklon*
> *Nemetskii paren' bral s toboiu.*
> *On padal vniz no byl spasen.*
> *A vot seichas byt' mozhet on*
> *Svoi avtomat gotovit k boiu.*
>
> [Before the war, you climbed this slope
> With a German partner.
> He fell down but you saved him;
> And now he is probably loading his submachine-gun
> Getting ready for battle.][3]

Vysotskii popularised the feat of Soviet mountaineers far beyond the circles of sport tourists. Today, the songs and stories about climbers' endeavours in World War II are as popular in the post-Soviet outdoor community as they were in the Soviet Union. In the absence of scholarly studies, the breathtaking and tragic mountaineering folklore shaped the Russian collective memory about this little-known episode of World War II, and most Russians who have been exposed to it believe that it relays historical facts.[4] This enduring perception stirred my interest in the battle on the Main Caucasus Ridge (MCR), which became the highest battlefield of the two world wars, reaching, at times, an altitude of more than 4,000 metres.

The major focus of this study is on the actions in the high Caucasus in the late summer and autumn of 1942. After the Wehrmacht recovered from the defeat at Moscow during the previous winter, the High Command of the German Armed Forces (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, OKW) chose southern Russia as its main operational region for the 1942 campaign. In the summer, it launched two strategic offensives that were expected to decide the fate of the war. The first offensive, code-named Operation Blau, presumed that Army Group B would advance towards Stalingrad and take it, thus destroying a major industrial centre and intercepting a vital supply artery along the Volga River used by the Soviets to transport oil from the Baku region to central Russia. The second simultaneous strategic offensive, codenamed Operation Edelweiss, had higher stakes than Operation Blau. With the failure of the Blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union, the German war machine began faltering from

the shortage of oil, which was delivered in insufficient quantities by Romania, its only oil supplier. Hitler calculated that without abundant oil reserves the German war economy was doomed to steady attrition and eventual collapse. In order to solve this problem once and for all, the OKW launched a two-pronged offensive by Army Group A: one major attack was to proceed towards the Grozny and Baku oilfields via the steppes of the Northern Caucasus and the other was to go along the Black Sea coast via Tuapse and Sukhumi to Transcaucasia and then to the Middle Eastern oilfields. In addition to these two major strikes, the 49th Mountain Corps was to advance across the Main Caucasus Ridge to the Black Sea into the rear of the Soviet 18th Army, which defended the Tuapse region; this would facilitate the advance of the German 17th Army along the Black Sea coast. This study focuses on this last component of Operation Edelweiss – a minor offensive meant to pave the way to the main campaign of 1942, a campaign perceived by the OKW as a key to victory in World War II.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the armies of several European states came to the conclusion that only a special force with mission-tailored skills, gear, and structure would be able to operate effectively in the mountains. However, as with any other special forces, the concept of mountain formations suffers from the internal contradiction between their ability to perform certain missions more effectively than regular infantry and their usefulness beyond these missions. It takes much time and effort to train the personnel of such formations, but the skills they acquire after lengthy training, their weapons, and the structure of their units are too mission-specific to secure an advantage in other conditions. A state expecting future wars to unfold mainly on the plains, with actions in the mountains occurring only on rare occasions, needs only a small mountain force, because such a force excels only in mountains or other terrain inaccessible to motor transport and heavy weapons. It makes no sense to deploy this force on plains with a decent road network, because its weak firepower and primitive logistics make it inferior to regular infantry, whose personnel require less individual training and can be easily replaced. Special forces, including mountain formations, must be few but well trained for their specific missions. This was the approach chosen by the Wehrmacht. In contrast, the Red Army raised many 'mountain' divisions but did not train them for mountain warfare. Since these formations differed from regular rifle divisions only in structure and not in skills, this designation can be used only in quotation marks.

The outcome of battles in the mountains often turns on the ability of the protagonists to cope with unique challenges unknown on the plains: narrow, steep trails accessible only on foot; limited opportunities for manoeuvre across broken landscape outside these trails; the impact of weather, soil conditions, snow cover, and winds above the treeline; the scarcity of population and, concomitantly, the shortage of shelters and food supply; the absence of vegetation or, by contrast, its exceptional thickness; and severe fatigue. Only those trained and equipped to operate in such conditions could be effective in the mountains.

However, the Stalinist state scoffed at the very notion of specialisation. The tendency to 'think big' while ignoring the details, even vital ones, surged during the Soviet modernisation rush of the 1930s and became a key component of Stalinist culture. The implications, in both the civilian and the military spheres, were a preference for quantity over quality, uniformity over specialisation, collectivism over individualism, and improvisation over professionalism. The Stalinist perception of people as mere cogs in the Soviet state machine[5] prompted communist leaders to ignore individual skills in the belief that the massive collective endeavour that inevitably had to be undertaken while performing any mission set by the state would make these skills unimportant. Such a mentality led to a series of strenuous but ineffective efforts in addressing problems that could have been solved more easily by smaller numbers of skilled manpower. The dismissive attitude of Soviet generals to military specialists was a repercussion of this tendency.

My father's war experience can serve as an example. He grew up in Baku, a city on the Caspian Sea with a warm, semi-arid climate, where even the lowest winter temperatures are well above freezing. When the government began allowing university students to volunteer for the Red Army in the autumn of 1941, he joined up and was sent to an officer school in Tashkent, a city with an even warmer climate. Upon graduation and with the rank of lieutenant, he was assigned to a ski brigade that fought on the Northwestern Front. Ski brigades conducted raids into the flanks and rear of immobilised Germans and also provided manpower to support armour in winter offensives, when they had to follow the rushing tanks closely. Such endeavours were torment for a person who had never skied before but who was expected, as a platoon commander, to be an example to his men. He dreaded the exhausting ski marches and his subordinates' mockery more than enemy

fire. It would have been easy to find enough good skiers in Russia to field as many ski brigades as necessary, yet those in charge of recruitment enlisted a junior officer who had hardly ever seen snow. A key argument of this study is that such incidents were not bizarre aberrations but the rule, stemming from the general contempt for professionalism pervading the Red Army. The discussion of military professionalism in the context of mountain warfare is the core theme of this book.

The Caucasus is the highest mountain ridge in Europe; eleven of its peaks are higher than Mont Blanc, the top summit of the Alps. The climate of the region changes dramatically with elevation from the subtropical resorts dotting the Black Sea shore and surrounded by mandarin groves and tea plantations to the windy mountain passes well above the treeline that are free of snow for only two months a year. During the first winter of the war between the Soviet Union and Germany, the Red Army knew what battle environment to anticipate, while the Wehrmacht did not; this knowledge helped the Soviets to inflict the first strategic defeat on the German land forces in World War II. In contrast, the vertical dimension of warfare in the Caucasus furnished great surprises for both sides. When the Soviet and German general headquarters planned actions in the high Caucasus, none of them understood what atrocious conditions their soldiers would face there. Although the well-trained German mountain divisions sent across the Caucasus had gained a wealth of combat experience in the lower Carpathians, Norway, and Yugoslavia, all these regions were accessible to regular infantry. Only in the high Caucasus did they have to employ the full extent of their special skills in mountain warfare, and these skills enabled them to cope with the severe battle environment much better than Soviet regular infantry, some of which had the misleading designation of 'mountain troops'. The higher the elevations in which the battles occurred, the greater the imbalance of casualties in favour of the Germans. The Red Army's preference for uniformity and disregard of mission-tailored skills resulted in the unprecedented misery experienced by the Soviet soldiers sent to defend the high Caucasus. The Caucasus separates Europe and Asia; by crossing the MCR, the 49th Mountain Corps became the only Wehrmacht formation that reached Asia in World War II.

In order to better understand the environment in which the battles studied here occurred, I retraced the footsteps of the armies in the campaigns examined in detail or surveyed in this book: I walked

along Suvorov's entire route across the Swiss Alps, crossed the Balkans via the Shipka pass, the MCR via the Marukh pass, and the Carpathians along the route of the Soviet 3rd Mountain Corps, and followed the trails chosen by the Lanz Division during its trek towards Tuapse. This field research allowed me to grasp some of the challenges experienced by soldiers, often imperceptible in combat records; it also helped me to assess the credibility of these records.

While the two major German strikes presumed by Operation Edelweiss have received sufficient coverage in histories of World War II, its most spectacular component – the bold attempt to break through the MCR – has attracted little scholarly attention. The German and the Russian narratives on the battle in the high Caucasus exist in parallel, and neither Russian nor German authors cross-reference their sources. German writings on this episode are limited to several brief memoirs,[6] a study of relations between the Wehrmacht and the local population,[7] and popular histories, the latter based on unidentified German sources.[8] All Western interpretations rest on these writings. Russian historiography on the battle in the high Caucasus consists mostly of memoirs of dubious credibility;[9] pseudo-scholarly, ideology-tainted writings that contain more misinformation than facts;[10] unreferenced popular histories;[11] and summaries of these popular histories.[12] The three trustworthy memoirs[13] and an unpublished PhD dissertation[14] of the Soviet period were thoroughly sanitised by censors and suffer as well from self-censorship. The post-Soviet, multi-volume official history of the Great Patriotic War devotes less than one page to the actions on the MCR, and most of the information it provides on this subject is false.[15] The post-communist scholarly contributions to this historiography are thus limited to one chapter in a monograph devoted to the entire 1942 campaign in the Caucasus that describes some events at the MCR but does not analyse them[16] and two valuable document collections.[17] This study is the first attempt to integrate data from Russian and German military archives and analyse the Soviet war effort in the high Caucasus.

The book starts with a discussion of the knowledge about mountain warfare that the Red Army had before it embarked on the campaign in the Caucasus in 1942. Military academies all over the world study historical experience in order to draw lessons for the future and avoid the disasters suffered by their predecessors.[18] And so did the Russian Imperial Military Academy, which thoroughly analysed the campaigns in which Russia participated. Since most lands of European

Russia and the adjacent lands of its western neighbours are plains, the Russian Army rarely fought in the mountains, and when it did these were minor episodes in Russian military history. However, they still demonstrated what the Red Army, the successor to the imperial army, should have anticipated in the next major war to operate successfully in the mountains. The Russian Imperial General Staff accumulated and processed a large volume of information on those experiences, sufficient for the Red Army to prepare itself for similar challenges in the future and train its soldiers to cope with them.

Having realised in the interwar period that mountains would likely be among the battle environments in which the Red Army would have to operate in the next war, its General Staff restructured several infantry formations as mountain divisions and undertook vigorous steps to create a pool of potential recruits with intimate knowledge of mountaineering. By the mid 1930s, this well-focused effort, supplemented with field experiments and conceptual research, had created a solid basis for raising a force able to match the elite German mountain divisions. However, the Soviet state wasted this impressive potential during the Great Terror of 1937–8, during which it destroyed not only the major proponents of mountain formations but the entire concept of such a force before it had taken its first steps towards professionalism. A host of problems, real and imagined, prevented the Red Army from following the Wehrmacht's example in recruiting local highlanders into mountain divisions. As a result, the Soviet 'mountain' divisions barely differed from regular rifle formations. After a series of embarrassing defeats suffered against the small, poorly armed Finnish Army during the Winter War demonstrated the simple fact that tactics, training, weapons, and uniforms must be adapted to the conditions of the potential military theatre, the Red Army made a consistent effort to prepare for winter warfare; however, it failed to extrapolate the conclusions it drew from the Winter War to actions in the mountains and entered the war against Germany having no units trained to operate in the mountains.

Although both Soviets and Germans made many grave strategic errors on the Eastern Front, Operation Edelweiss set a record in the number of blunders. The offensive of the German 49th Mountain Corps across the Caucasus was a wild gamble marked by thoughtless strategy, poor intelligence about the terrain and enemy forces, and the hubristic belief that the racial superiority of the *Herrenvolk* would secure an easy

victory over numerous *Untermenschen*. As for the Red Army, its generals, none of whom had ever visited the high Caucasus, persuaded themselves that the ridge was impassable and failed to occupy mountain passes with the large forces they possessed. They squandered all but two 'mountain' divisions in actions on the plains long before the Germans approached the Caucasus and then had to rely mainly on regular infantry and cavalry to defend the MCR. Yet, despite the remarkable victories the German mountain troops won in the high mountains, the Red Army successfully countered their superior skills with far greater numbers and stopped the Germans as soon as they reached lower elevations at the southern slopes of the Caucasus, where their lack of alpine skills mattered less.

After that, the Soviets launched a counteroffensive that was to push the Germans back across the ridge and throw them down its northern slopes. However, the Germans regained their skill advantage at the high elevations and terminated the Soviet attack with small forces. Despite vigorous assaults, the Soviets failed to reconquer a single pass across the MCR and continued to keep numerous formations in the mountains, thus playing into the hands of the Germans, who were seeking to pin down as large a Soviet force as possible in order to frustrate the transfer of Soviet divisions to the area of the major offensive towards the Black Sea coast. Thus, the Germans snatched the victory from Soviet hands and turned the battle in the high Caucasus into a stalemate.

The combat effectiveness of the opposing forces depended on factors such as firepower, command-and-control systems, logistics, food supply, gear, uniforms, the ability to withstand atrocious weather and assist wounded men, relations with local people, and the morale of soldiers. Skill in mountain warfare enabled the Germans to outperform the Soviets in most regards, which resulted in a great disproportion of casualties being suffered by the opponents. After the Headquarters of the Transcaucasian Front (TCF) realised, belatedly, that, instead of regular infantry, they needed a special force able to operate effectively in the mountains, they scrambled together a handful of climbers, ordering them to help local commanders in raising genuine mountain units. The Mountaineering Section organised within the TCF quickly established a training infrastructure modelled on the one that had existed in civilian mountaineering before the war and trained thousands of soldiers within a tight timeframe, thus creating the potential to approach

mountain warfare professionally. However, the elite mountain units raised as a result of these strenuous efforts emerged too late to affect the battle of the Caucasus.

The Red Army fought two more battles in the mountains on the Eastern Front. In the autumn of 1942, it faced a major German offensive across the wooded foothills of the Caucasus towards the Black Sea coast in the Tuapse region. It beat off this attack by deploying the same type of manpower that it had used in the high mountains: regular riflemen untrained for mountain warfare. Yet since their numbers were far superior to the grossly overstretched Germans and since the lower mountains offered fewer advantages than the high Caucasus to the skilled German mountain troops, the Red Army won a strategic victory, which contributed to the decisive failure of the Wehrmacht's campaign in the Caucasus. The Soviet soldiers who fought in the Caucasus drew many correct conclusions from their endeavour, and several senior officers promptly analysed the actions there and issued valuable recommendations on mountain warfare. However, the Soviet High Command (Stavka) ignored, for the most part, the grim experience of the Red Army in the Caucasus; it dismantled the sound training infrastructure established by the TCF in the wake of the battle and dissolved the elite mountain units that had been raised with such great effort. When the Stavka decided to exploit the September 1944 uprising in Slovakia in order to break into the rear of the German Army Group South across the Carpathians, it again planned this strategic offensive in the way it planned offensives on the plains. This last operation in the mountains on the Eastern Front, conducted by formations with a wealth of combat experience but without training in mountain warfare, ended in a bloody stalemate, with two Soviet armies pinned down by much smaller German forces.

The unimpressive performance of the Red Army in the mountains stemmed mainly from the absence of appropriate training. Was, then, its failure to organise a force able to operate effectively in the mountains a unique misstep or a typical undervaluation of mission-tailored skills? I argue that the basic training of Soviet soldiers serving in 'mountain' divisions was as inadequate as that of their counterparts elsewhere. The habit of sending untrained soldiers into battle with the idea that they would gain the necessary skills in combat had the effect of turning only those who survived the long and costly trial-and-error learning process into an effective force. Despite grave attrition, the

large numbers of enlisted personnel eventually provided enough skilled survivors to match their German counterparts. However, the brief and casual mountain campaigns produced few trained soldiers, and most of those fell in subsequent battles on the plains before they could apply their skill to the next action in the mountains. In the absence of a training infrastructure, most participants in that next action were, again, soldiers untrained for mountain warfare. Without the scores of heavy weapons that were the major trump card of the Red Army, the enormous gap in skills resulted in a huge disproportion of casualties during every campaign in the mountains throughout World War II. The universal Stalinist disdain for professionalism was at the root of such an outcome.