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## Battle at the Don River (1943)

### Abstract

*The role of the Royal Hungarian Army in the Second World War was determined by the political constraints of the Kingdom of Hungary and its limited economic opportunities. The situation of the German troops on the Eastern Front – after their initial successes – demanded a greater involvement of Hungarian troops in the war. The Hungarian Government reluctantly set up the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hungarian Army, which immediately joined the German forces after its deployment. The story of the Second Army has been one of the saddest chapters in Hungarian military history.*

*Keywords: Royal Hungarian Army, 2<sup>nd</sup> Hungarian Army, World War II, Don Bend, Voronezh Front*

### Introduction

The German attack on the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa) started in the summer of 1941. However, the "Blitzkrieg" strategy was not successful. The Soviets allocated fully operational units from the east around Moscow, and they were able to stop the German advance in November–December 1941.<sup>2</sup> Hitler saw that it would not be easy to defeat the Soviet Union, so he constrained his allies, such as Hungary, to enhance their activity in the war.

The German Government demanded through diplomatic missions (arrogated by Hitler in December 1941 and requested by Ribbentrop<sup>3</sup> and Keitel<sup>4</sup> in Budapest personally)<sup>5</sup> the more vigorous participation of two Hungarian Army units in the military line (by providing more forces for serious tasks).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> DOMBRÁDY-TÓTH 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Joachim von Ribbentrop (1893–1946), Minister of Foreign Affairs of the German empire (1938–1945).

<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Keitel (1882–1946), German general, member of the General staff and Commander of the German Wehrmacht.

<sup>5</sup> BABUCS–MARUZS 2007: 29–94.

<sup>6</sup> At this time, some rear area security units from Hungary were present to support the German units.

At the end of the negotiations (with diplomatic pressure vs. unwilling Hungarian policy), the Second (Field) Army<sup>7</sup> with three Corps was sent by the Royal Hungarian Army (Magyar Királyi Honvédség) in the spring of 1942. Germany promised armoured assets and modern heavy weapons for the mobilised 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, which consisted of more than 200,000 soldiers.<sup>8</sup>

The Hungarian Government believed that – similarly to the Hungarian troops deployed earlier – the Second Army would return in a few months.

The total number of military members was 207,000 soldiers and 30,000 civilians.

The Second Army arrived at the battle zone in the spring of 1942 and launched fighting manoeuvres within the German armed forces. In August 1942, the Hungarian units reached the bank of the Don River. The German military command assigned the Second Army plenty of defence positions at the western bank of the Don River. The Hungarian lines trailed 210 km following the river, but the Russians had kept four bridgeheads until September. The Hungarian troops and some German units seized one of them, but they conducted intensive operations. These clashes were serious because heavy armoured troops and air strikes supported the enemy. The cruel battles resulted in many losses from both sides, but in the end, two points remained in the Russian troops' hands (Shchuchye and Uriv bridgeheads).

In autumn, the German units were withdrawn from this area because the situation at Stalingrad was inauspicious. The German redeployment and the military balance changes at the Eastern front were the causes the Hungarian Second Army started preparing for the defence operations.

## Opposite forces

The Hungarian Second Army's ORBAT (Organisation of Battle) occurred in January 1943 at the Don River.<sup>9</sup>

Each of the three field Corps (III, IV, VII) contained three light divisions. The light division means that they consisted of only two (!) infantry regiments instead of three. The direct unit of the Army General Headquarters was the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division, but the number and quality of the armoured vehicles were insufficient. Therefore, this unit was transferred from the Hungarian Army General Headquarters and was part of the German Panzer (Cramer) Group deployed in the rear area away from the Hungarian units. At that time, some subunits were in the process of being relieved, which was the cause the number of soldiers was higher than before, but unfortunately, the number of weapons was insufficient. The result was that some subunits close to the frontline were not equipped with weapons and ammunition. The inadequate size of the defensive line (over 210 km), the lack of equipment and ammunition and poor organisation resulted in a weak structure of Hungarian defensive positions (on average, one platoon defended a 1.5 km line).<sup>10</sup> The Hungarian defence system consisted of one

<sup>7</sup> VÁRKONYI 2013: 23–25.

<sup>8</sup> LONG 2005.

<sup>9</sup> LONG 2005: 2 and table.

<sup>10</sup> BABUCS–MARUZS 2007: 30.

echelon, and the number of the reserve force was limited. The 429<sup>th</sup> Grenade (infantry) Regiment was also deployed in the Area of Defence of the Hungarian Second Army.

The Hungarian Second Army was a part of the German Army Group B. The Russian Voronezh Front was facing the Ostrogozhsk–Rossosh formation, which belonged to the German Army Group B. According to the Russians, this formation contained six German, ten Hungarian and five Italian divisions, more than 260,000 soldiers with 300 armoured, 900 artillery assets, 800 mortars, and 8,400 machine guns.<sup>11</sup>

The Soviet troops on the left bank of the Don became more potent than before: The HQ of the Voronezh Front controlled the 40<sup>th</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> Army, 3<sup>rd</sup> Tank Army, 18<sup>th</sup> Independent Infantry Corps, 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalier Corps and some directly attached units. The air support provided by the Second Air Army, the Voronezh Front, had more than 347,200 soldiers.<sup>12</sup> In front of the Second Hungarian Army, the Fortieth Army was deployed, consisting of five infantry, one artillery, one rocket artillery, one air-defence division, three armours and one infantry, two antitank brigades, four rocket artillery regiments and other combat support units.<sup>13</sup> On the South flank, the 18<sup>th</sup> Independent Infantry Corps comprised three infantry divisions, two armour and two antitank brigades, one armour regiment, four rocket artillery battalions and two air defence regiments. Near this formation, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tank Army contained four infantry divisions, two tank corps, one infantry and two tank brigades, one artillery, two air-defence divisions and eight rocket artillery battalions.

The Voronezh Front had 788 tanks<sup>14</sup> and 400 air assets.<sup>15</sup> The total human resources was more than half of a million soldiers. The 40<sup>th</sup> Army and the 18<sup>th</sup> Independent Infantry Corps (later supported by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tank Army) had the task to defeat the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hungarian Army. They had eight infantry divisions, five armours, one infantry and four antitank brigades, seventeen rocket artilleries and nine field artillery battalions.

## The Russian strike

The Russian Supreme Headquarters (Stavka) had a concept of operation which belonged to the more significant strategic campaign within the Stalingrad battles (from November 1942 to February 1943). They wanted to utilise the German strategic defeat and launch a great offensive to set the (operation level) conditions for spring operations to push back the German troops. As a part of this concept, they stroke the Italian and Hungarian Armies northwest to Stalingrad after the enclosure of the German 6<sup>th</sup> Army.

The Commander of the Voronezh Front was to conduct strikes from three different directions. The Northern 40<sup>th</sup> Army from the Uriv bridgehead stroke the Hungarian 7<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> light divisions. The centre of the frontline attacks was the reinforced 18<sup>th</sup> Independent Infantry Corps from the Shchuchye bridgehead against the Hungarian

<sup>11</sup> MOSKALENKO 1982: 314.

<sup>12</sup> ANDRONIKOV et al. 1996: 165–167.

<sup>13</sup> MOSKALENKO 1982: 315, 320.

<sup>14</sup> Light, medium and heavy tanks were used mixed at the armoured units.

<sup>15</sup> SZABÓ 1994: 201–203.

12<sup>th</sup> Light Division. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Tank Army conducted the Southern strike against the Italian units, and later, they had to turn over the back of the Hungarian troops. The aim of the strikes in the direction of the centre of the Hungarian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's rear was to enclose the Hungarian central units and annihilate the separated small parts of the Army. The Russians knew what the weak points of the Hungarian troops were. Moreover, they trusted their higher quality equipment and that logistic support was available.

The 40<sup>th</sup> Russian Army only concentrated the main artillery assets on a 10 km wide frontline to prepare for the breakthrough. The penetration line (attack corridor) was under heavy artillery fire by twenty-five artillery assets/kilometre, and because of this massive concentration of artillery, the central manoeuvre units established the superiority of the combat power. At the Uriv bridgehead, the Russian superiority was three and a half times in men and ten times in firepower. At Shchuchye, the situation was similar. The ratio between the two parties was 3.1 and 7 times for the Russians.<sup>16</sup>

The 40<sup>th</sup> Army Commander (Moskalenko) ignored the Front Commander's order. Without combat reconnaissance (pre-attack with limited combat power to detect the enemy positions), he started the offensive with intense artillery strikes and full combat power.<sup>17</sup> His idea was that time is crucial, and because of this, he wanted to defeat the enemy in two days. The original starting time would have been the 14<sup>th</sup> of January, two days before small formations must conduct the combat reconnaissance. That was the cause the Russian infantry divisions assaulted in crowded lines the Hungarian units.

The weather conditions were terrible. The temperature had fallen under minus 35 degrees Celsius, and the frosty wind was deadly. Since the Don was frozen, that was not an obstacle anymore. The situation of the Hungarian units became critical. According to the Russian concept, the two bridgeheads were the main effort. The 40<sup>th</sup> Army executed a deliberate offensive campaign from the Uriv, and the 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Corps attacked the Shchuchye. Before the offensive, heavy fire strikes accomplished artillery preparation in one hour. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of January, in front of the Hungarian troops at the Uriv, three Russian divisions started the offensive. The first assault was unsuccessful. Many Russian foot soldiers remained on the battlefield. On the second day (the 13<sup>th</sup> of January), the Russians started again with fire strikes and infantry assaults supported by tanks. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of January, at the Shchuchye, the Russians opened the second attack corridor after an intense artillery preparation. Three infantry divisions supported by a hundred tanks assaulted four Hungarian battalions. The Hungarian troops had no armoured units and sufficient antitank assets.

The Hungarian 1<sup>st</sup> Armour Division was a detachment from the army commander and belonged to the Cramer Corps, and this unit was withdrawn 50–80 km west from the frontline.<sup>18</sup> The German leaders were unaware of the dangerous situation and were late. The counter activities were slow and started too late. The 700<sup>th</sup> German Armoured Brigade started a counterattack against the Russian T-34 tanks, but they suffered losses, and most of the German tanks were destroyed. The Russian leaders set the second echelon, new armour and quick (infantry troops with ski) units to develop

<sup>16</sup> BABUCS–MARUZS 2007: 43; SZABÓ 1994: 178.

<sup>17</sup> MOSKALENKO 1982: 328.

<sup>18</sup> SZABÓ 1994: 169–170.

the penetration of the Hungarian lines. The Hungarian infantry units fought against the Russians and the weather conditions without support and (artillery) firepower. The mobility capacities were limited because the horses were withdrawn from the rear logistic area (100–150 kilometres west from the frontline). The Hungarian troops did not have vehicles and transportation assets, and the Hungarian commanders followed the tense “to keep the positions” order.<sup>19</sup> The Don River lost its role as a barrier (it was frozen), and the Hungarian defence concept was based on the water obstacle: the limited manoeuvre possibilities across the river. In that situation, the Hungarian units lost the foremost defence opportunity and could not move by horse or vehicle. Moreover, the weather conditions became more hostile.

Without combat power (tanks and artillery) and support (ammunition and food), against the Russians and the cold, the unit commanders started to save the soldiers. They withdrew the units in small groups and searched for safe havens. The problem was that the Hungarian (and the German) troops did not have rear combat areas with logistic and reserve defence positions. They had no prepared shelters to protect the soldiers.<sup>20</sup> The strength of the defence system is based on (resistant) defence strongholds because the subunits could support each other with infantry weapons, but the rear area was not prepared for combat activities. Some of the positions were fortified, but the battlespace structure was narrow. The main effort was to keep the first position close to the Don River.<sup>21</sup>

After two days, the Russian divisions with armoured troops broke through the Hungarian lines. To avoid the enclosure the Hungarian units moved from the defence positions to the west direction, and the commanders tried to reach the safe positions to reorganise the forces and resupply the troops with ammunition and food.

The Russian operational concept consisted of four steps.<sup>22</sup> In the first phase, they aspired/planned to gain ascendancy over the enemy with deception (to cover the manoeuvres and deployment), which means the local superiority over the enemy in combat power (fire, armoured assets and human resources). The second was the unexpected strikes by infantry units supported by intense artillery and armour troops. It resulted in the penetration of the first defence line, and the assault units sank the gap of the enemy defence structure. The third phase contained rapid forces (armoured, cavalry and infantry), and their tasks were to separate the enemy forces, try to enclose some of them and block the captured units. After that, the separated enemy parts were demolished because they did not get fire and logistic support. The Soviet units followed this method, and the German incompetent directives (keep the positions) helped the Russians gain the losses.

<sup>19</sup> Operation Order of the Hungarian Chief of Staff, issued on 12 December 1942.

<sup>20</sup> SZABÓ 2003: 274–277.

<sup>21</sup> SZABÓ 2003: 274–275.

<sup>22</sup> MOSKALENKO 1982: 315–316.

## Hungarian defence operations

The Hungarian Reconnaissance organisations had detected the Russian deployments and reinforcements. The Commanders considered that the Russian attack was possible in the middle of January. However, the German leaders thought this differently. They focused on the Stalingrad battle.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of January, at 09:45, the Russian troops attacked the Hungarian positions from the Uriv bridgehead. On the first day, 11–12 attacks were conducted against the Hungarian defence positions but had limited results. An interesting fact is that the Russian soldiers were drunk.<sup>23</sup> Most Hungarian units kept their positions and waited for the reinforcement forces. After the first engagement, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hungarian Army Commander started (13<sup>th</sup> of January) a counterattack. However, the Russian preponderance neutralised the Hungarian strikes. The Army Commander did not have influential reserve forces, especially armoured troops, because the armour division was under German authority.<sup>24</sup> The Hungarian soldiers fought as heroes, but the Russian outnumbered force and the missing Hungarian combat support (armour, artillery troops and ammunition supply) made the situation hopeless. The fortified defence positions protected the soldiers and were the strong pillars of the defence operations until the Russians cut off the units and blocked the logistic support lines (routes). The Russian rapid units, after they made passageways and went through the Hungarian minefields and obstacle system, seized the Hungarian rear areas, where there were no reserve forces and defence positions for the Hungarian troops. After they had to leave the strongholds, the chance of fighting successfully against the Russians was minimal. The aim was to rescue as many soldiers as possible and reach the new assembly area west. It should have been an escape from the fighting and the cold.

Without horses and vehicles, walking was slow and deadly. The temperature was extremely low at minus 37–38 degrees Celsius.

## Withdraw and engagement

The German leaders could not recognise the role of the offensive, and their reactions were late. The redeployment was slow, and the reaction force was weak. The 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of January were critical days. The Russian rapid units bypassed the Hungarian positions, forcing them to retreat to the West.

The Hungarian commanders saw the German incompetence and recognised that the Hungarians remained alone. The most important task was to save the soldiers' lives. Planning and organising the movement was critical because they were under enemy fire. The commanders set the security units to protect the moving troops. These rearward formations would have been relieved if that had been possible. The movement was hazardous because the Russians wanted to enclose the units, and the fighting contact was permanent. The situation was the most dangerous and critical at the 3<sup>rd</sup> (III) Corps

<sup>23</sup> SZABÓ 1994: 181, HL (Hungarian Military History Storage), 2<sup>nd</sup> Army documents, 22<sup>nd</sup> package, LTC Béla Vécsey report, Commander of the 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.

<sup>24</sup> SZABÓ 2003: 275.

on the Northern flank.<sup>25</sup> This unit seceded from the Hungarian troops and threatened the enclosure by the Russians. This Hungarian unit was attached to the German 2<sup>nd</sup> Army by the German Army Group B until the delayed operations were conducted.<sup>26</sup> The movement to the West was complex and deadly. The Soviet units searched for the Hungarian soldiers and killed most of them. The situation of the German units was similar everywhere near Stalingrad. The escaped German units seized all the usable buildings and shelters. Since the will to live was much stronger than comradeship, German soldiers usually did not let any Hungarian soldier into these occupied buildings, which reduced their survival rate because they had to stay outside for those nights.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of January, the Hungarian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army began to evacuate the positions because the penetrated Russian units tried to isolate and capture the Hungarian troops. At the same time, the Italian and German troops left the positions by the Southern flank and moved back to the West. The Soviet 3<sup>rd</sup> Tank Army and the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalier Corps pushed them. The Russian invasion began successfully.

Most of the Hungarian units broke out the Red Army blockades and moved to the designated assembly area. The losses were enormous because the heavy weapons were immobilised, and the ammunition had run out.

The situation was severe everywhere, maybe the 3<sup>rd</sup> (III) Corps was in the most significant trouble. This unit lost contact with the Hungarian Commanders and the other units led by the German "Siebert Group". In other words, the role of this combat unit was to protect the escape of the German 2<sup>nd</sup> Army from Voronezh. However, the support system for the Hungarian unit collapsed because the German Commander did not support the Hungarian Corps and only ordered "last endurance". Hitler knew about the situation but definitely prohibited any withdrawal. He ordered: "Keep the position until the last man standing." Nobody had given the order to redeploy and withdraw, so the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Commander was alone between the cruel order and the one possible solution: withdraw the units. On the night of the 17<sup>th</sup> of January, he decided the last Hungarian units would move back from the Don River and take a suitable position further away from the Russians. The last units (7<sup>th</sup> Corps) began the manoeuvres and left the Don, but they had severe losses.

The forward Russian armour-supported units enclosed two strategically essential cities Aleksejevka and Ostrogzhsk, both were dislocated by German and Hungarian units, and the Russians wanted to demolish every military force. The Hungarian troops kept open an eight-kilometre-wide corridor between Aleksejevka and Ilovskoje, and many Hungarian and German units were evacuated this way.

In the Northern flank, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps reorganised the units and, together with some German subunits, occupied strong defence positions that could stop the Russian 60<sup>th</sup> Army strikes from the 16<sup>th</sup> of January to the 27<sup>th</sup> of January. This composition defended the withdrawal of the 2<sup>nd</sup> German Army's right flank.

Army Group B finally got permission<sup>27</sup> (from Berlin, OKH<sup>28</sup>) to reorganise its forces. Therefore, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hungarian Army got an order to move near Romni and Kolotov to

<sup>25</sup> SZABÓ 1994: 214–218.

<sup>26</sup> SZABÓ 1994: 195, HL 2<sup>nd</sup> Army documents, 20<sup>th</sup> package, III Corps documents (1943.I.12–31).

<sup>27</sup> SZABÓ 1994: 211.

<sup>28</sup> Oberkommando des Heeres, Supreme Headquarters of the German Army.

reorganise and resupply the equipment and the necessary material storage.<sup>29</sup> Some Hungarian units fought together with the German units until the end of February before arriving at the designated assembly area.

## After the battle

The retreat lasted till the end of January. Throughout the battlefield, the Army had heavy battles to try to rescue the enclosed troops. All Hungarian units arrived at the assembly area in the middle of February after the cruel engagement and devastating March. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Command made the report and listed the losses from the Russian offensive.

The Hungarian historians issued the amount of loss.<sup>30</sup> According to the sources, it could be assessed that 40–42,000 soldiers and Hungarian citizens died (KIA<sup>31</sup>), 28–35,000 were injured (WIA<sup>32</sup>), and 26–60,000 were captured by Russians (POW<sup>33</sup>). The loss of the Russians was as follows: 13,876 died, and 23,547 were injured, but the Russian operation was conducted in a bigger area against the Italian, German and Hungarian troops at the same time. Another source reported higher numbers, but it is true that the source mentioned above covered a longer term for the Russian Voronezh Front operations (50 days, between the 13<sup>th</sup> of January and the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March). The number of dead soldiers was 33,331, in addition to 62,384 injured and sick soldiers. The total loss was 95,715 soldiers. These figures might be higher compared to the Hungarian losses, but we have to keep in mind that the Soviet counterattack was conducted on a much wider frontline in a greater period of time because the 3<sup>rd</sup> (Russian) Tank Army attacked the Italian and German units by the Southern flank.

The serious losses resulted in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hungarian Army being transported back to the homeland between April and May 1943 after the Hungarian and German political negotiations. In the homeland, the Army was reorganised and fought against the Russians after the Romanian capital treason in 1944.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusions

### The structure and organisation of the Hungarian Army

During the organisation and the preparation process, some mistakes had been made by the Hungarian military leaders. First of all, the combat support units, the number of the artillery assets and fire capacities were insufficient. The armour units also had similar problems as the armour units were missing from the combat units. The

<sup>29</sup> DOMBRÁDY-TÓTH 1987: 273.

<sup>30</sup> ROMSICS 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Killed in action (military terminology).

<sup>32</sup> Wounded in action (military terminology).

<sup>33</sup> Prisoner of war (captured by the enemy).

<sup>34</sup> RAVASZ 2002: 55–57.

biggest problem was the “light division” organisations,<sup>35</sup> which were called brigades before. The combat power was limited, similar to a brigade only, but the size of the battlefield (for defence) was a division size. Mobility was another serious problem. Without transport vehicles and horses, mobility was very limited at this critical time.

## The support and logistic

The other low-performing element was the poor logistic support between the summer and winter seasons. The Hungarian leaders did not complement the lack of equipment and weapons. However, they had some opportunities.

There was a shortage of equipment and weapons, and the material supply was limited. The logistic system was based on the Allied (German) kindness intent. The supply system (and the Hungarian troops) depended on German opportunities.

## The Don River did not protect the Hungarian lines

The leadership had neither long-term nor medium concepts about how to conduct their operations. The political and military leaders neglected the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army and did not care about the upcoming events. The forecast, such as planning (intellectual effort) and making long-term concepts, belongs to the leaders' duty. The fact that they ignored the changeable weather conditions (the frozen river, the extreme cold and snow) means that they did not care about the threat and consequences.

## Never trust the allied neighbours

Historical experience of small allied countries: the strong powers do not respect the smaller ones, and the members of the alliance are not equal. Regardless of the promises or/and historical connections/relationships.

Every ally state should have a second plan (without the allied troops). We also have to have one at all times. Nevertheless, we did not have a so-called “second plan” in 1942–1943.

## Experiences for the Hungarian leaders

Never leave the road! The science of military organisation (principles, organisation procedures and force generation) is based on serious historical experiences. It is impossible to figure out new structures, such as “light” and other renamed formations. Light means weak in the “politically correct” communication. This is a long-standing bad practice in Hungarian military and strategic thinking. To cover the weaknesses in a defence structure

<sup>35</sup> KOMJÁTHY 1982: 139.

is a huge wickedness mainly for the public. The incorrect methods (sending weak and poorly equipped forces to the Don) were the main cause of the Don catastrophe. The weaknesses of the Hungarian troops were recognised by the German and the Russian leaders also. The deceptive names (light division) covered the organic problems and limited combat capabilities. Unfortunately, the Hungarian people were misguided, nobody else. In the end, they gave the greatest sacrifice to the thousands of victims.

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