

Operation Edelweiss

THE NAZI WAR FOR OIL

A DOCUMENTARY
BY RENZO CARBONERA



PRODUCED BY  sd cinematografica

Synopsis

In the twentieth century, oil became a vital resource, influencing and sometimes determining the outcome of wars, diplomacy, politics and the world economy, not to mention the impact it had in the ecological field.

Our story is about the Nazi regime's desperate thirst for oil, which proved crucial to the outcome of the Second World War.

Nazi tanks, airplanes, submarines and ships, as well as Hitler's infamous super weapons, the Wunderwaffen, and the first jet-propelled aircraft, the Messerschmitt, all required huge quantities of oil. And Germany did not have this resource.

This is why, in 1942, the Wehrmacht launched an operation aimed at conquering the vast Soviet oil reserves: the oil fields of Grozny and Baku in the Caucasus.

The 49th Mountain Corps took part in a battle that is considered one of the most arduous and little known of World War II: Operation Edelweiss.

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Treatment

The summer of 1942. The Wehrmacht is engaged on several fronts.

The tanks of Rommel's Afrika Korps stand motionless under the sun in the desert of Tobruk and the mechanized infantry divisions under General von Paulus wait at the gates of Stalingrad. From air bases in Belgium and the Netherlands bombers are not taking off for London and Birmingham; from La Rochelle the dreaded Wolfsrudel, the submarines that have been terrorising the columns of Atlantic merchant ships, are not setting sail. What is happening to the divisions of the German army?

Everyone is waiting for something, the same thing!

The Reich is thirsty, thirsty for something in particular – it has an insatiable, desperate thirst for oil. And it is the lack of oil, even more than bullets, even more than explosives, even more than food and medicine, that is the sandbank against which the force of the Third Reich is hopelessly running aground.

August 1942. On the snow capped peaks of the Caucasus Mountains, in a luxury hotel converted into a bunker and blockhouse at a height of 5000 metres, the advanced forces of the Wehrmacht Mountain Corps, made up of troops from Bavaria, Austria and Alto Adige (the so-called "optanti", those who "opted" to join the Reich after 1939 when Hitler and Mussolini reached their agreement) led by Marshall Kuemmele, is drinking a toast of vodka and dry biscuits with the enemy, a handful of students from the Red Army's Transcaucasian Mountain School. The school is run by the legendary Soviet mountain climber Eugeny Beletsky. The Russian officer, a little tipsy like all the others, is saying that according to Greek mythology it was on that mountain that Prometheus was chained for eternity for having stolen fire from the gods.

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Gorter, a war correspondent, is standing to one side, listening. Everyone is enthralled by the storytelling skills of the charismatic, burly Soviet worker turned daring, world famous climber. Watching the scene, one would never imagine that outside, thousands of metres below, the most devastating war humanity has ever suffered is raging, one where Germans and Russians are the bitterest enemies.

Gorter was seconded from Nazi propaganda to this mission because he is the only war correspondent with experience of the mountains. Marshal Kuemmele is leading the vanguard of the 49th regiment, the specialized mountain arm of the Wehrmacht, to fight in the mountains. The aim of their mission, Operation Edelweiss, is to conquer the massive Mount Elbrus (5648 meters high), to gain control of the mountain pass and block the Red Army on the Caucasus plain.

The exploits of these mountain daredevils will enable the German navy to conquer the huge Baku and Caspian Sea oilfields, setting off from the Mediterranean, without having to clash with the Soviets. These deposits, the largest in Europe, would provide the Third Reich with enough oil to supply the nation and its thirsty war machine.

Before the war, oil had not assumed the importance it has today. About 80% of the world's energy came from coal, a resource that Germany possessed in abundance. But to win such a highly technological conflict as the Second World War, which was based on motorized equipment and weapons, oil resources were of paramount importance.

The Germans' strategy of Blitzkrieg, the "lightning war" having failed, the crucial role of oil and at the same the difficulties of accessing this resource assumed enormous importance. On the other hand, the huge oil reserves and other raw materials at the disposal of the Russians were making the Soviet Union the only superpower capable of competing with the United States.

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What is more, the Germans had not forgotten the lesson they had learnt during the First World War when the German Empire had tried to secure the Iraqi oil fields through an alliance with the Ottoman Empire. This front, known as the "Mesopotamian Campaign", ended with Germany's defeat at the hands of the British Colonial Army, contributing to the defeat of the German Empire.

The oil age thus began during the bloodiest war to ever inflict our planet. But the battle in the Caucasus mountains and the Elbrus massive has almost been forgotten, despite being of fundamental importance to the outcome of the war.

The war against the Soviet Union began on June 22, 1941, and the German 49th Mountain Regiment was sent immediately to the war's southern front. Its men had a reputation for being able to fight in the harshest conditions, thanks to mountaineering and military tradition of skill and almost superhuman stamina. Moreover, in civilian life they were almost all professional mountain climbers respected the world over. On this occasion, their mission was very special.

The mountain infantry (Gebirgsjaeger) of the Wehrmacht were followed by 15,000 oil industry workers, sent by German companies such as "German Oil on Caucasus", "Oel-Ost" and "Karpaten-Oel. The aim was to construct pipelines in the wake of the Wehrmacht as they advanced towards the Caucasus, in order to be able to exploit the oil wells as soon as they were seized. In return, these companies were awarded 99-year exclusive licenses to exploit the oilfields in the Caucasus.

After more than a year of military operations, the situation has reached a stalemate. Therefore, on July 23, 1942, Hitler decides to authorize Operation Edelweiss. While the Abwehr, the German intelligence services, develop Operation Schamil to support the anti-Soviet uprising in Chechnya, the units of the 49th Mountain Division advance in the direction of Baku, which is to be conquered by land without bombing, to avoid hitting the wells or refineries. But to reach there they have to liberate the Elbrus Pass and hold in check the Red Army in the Caucasus, the objective of operation Edelweiss.

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A vanguard of 150 men led by Colonel Groth is sent to seize the passes that lead to the Elbrus massive. From Karachay-Cherkessia through the village of Khurzuk and Ullu-kam Gorge they reach the Khotyutau Pass, which is not defended by Soviet troops. The Khotyutau Pass is later nicknamed "the General Konrad Pass". It is August 10, 1942.

But the German Gebirgsjaeger are not alone in these mountains. They will be faced very soon with the vanguard of the Red Army, which has been sent in the area. The first contact takes place on August 17, when the Germans reach a Soviet ski resort and hotel, a hotel of absurd ostentation and luxury in the middle of nowhere, belonging to the Soviet travel agency Inturist.

Exhausted after several days of climbing and with a heavy storm approaching, Colonel Groth and Sergeant Kuemmele are invited by Soviet soldiers to the heated bunker built next to the Inturist Hotel: the Germans bring the bread, the Soviets the vodka. Together they drink to peace, listening to Beletsky's stories. But the idyll does not last long: the following day the German forces return, put the Soviets to flight and seize the site.

Part of the documentary, with relevant dramatic reconstructions, focuses on this dramatic and significant event, as a way of introducing the main characters of the story: Colonel Groth, Captain Gammeler, Marshal Kuemmele, the war correspondent Gorter and, from the Russian side, Captain Beletsky.

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From the bunker of the Inturist Hotel, a few days after having conquered it for the first time, Colonel Groth and Captain Gammeler, along with twenty-one experienced climbers, set off on an historic mission. On August 21, 1942 they reach the top of Mount Elbrus, a feat that is still etched in the annals of mountaineering and extreme sports in general. An undertaking so arduous that the Nazi flag flew atop Elbrus for several years after the end of the war. It was the last Nazi flag to fly anywhere in the world.

Through the mountaineering feats of these individual we will discover a new more human and epic aspect of war.

During the following weeks the Germans and Russians fight to maintain or regain control of Elbrus, and especially the position of the Inturist Hotel. The friendly meeting that begins the documentary is an example of the sense of chivalry shared by those with a common history of being born and raised challenging mountains, even when they are "the enemy". What is particular about Operation Edelweiss is just this succession of fierce battles interspersed with moments of collaboration, which were necessary to survive in this odd situation where the enemy is not only the opposing army but also nature and human limitations.

Meanwhile, the Eastern Front is divided and weak. The Battle of Stalingrad consumes huge quantities of men and equipment, and represents a key point for Hitler's propaganda machine: failure would have had dramatic consequences for the whole front.

Soon General Konrad is left alone with his 49th Regiment and his mission grinds to a halt. The battle on Elbrus turns into a heroic act performed by a handful of men. After bloody clashes, the expedition is blocked only 40 kilometres from Grozny and is forced to return to the mountains, due to lack of supplies.

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Here the soldiers hold their position for four months during the winter, in conditions of extreme altitude and climate, without being able to count on any reinforcements, despite many promises. Of the division, less than twenty soldiers survive and abandon the Elbrus Massive in January 1943, tagging onto the Nazi army retreating from Russia after the defeat at Stalingrad, a prelude to the fall of the Third Reich.

General Rudolf Konrad, who had joined the Nazi madness without hesitation and actively participated in the persecution of the Jews, changed his mind, realising that the war was absurd and that these climbers on Elbrus would have much preferred to have shared the peak instead of killing each other. The famous general was tried in a Nazi court because he had ordered the retreat from a hopeless situation like that of Operation Edelweiss, where, among other tragedies, his son Eberhard lost his life.

Eugeny Beletsky, the Soviet officer who had shared so much with the German climbers, personally led the Soviet expedition to remove the flag bearing the swastika from the top of Mount Elbrus. He only succeeded in 1953.

Would the War have ended differently if the Nazis had succeeded in taking control of the oil the Wunderwaffen needed?

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Note of intent / Visual Note

The documentary will be based on research by Dietrich Eishholz – “Krieg um Oel. Ein Erdoelimperium als deutsches Kriegziel 1938 – 1943” and the diaries of General Konrad, “Kampf um den Kaukasus”, which will be fundamental for a faithful reconstruction of what happened and for the scripts of the dramatic inserts.

In order to reinforce the dramatic element, the narrative will focus on two main characters, the German war correspondent Wolfgang Gorter, who joined Operation Edelweiss from Nazi propaganda, and the leading Soviet climber Eugeny Beletzky, who became famous worldwide when the Queen of England invited him to an audience.

The documentary will develop a compelling narrative rhythm, interweaving five strands of narrative material:

- A vast amount of archive material, largely unseen, from public archives (NARA, Istituto Luce, the British Film Archive, Austrian and German Film Archives) and private collections, like the photographs of the Mount Elbrus climb taken by the war correspondent Gorter.

- Moving personal accounts, many recorded in the 1990s by British journalist Stuart Russell, and interviews with relatives of the main characters involved (Generale Konrad, Colonel Groth, Marshall Kuemmele and Wolfgang Gorter) and historians such as Giorgio Seccia and Bertin Claude, experts in military strategy and mountain climbing, as well as contemporary military experts like Lucas James and Paul Carrel, who explain the tactical aspects of the operation, the dreadful conditions of the battlefield among the mountains and glaciers, the complex background of the war and the continuous advances and retreats that took place on this very mobile front.

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Note of intent / Visual Note

- A visual support of the explanations in the form of a model of the battlefield using miniature soldiers and equipment combined with computer graphics.
- Reconstructions. Brief inserts, carefully selected to tell not only a tale of war but also of one of challenging nature, carried out by a handful of men: two stories that have something in common, they both took these men beyond their limits.
- An expedition to the Caucasus to provide contemporary material to frame the environmental context in which Operation Edelweiss took place.

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The Director

RENZO CARBONERA

Born in Latisana (UD), Italy on 15th Sept. 1980

Renzo Carbonera graduated with a thesis on British director Ken Loach at the University of Padova. He then took an Audiovisuals Master Degree there, with seminars by renowned professionals like Academy Award winners Roberto Perpignani (Orson Welles' editor), Vincenzo Cerami (Roberto Benigni's scriptwriter) and Vittorio Storaro (Bernardo Bertolucci's d.o.p.).

He has Italian and German nationality, speaks fluently Italian, German and English, and lives between the Bavaria and Friuli/Veneto regions. He is 30 years old and directed 8 TV documentaries, all of them have been distributed and broadcasted worldwide. His collaborations include Mediaset, RAI, Fox International Channels and other broadcasters from major European Countries.

His projects have been funded twice by the EU Media Programme, 7 times by the FVG Film Commission, and 2 times by the Veneto Film Commission. Renzo directed and wrote many history documentaries, but also the docu-fiction "Stop and Listen", on the best male polyphonic choir in the world, produced by Ticofilm with RAI, YLE (Finland), Musica Mundi (Germany).

Furthermore he just finished his first fiction short film, produced by Maremetraggio, Esperimentocinema and Sissy Entertainment, with Sergio Rubini (Academy Award winner "Mediterraneo" by Gabriele Salvatores, and Mel Gibson's "Passion of Christ"), Cosimo Cinieri (many Federico Fellini movies) and Italian-German TV star Christiane Filangieri. This short film will premiere at the Venice Film Festival – Mostra del Cinema di Venezia in September 2011 and be presented at the Nastri d'Argento – Taormina Film Festival.

Lately Renzo has been selected for two Media script and production workshops (EEFA and MFI), to develop his first feature length movie "Zarafa's Journey", an Italy/Germany/Romania co-production. Furthermore, in September 2011 he will direct the video and mise-en-scène of two live events, the opening and closing ceremonies of the major European Olympic Sports event in number of participants: the European Master Games 2011 in Lignano Sabbiadoro-Italy.

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Director's filmography

- 2011 Hemingway's Pen
Shortfilm, 15', RED 5k
FESTIVAL PREMIERE: Major film festivals premiere at Mostra del Cinema di Venezia september 2011
TV PREMIERE: SKY TV premiere in october 2011
- 2010 The Sinking of Baron Gautsch
Documentary, 30', HD
BROADCASTER: RAI 3
- 2010 Stop and Listen
Docufiction, 55', HD
BROADCASTERS: RAI3, YLE, SVT, HRT)
- 2009 Blue Jeans and Short Skirts
Documentary, 52', HD
BROADCASTERS: Mediaset/RETE 4, History Channel Spain, RTV Slo
- 2009 A Ring on the Adriatic
Documentary, 52', HD
BROADCASTERS: History Channel Italy, History Channel Spain, Czech TV
- 2007 Bottecchia, l'ultima pedalata
Documentary, 52', HDV
BROADCASTER: RAI 3
Home video release in Italy, Austria and Slovenia
- 2006 Gemona 76. Memorie di un sisma
Documentary, 52', HDV
BROADCASTERS: RAI 3, History Channel Italy
- 2005 L'Aghe
Documentary, 52', HDV
BROADCASTER: RAI 3
Home video release
- 2004 Five Points
Documentary, 25', SD
BROADCASTER: Coming Soon Television
Various film festivals in Italy, Rio de Janeiro Film Fest, Mocha Film Fest Mumbai, Idago Film Fest, Indiana Film Fest

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The Production Company

SD Cinematografica has been in the audiovisual field (in particular television production and editing) since 1961. In 1981 it became a limited Company.

With Frédéric Rossif, the well-known French documentary maker, it has produced many television series: from "L'APOCALISSE DEGLI ANIMALI", to "L'OPERA SELVAGGIA" to art documentaries on MATISSE, MATHIEU, PICASSO and MORANDI, following the editorial line of the multi-award winning "LA VIOLENZA E LA PIETÀ", on the restoration of Michelangelo's Pietà, that received an Academy Awards nomination (documentary section).

The wildlife series "PAN – Animals of the Mediterranean", co-produced with RAI and shot on film, was broadcast in primetime in Italy. Thanks to its high quality and scientific value, it was sold to 38 countries.

Several nature documentaries produced for RAI's GEO&GEO have been entered in international festivals and have won major prizes.

Recently SD Cinematografica has produced two 50-minute documentaries for the National Geographic Channels, as well as 50 fillers.

"Flying over Everest" produced in 2004 after two years of shootings won 17 prizes at important International Festivals and was broadcasted by RAI and Discovery Channel (Italy), TF1 and ARTE (France), NHK (Japan), ARD (Germany), RTSI and SF1 (Switzerland), MTV3 (Finland) and many others.

With the recent "The sinking of Andrea Doria" SD Cinematografica is proud to include the American PBS and the German ZDF in its list of international coproducers.

"Ortona 1943: a bloody Christmas", a co-production with Mediaset (Italy) and ZDF Enterprises (Germany), has been nominated at Banff world television festival as one of the best "History and biography programs" in 2009.

"Free Mussolini", a 120' special co-produced with RAI (Italy), is now distributed by ITV Global.

It has a catalogue of around 250 hours of programming, including over 40 films, and production, editing (analogue and digital) and dubbing facilities.

For several years it has also been involved in television and home-video distribution.

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Production's recent filmography

- 2010 On the trails of the glaciers
Documentary, 52', HD
CO-PRODUCER: Eikon Film Gmbh (Germany)
BROADCASTERS: ZDF/ARTE, NHK, RAI and RSI
- 2010 Free Mussolini
Documentary, 120' and 52', HD
BROADCASTER: RAI
INTERNATIONAL SALES: ITV Global
- 2009 Blue Jeans and Short Skirts
Documentary, 52', HD
BROADCASTERS: Mediaset/RETE 4, History Channel Spain,
RTV Slo
- 2009 A Ring on the Adriatic
Documentary, 52', HD
BROADCASTERS: History Channel Italy, History Channel Spain,
Czech TV
- 2008 Ortona 1943: a bloody Christmas
Documentary, 52', HDV
CO-PRODUCERS: Mediaset and ZDF Enterprises
BROADCASTERS: Rete 4, History Channel Italy, UK and Spain,
Telelatino
FESTIVALS: Nominee at Banff World Television Festival
- 2006 The Sinking of the Andrea Doria
Documentary, 60' and 75', SD
CO-PRODUCERS: Monaco Film (Germany) & Thirteen (USA)
BROADCASTERS: ZDF, PBS, RAI, History Italy & UK, Nat Geo
(Australia)
- 2004 Flying over Everest
Documentary, 52', SD
CO-PRODUCER: Provobis (Germany)
BROADCASTERS: BR/ARTE, RAI, NHK, TF1, Discovery,
Halogen
- 2003 The mystery of the wolf
Documentary, 52', SD
BROADCASTER: National Geographic

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Contacts

SD CINEMATOGRAFICA
Lungotevere delle Navi, 19
00196 Roma - Italy

Tel.: +39.06.3215114

Fax.: +39.06.64520220

Email: info@sdcinematografica.it

PRODUCTION:
ROBERTO DALL'ANGELO
CEO

Email: roberto.dallangelo@sdcinematografica.it

SALES:
ALESSIO ZANARDO
Sales Manager

Email: alessio.zanardo@sdcinematografica.it

WEBSITE: www.sdcinematografica.it

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