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Review of *The Panzers of Prokhorovka: The Myth of Hitler's Greatest Armoured Defeat* by Ben Wheatley

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BOOK REVIEWS

with an interest in the social and gender aspects of the Resistance in France, particularly surrounding the support of Allied personnel.

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Ben Wheatley, *The Panzers of Prokhorovka: The Myth of Hitler's Greatest Armoured Defeat*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing 2023. 229pp + 14 maps + 126 photographs + 67 tables. ISBN: 978-1472859082 (hardback). Price £25.00.

Nowadays, visitors approaching the town of Prokhorovka on the main road from Belgorod cannot miss the fifty-two-metre-high Victory Memorial Tower which dominates the fields to the south of the town. A little further on, lies the extensive Prokhorovka Museum complex which is 'announced' by a particularly dramatic sculpture of two Soviet T34 tanks crushing a couple of German Tigers. The tower, the museum complex and the sculptures were constructed in the 1990s at a time when direct memories of the Battle of Kursk were beginning to fade. The Great Patriotic War was (and is) a source of great pride for the Russian people, and in the post-Soviet era it has served the authorities well to reinforce this through the memorialisation of key sites, and the propagation of associated nationalistic sentiments through school curriculums and state-controlled media.

The Battle of Kursk in the summer of 1943 was, without doubt, an iconic victory for the Red Army - ranking alongside the Battles of Moscow, Stalingrad and the crossing of the Dnieper in terms of scale and importance. Indeed, the distinguished American historian David M. Glantz, suggests that Kursk and the ensuing Soviet Kutuzov counter-offensive constitute the point at which the strategic initiative was irretrievably lost by the German Wehrmacht. However, elements of the established narrative have, in recent years, been subject to vigorous challenge. One such element is the idea that on the 12 July 1943 Hausser's German II SS Panzer Korps suffered a catastrophic loss of armoured fighting vehicles (AFVs) when counter attacked by Rotmistrov's Soviet 5th Guards Tank Army at Prokhorovka.

The 'myth of Prokhorovka' began to unravel with the publication of the II SS Panzer Corps War Diary in 1980. A report from 5th Guards Tank Army issued on 17 July

1943 claimed 353 German AFVs had been destroyed on the fields around Prokhorovka in just one day, and yet the former document gave a figure of only 33 for the entire Kursk offensive! In recent years, the German historians Ernst Klink and Karl-Heinz Frieser have done much to develop a counter-narrative, and, from a Russian perspective, the research undertaken by Valerie Zamulin has also served to challenge the 'official' view.

In this fascinating new study Ben Wheatley has built on these foundations to produce a definitive enumeration of AFV losses. In doing so he has developed a number of thought-provoking arguments concerning the significance of the battle. The approach the author has taken is the epitome of empirical study in that every piece of available data from both Russian and German sources has been analysed and cross-referenced. The use of aerial reconnaissance photographic evidence to verify documented claims is novel and serves to build confidence in the conclusions reached. The revised picture is a revelation. Far from being 'destroyed' at Prokhorovka the three Division strong German II SS Panzer Korps (*Leibstandarte, Das Reich and Totenkopf*) left the field of battle undefeated and in good order, having lost only 16 AFVs - a figure which included just one Tiger. On the other hand, the author, in applying the same analytical tools, concludes that the four Soviet tank corps that participated in the Battle of Prokhorovka lost between 212 and 265 AFVs.

Aside from giving the definitive position on AFV losses at Prokhorovka, the author explores a number of related questions. In particular it is clear that on the German side, the recovery of 'knocked-out' armour was, up until late 1943, extremely effective. Damaged vehicles were classified on the basis of severity before being allocated for repair to in-theatre workshops or specialist facilities back in Germany. Where they were written-off, then this was marked in contemporary records. Because the ground at Prokhorovka was not conceded until a few days after the battle, then it was possible for specialist Wehrmacht units to retrieve and repair a high proportion of damaged vehicles. Later in the war, as spare parts become scarce, transportation more difficult and where the Axis forces were in retreat, recovery and repair became more difficult and the rate of AFV losses increased exponentially.

Notwithstanding the over-statement of German losses, the author readily concedes that the Soviets prevailed at Prokhorovka and that in holding the Wehrmacht on both the northern and southern faces of the Kursk salient, they were able to successfully execute Operation Kutuzov which set the conditions for a drive to the Dnieper and beyond. In acknowledging the Soviet victory, he cites a massive superiority in artillery, the deployment of a seemingly impregnable anti-tank screen and the sheer number of tanks as the elements that tipped the balance. Indeed, even after the battle, 5th Guards Tank Army were able to deploy over 400 operational AFVs.

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This reviewer is not a fan of counter-factual history but nevertheless the author makes some interesting points when ruminating over what might have happened had the II SS Panzer Korps not been split up and its' effectiveness diluted after the 17th of July - particularly in bolstering the defence of Kharkov or prosecuting an effective counterattack to pre-empt such a threat. As he says, 'a fully operational and complete II SS Panzer Korps (including the *Liebstandarte*) in the hands of Manstein would have been a fearsome prospect'.

It is perhaps indicative of the range of sources used and the depth of research, that 132 pages are given over to the bibliography, appendices and notes. Aside from increasing the veracity of the authors' conclusions, this additional material is a rich reference source for anyone with an appetite to investigate this topic further. The large number of high-quality aerial photographs which are included, along with contemporary images sourced from Google Earth, bring another dimension to the analysis - and they also serve to remind the reader that many brave tank crews paid the ultimate price during this epic battle. It is often said that history is a matter of interpretation. However, this is one instance where the facts speak for themselves, and the author of this study should be commended on answering a contentious question in such a thorough, objective and authoritative way.

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Andrew Fine, *The Price of Truth: The Journalist who Defied Military Censors to Report the Fall of Nazi Germany*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2023. xv + 290 pp. ISBN 978-1501765940 (hardback). £27.99.

Andrew Fine's latest book is a study of a man and an incident. As a reporter based in Europe during the bloody denouement of the largest war in history, Ed Kennedy was a journalist at the peak of his career. Kennedy was not only covering news stories of interest to an enormous rapt audience but was also shaping up to become the chief of his bureau, the Associated Press, in Paris. In a single day all this would be lost.

As one of the journalists chosen to witness and report the surrender of all German forces in Europe, Kennedy also had the opportunity to secure one of the greatest