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Walter Dunn. *Kursk: Hitler's Gamble, 1943.* New York: Praeger, 1997. xvi + 200 pp. $57.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-95733-9.

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Between July 5 and 13, 1943, the Red Army and the Wehrmacht fought the largest land battle in history for possession of Kursk, a rail junction some five hundred miles south of Moscow and inside a westward bulge in the Russian front line. The Wehrmacht called the operation *Zitadelle*. Hitler's justification for the Reich's enormous commitment of men and weapons was that a victory would offer a "Fanal," a beacon that German arms remained invincible despite the catastrophe at Stalingrad the previous January, and that Moscow's link to its Caucasus oil fields could be cut. The Wehrmacht concentrated more armor for *Zitadelle* than it had supplied to the three army groups in Operation *Barbarossa*, the June 1941 invasion of Russia.

The Red Army's aim was not just to deny German objectives. It had to demonstrate yet again that it could survive a Wehrmacht onslaught. In March, even while Soviet armies surged forward in the aftermath of Stalingrad, powerful Nazi armies recaptured Kharkov, the second largest city in the Ukraine. Like the Wehrmacht, the Red Army was now committing the bulk of its armor for an engagement at the bulge.

In his highly-detailed account of the Kursk battle (or, more properly, series of battles), Walter Dunn's purpose is "to examine the facts in detail to see if they reveal something that approaches a rational explanation of what occurred and the consequences" (p. viii). But bluntly put, nothing about *Zitadelle*, beginning with its conception in Berlin, can be considered rational. Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, arguably the Wehrmacht's finest strategist, had formulated a plan for a limited offensive for no later than May to thwart an expected Russian breakout attempt from the bulge. Instead, Hitler favored a massive assault with forces comprising the cream of the SS and the Wehrmacht which would theoretically envelop the Russians from north and south and wreak havoc reminiscent of mighty Nazi victories at Kiev and Minsk in July 1941.

Yet *Zitadelle* concerned Hitler from its earliest planning stages. He demanded that new super-tanks be put into production and delivered, thus delaying the attack date and giving Russians time to prepare. Dunn argues persuasively that Hitler proceeded with the operation, in large part, because "the invasion of North Africa by Britain and the United States in November 1942 signaled that the likelihood of an invasion of France in 1943 was slim. The plans made at Casablanca by Churchill and Roosevelt in January 1943, soon revealed to Hitler, confirmed that fact" (p. 14). Divisions stationed in France were transferred to the Eastern Front. Without them, *Zitadelle* would have been unthinkable.

Stalin depended for his military guidance primarily

on Marshal Georgi Zhukov, who had no compunction about ordering troops across minefields to clear the way for succeeding waves of soldiers. We are uncertain (all of Stalin's files have not yet been opened) of the Soviet dictator's outlook in the spring of 1943. Russians had made contacts with Germans in Stockholm, looking to a negotiated Russo-German peace. Possibly, Stalin expected more from Hitler than the abrupt dismissal of the peace feelers.

Dunn says nothing about peace; military aspects of Kursk are virtually his only interest. And he writes that Zhukov could not be certain, in early spring, where, when, and with what weight, Germans would attack. Was the target Kursk or was the intention to encircle Moscow? Twice before, in 1941 and 1942, Stalin's generals had been badly mistaken about German plans, with near-fatal results for the Soviet Union.

When Moscow finally determined–through spies operating within the Wehrmacht and British intelligence–that Kursk was Berlin's objective, Stalin agreed to Zhukov's plan for an immense defensive system. In a model of understatement, Dunn notes that "with the memories of German ability to penetrate Soviet defensive lines at will in 1941 and 1942, the Red Army indulged in what could be considered overkill" (p. 100). This meant three "army" level defense lines, three lines manned by front reserves, and two reserve lines manned by the "Steppe Front," for a total of eight successive lines of emplacements within the bulge, protected by 400,000 land mines and more anti-tank guns than the Germans had tanks. By July 4, both sides had crammed men and equipment into an area about 118 miles wide and 75 miles deep. Soviet forces consisted of 1.3 million men, 3,444 tanks, 2,900 aircraft, and 19,000 guns. The Wehrmacht concentrated 900,000 troops, 2,700 tanks, 2,000 aircraft, and 10,000 guns.[1]

Although historians disagree on the German and Russian orders of battle for Kursk, none disagree about the nature of war on the Eastern Front. Dunn paraphrases the testimony of Guy Sajer, an infantryman in the SS *Grossdeutschland* Division, as evidence of what German soldiers knew to expect of Soviet artillery barrages: "Daylight turned to darkness and was interrupted by brilliant flashes of nearby explosions. The earth trembled and bushes and trees exploded into flame by spontaneous combustion from the intense heat. The German troops were frozen with fear, unable to move or even scream at times and at other times driven to howling like animals while desperately trying to bury themselves deeper to escape the terror, while clutching one another like children. Those who peered out were thrown back into the shelter in pieces" (p. 108).

In the north, through the end of the operation the German 9th Army gained a mere six miles at a cost of 25,000 dead and two hundred each of tanks and aircraft lost. The focus of the battle shifted to the south, where the crack 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment *Kempf* were under Manstein's command, and where the German assault began after a Soviet preemptive barrage that "in Zhukov's opinion…began too soon while the Germans were still in their dugouts and their tanks were in concealed waiting areas, rather than in the open, assembling for the attack" (p. 109).

To win, the Wehrmacht would have to encircle the bulge by the offensive's fifth day. But not only were troops in the north stalled; elite SS units attacking in the south could not pierce the third line of Soviet defenses. What encouraged the German side, Dunn stresses, was its new Tiger tank, whose frontal armor was 100mm thick and which mounted an 88mm gun with a thousand-yard range. Tigers and their assault gun counterparts, Ferdinands, which mounted even more powerful 88mm guns than the Tigers, could not be reached by Soviet anti-tank guns. German tactics were for Tigers and Ferdinands to pick off Soviet anti-tank guns and tanks, and thus open holes in Russian defenses through which infantry and medium tanks could pour.

But three factors doomed the Wehrmacht. First, Russian generalship managed an elastic system of defenses within the emplacements. Second, Russian tactics permitted Tigers and other tanks to advance, after which Soviet details attacked enemy behemoths from behind where their armor was thinnest. The third factor was the incredible combination of fatalism and fanaticism that characterized Russian soldiers.

On July 12, southwest of Prokhorovka, a village barely twenty miles from where the 4th Panzer Army had started its offensive, *Zitadelle* reached its climax. The Soviet Fifth Guards Tank Army engaged the Second SS Panzer Corps at such close quarters that respective air force and artillery units stopped bombing and firing lest they massacre their own men. Drivers of an untold number of Soviet T-34 medium tanks deliberately crashed into Tigers and other German tanks, blowing themselves up along with the invaders. By the end of the day, Pavel Rotmistrov, commanding officer of the Fifth Guards, estimated that each side had lost no less than three hundred tanks.

Although Manstein still had hopes of victory as late as the 12th, Hitler ordered a withdrawal on the 13th in order, he said, to transfer troops to the Mediterranean to deal with the Anglo-American invasion of Sicily. Dunn comments, "Although Hitler mentioned Sicily as one reason for the termination of the offensive, Manstein also noted other reasons were given including the threat to the Mius River front and the Soviet attack north of Orel that began on July 12" (pp. 190-1). Put another way, Hitler grasped that Germany's armed forces simply did not have the resources to continue a fight of this scale at Kursk, other points on the Eastern Front, *and* in Sicily.

Red armies shortly began the offensives that would finally take them to the gates of Berlin. Kursk *was*, in fact, a turning point in the war. But surprisingly, despite its immensity, ferocity, and importance, Kursk has never received an equal amount of attention from American, British, German, or even Russian historians as have the battles of Moscow or Stalingrad. Nor does Kursk linger in the minds of Russians; there is no memorial inscribed with the names of Red Army men who fell at Kursk as there is for men who fell at Stalingrad.

All of which makes Dunn's book all the more useful for its details. But he does not answer the question: why the lack of interest in Kursk? He tells us that "most Western studies of the battle have been based on German sources, and even Soviet authors frequently quote published German memoirs. Previous studies have related little about Red Army forces opposing the Germans, certainly not with the same detail regarding the German forces, leaving the impression of a faceless Russian mass of poorly trained cannon fodder" (p. 185).

Until Russian files are integrated more fully, this impression will, unfortunately, persist. Yet, even then, the basic documentary source for *Zitadelle* may remain the applicable sections of the *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht*. In secondary sources, we have (in English) summary accounts of the battle in books by Eddy Bauer, John Erickson, Richard J. Overy, Albert Seaton, and Earl Ziemke.[2] Accounts in the memoirs of generals on both sides are patently self-serving. To cite one example, Manstein blames the defeat wholly on Hitler; Zhukov has harsh words for his fellow Soviet marshals and Stalin.[3]

What none of these books, including Dunn's, tells us is just how much of a gambler Hitler was. On January 24, 1943, he proclaimed total war for the Reich. On February 18, Goebbels delivered his Total War speech, the most effective public statement of his career. In theory, Germans were energized to work longer, harder, and faster on behalf of the Reich. Yet during 1943, and considering only tanks, Soviet production of 27,300 exceeded losses by nearly 5,000; Germany produced only 10,747 tanks, for a net gain of less than 2,000. As usual, after stirring propaganda, Hitler and the National Socialist *Gauleiter* carefully avoided putting strains on the population. German factories continued to work a single shift; amusements, such as horseracing, were not curtailed. Hitler insisted that the *Herrenvolk* could defeat *Untermenschen* through superior will, not to speak of the Germans' inherent peerless mental and military abilities. An overwhelming majority of Germans agreed with him. They, too, turned out to be gamblers.

[1]. The statistics are from Richard J. Overy, *Russia's War: Blood upon the Snow* (New York: TV Books, 1997), p. 244.

[2]. Eddy Bauer, *The History of World War II* (New York: Military Press, 1966); John Erickson, *The Road to Berlin* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1983); Richard J. Overy, *Russia's War*; Albert Seaton, *The Russo-German War, 1941-45* (New York: Praeger, 1970); Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Campaign in Russia, 1942-45* (New York: Dorset Press, 1968).

[3]. Erich von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege* (Bonn: Athenaum, 1958) and Georgi Zhukov, *Marshal Zhukov's Greatest Battles* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

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