



David M. Glantz, Jonathan M. House. *The Battle of Kursk*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999. xiii + 472 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0978-9.



Reviewed by Milton Goldin (National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS))

Published on H-War (May, 2000)

The Fabled Battle of Kursk

In this latest account of what was arguably World War II's most critical European engagement David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House buttress two earlier understandings. The first is that although there was no clear-cut Soviet victory, the ultimate result was that the Red Army's gained military dominance in Eastern Europe. The second is that Berlin ultimately believed that the Germans needed to inflict a massive beating upon the Red Army in order to permanently intimidate them as well as to persuade wavering allies to remain in the war. As it turned out, the Russians were not intimidated, and Italy dropped out the war days after Hitler ordered the withdrawal of Nazi forces from the Kursk salient.

This brings us to the value of this book. The book is based, in part, on recently-available Soviet sources. Scholars [knew] that key World War II Red Army documents must exist, but Moscow denied requests to open archives, and no one knew with any certainty exactly what information they contained. What *was* known about the battle came from German documents and memoirs of generals on both sides. German sources were incomplete because the Soviets had carted off a large num-

ber of German documents after the war and, unsurprisingly, the memoirs of generals on both sides tended to be self-serving.

Glantz and House offer an accumulation of details missing from earlier accounts. They provide exhaustive examinations not only of German and Soviet preparations for the battle, but also of the singular determination of Soviet Marshal G. K. Zhukov. Zhukov emerges as a military leader who outworked his peers, was ruthless toward his subordinates, and devastated his troops. With respect to Soviet casualties, consider just one detail which teaches us something about Zhukov: "The frontal hammer blows [on the Soviet Voronezh and Steppe Fronts following Kursk], so characteristic of an operation planned by Zhukov, produced over 250,000 Soviet casualties, more than one quarter of the initial Soviet force" (p. 252).

To begin, the authors remind us that *Citadel*, the German code name for the Kursk operation, was not Hitler's idea. It sprang from the brain of "the brash, loud-mouthed" Colonel General Kurt Zeitzler, Chief of the Army General Staff, "although in truth the idea was

so obvious that anyone at the [German conference] table might have proposed it.” The idea was for “two different forces [from the north and from the south] to converge on Kursk, pinching off...[a] salient...that bulged westward into the German center” (p. 1).

It apparently never occurred to Hitler and his generals, who first discussed the operation in Munich on 3 May 1943, that “the German plan for Citadel was as obvious to the Soviets as it was to the Germans.” Having already learned at unspeakable cost how to think about prospective enemy thrusts, “the central question for the *Stavka* was how to respond to near-certain German offensive action” (p. 28). Stalin and aggressive front commanders argued for preemptive strikes against massing German formations, but Zhukov, Marshal of the Soviet Union G. M. Vasilevsky, and other senior officers recommended that the Red Army wait until the Germans exhausted themselves and then launch massive counter-offensives.

Zhukov and his adherents prevailed. Meanwhile, on both sides, preparations for the battle took on an intensity almost unmatched earlier in the conflict. Hitler postponed the attack from 4 May to 12 June and finally to 5 July to allow the maximum number of deliveries of tanks and self-propelled guns. On the morning of the first day of battle, the German side deployed 780,900 men and 2,696 tanks. Despite their horrendous losses earlier in the war, the Soviets deployed 1,272,219 men and 5,040 tanks, a force which, as the authors note, “actually *outnumbered* the attackers by about 2.5 to 1 in men and exceeded the Germans in tanks and guns” (p. 64).

What then comes as a surprise is the extent to which both sides used obsolescent equipment and that the Germans suffered from insufficient logistical support. Glantz and House maintain that the Luftwaffe’s Sixth Air Fleet, tasked with supporting the attack in the north, was equipped with three groups of aging JU-87 Stuka dive-bombers among its 730 combat aircraft and “generally received only two-thirds of its required levels of aviation fuel...” (p. 54). The Fourth Air Fleet, supporting the attack in the south, had 1,100 aircraft, including Hungarian assets, and “seven groups of...Stukas had to provide the bulk of close air support in an increasingly hostile air defense environment” (p. 54).

The Germans had fully tested neither their Panther nor Tiger tanks when the battle began. Mechanical breakdowns would render some useless, and rounds from aging 37mm anti-tank guns employed by Wehrmacht infantry units were not effective against late-model Rus-

sian T-34s. In the north, most of the Ninth German Army’s 590 tanks were “primarily obsolescent Panzer III and IV vehicles...” (p. 51).

On the Soviet side, the authors find that infantry units were still using “the embarrassingly obsolete PTRD 14.5mm antitank rifle.” Rounds could “penetrate the thinner side armor of older German tanks at very close ranges, [but] the lack of a modern lightweight antitank weapon made the Russian infantry particularly vulnerable to German tank attack” (p. 38). In the air, Red Air Force pilots were now equipped with fighter aircraft the equal of standard Luftwaffe types, but the authors contend that “Soviet pilots were often able to achieve significant results. . . only at great cost of men and machines” because the stolid tactics employed by the Red Air Force had changed little since the war began.

Glantz and House describe what happened at Kursk between July 5 and July 12 in great detail, and in some instances, hour-by-hour. Still, and this is no criticism of the authors, it seems impossible to convey the incredible fury of the combat. Consider the words of Lieutenant General P.A. Rotmistrov on the tank battle at Prokhorovka: “The tanks of both sides were in the closest possible contact. There was neither time nor room to disengage from the enemy and reform in battle order or operate in formation. The shells fired at close range pierced not only the side armor but also the frontal armor of the fighting vehicles. At such range there was no protection in armor, and the length of the gun barrels was no longer decisive” (p. 188).

The authors further contend that when the battle of Kursk ended, neither Hitler nor his generals fully grasped either the resources Soviets still had available or the Red Army’s resilience. The “Dnieper River [was] the next logical defensive line for Army Group South,” the authors tell us, and Hitler expected that the Soviets would not be able to establish bridgeheads. As it developed, Red troops did establish bridgeheads and, only 21 months after Kursk, Red armies arrived at the gates of Berlin. It turned out that Soviets did not wage war the way Germans did, but in sheer maniacal determination they were more than a match for Nazi legions. And, they were not intimidated.

Again, the value of *The Battle of Kursk* turns on new and critical details relating to Soviet perspectives. But no work is perfect, and Glantz and House leave a number of questions unanswered. How much, for example, did the *Stavka* know of the extent to which German operations at Kursk were being supported by Russian volunteers, just as had been the case at Stalingrad? How im-

portant to Soviet survival did the Stavka consider the 10 July Anglo-American invasion of Sicily? And surely not least, how much did Stalin know about Anglo-American military and political plans for the Balkans in mid-1943? Did his concerns in this regard affect the speed of the Red Army post-Kursk sweep?

These shortcomings excepted, Glantz and House are to be congratulated for their diligent scholarship. Their

readings in previously unavailable sources have yielded a more detailed account of this critical battle, and for that, all students of World War II on the eastern front should be grateful.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Milton Goldin. Review of Glantz, David M.; House, Jonathan M., *The Battle of Kursk*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4145>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.