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Dennis E. Showalter, *Armor and Blood: The Battle of Kursk: The Turning Point of World War II*. New York: Random House, 2013. Pp. xvi, 345. ISBN 978-1-4000-6677-3.

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In *Armor and Blood*, leading military historian Dennis Showalter¹ (Colorado College) re-examines the Battle of Kursk with two primary goals in mind: “to contextualize wider issues of operations and strategy, institutional structures and state policy, and to convey some of the Eastern Front’s human dimension... [and] structure and clarify the newly available mass of detail, official, tactical, and personal, on the fighting” (xiii). Succeeding on all counts, he has produced a superb introduction to the battle between the two greatest land armies the world has known.

The book is also a salutary corrective to outlying theories about the effect of Kursk on the outcome of the Second World War in general.² A particular strength is Showalter’s demonstration that Kursk showcased the fruits of the Red Army’s qualitative growth in fighting a successful war of movement against the Wehrmacht, something it had failed to achieve in the two years since the German invasion of the USSR, despite its consistent numerical advantages in key parameters of military power.

A largely synthetic work, *Armor and Blood* is not based on new primary source research by Showalter. This is not a drawback. There is now such a mass of readily accessible information on the Second World War’s campaigns that one of the most useful services today’s historian can perform is, having evaluated and assimilated the source material, to cut through the clutter and provide a cogent, well-informed analysis to his readers, especially when new facts have come to light. Showalter does just that in his vivid account of the titanic battles surrounding Kursk in summer 1943.

Showalter also addresses the still hotly debated questions of how and why the Red Army defeated the Wehrmacht’s attempts to pinch off the Kursk salient; these include, among other factors, Field Marshal Walter Model’s deployment of his armor, the Soviets’ decisions regarding their defensive effort, and Field Marshal Erich von Manstein’s belief that, given a bit more time, he could have smashed the Red Army’s regional reserves. Nor does Showalter shy away from discussing more statistical and technical matters, for example, the efficacy of particular weapons systems.

In evaluating and contextualizing Kursk, a spectrum of issues meriting consideration remains. First come statistics. In terms of material, the Soviet claims were of almost 2,800 tanks and assault guns destroyed. German archives provide a figure of around 250. Only 10 of those were Tigers. Similar exploration of Soviet records gives 536 total AFV [armored fighting vehicle] losses for Central Front, between 1,200 and 1,400 for Voronezh Front and the reinforcements from Steppe Front. Put together, the totals vary between 1,600 and over 2,000—about eight to one. More than 54,000 Germans were killed, wounded, or missing. Total Russian casualties exceeded 320,000.

These figures help address some of Kursk’s prevailing myths. The German army on the Eastern Front was neither bled white nor demobilized by Citadel’s human and material losses. Its Tigers were masters of the field wherever they appeared. Even the often denigrated Ferdinands did yeoman service in Model’s sector when used appropriately, in their antitank role. Intangibles may well be another story. (268)

In the space of one and a half paragraphs, Showalter establishes a big picture idea about the battle’s outcome, delving into technical observations to back up his points, and then, in the remainder of the chapter, dismantling one myth after another. In such typically succinct and forceful passages, the author’s mastery

1. A former president of the Society of Military History, he has written, co-authored, or edited over thirty books, mostly on German military history from Frederick the Great to World War II.

2. For example, David Stahel, in *Operation Barbarossa and Germany’s Defeat in the East* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2009), argues for mostly quantitative reasons that the war’s outcome had been decided already by August 1941.

of his sources ensures that his readers will be familiar with competing narratives in the vast body of previous scholarship³ and able to draw informed and well-reasoned conclusions about the battle.

Another virtue of the book is its organization and attention to background information. For instance, Showalter concisely plots the paths each of the enemy armies took to Kursk in the previous two years of Operation Barbarossa. The concision of this narrative spares the well-versed reader having to slog through familiar material couched in excessive detail. Serious students of the history of events and actions on Germany's Second World War Eastern Front are too often confronted with a veritable blizzard of units involved in many of the battles; this is especially so for the truly massive clashes at Kursk, which dwarfed the battles between Germany and the Anglo-American allies in either western or southern Europe. And yet Showalter deftly identifies and locates the relevant armies, fronts, corps, divisions, regiments, and so on without drowning the reader in a sea of obscuring minutiae.

The book is not flawless. The subtitle "The Turning Point of World War II" is regrettable: no one battle can be assigned such significance in a series of events as complicated as the greatest clash of arms in human history. There are also some mistakes regarding unit names and locations at select dates,⁴ but they are few and detract little from the book's value.⁵

Armor and Blood is now the best one-volume popular account of the Battle of Kursk and its impact on the course of the Second World War.

3. A signal enhancement in this regard is Showalter's survey of English-language literature on the Kursk campaign in his "Guide to Further Reading"; given the book's likely readership, this is a fair substitute for a detailed bibliography.

4. E.g., the map on page 6 places the German 3rd Panzer Army in two widely divergent locations at once while failing to designate the German 1st Army as a *Panzer* Army.

5. A minor distraction rather than an error is Showalter's overfondness for the phrase "no bagatelle."