

BATTLE OF KURSK: KNOWN AND UNKNOWN

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Different questions of more properly, so less properly investigated events of the Kursk battle are discussed in the article on the basis of diverse historiographic material. However, considerable attention is paid to the controversial aspects of the topic. The author proves his own approaches to the consideration of the most controversial and virtually undiscovered aspects of the battle, offers the directions of their further research. Particular attention is paid to the identification and analysis of actual combat potential of opposing forces military groups in the period of the battle, reasoned and mistaken, strategic and tactical decisions of Soviet and Germanic command on the eve and directly in the period of the battle, particularly, the actual failure of the plans of the German command in operation "Citadel" realizing and trap and defeat of all impactful German group by planned Soviet command, on the second stage of the battle, reasons of Soviet counteroffensive actions failures on July 8 and in particular July 12 on the Voronezh Front.

Key words: Great Patriotic war, World War II, USSR, Kursk, army, troops.

World War II and its central component the Great Patriotic War are epochal events in the world and national history. It should be noted that socio-political and scientifically-theoretical actuality of different problematics of the given wars has very important significance in the context of the 70 years anniversary of their end. The given topic will clearly become one of the central in socio-political and scientific discussions on various political, scientific, cultural and other international forums in the present jubilee 2015. The grand battle of Kursk was one of the main events of the Great Patriotic War and the Second World War, marked the end of a radical turning point in the war. In its significance, scope, strengths and fight tension of opposing forces to military and political significance, this battle has no equal to a large extent, not only in the Second World War, but also generally in the military history.

The Battle of Kursk included Kursk strategic defensive operation (5-23 of July 1943), Orel strategic offensive operation "Kutuzov" (12 of July -18 of August 18, 1943), the Belgorod-Kharkov strategic offensive operation "Rumyantsev" (3-23 of August 1943). German military-political leadership planned to defeat Soviet troops in the region of Kursky ledge and acquire strategic initiative on the whole Soviet-German front. In the combat order OKB №6 signed by Hitler on the 6th of April, 1943 was said: "I decided ...to execute an operation "Citadel" ...This operation has fundamental importance. The best connections, weapon, commanders and a great volume of ammunition should be used on the main attacks direction" [10, p.293]. Under the conditions of the operation successful development, the given order provided development of offensive on the southeast (to Rostov and Caucasus) or northeast (to Moscow) directions, and also relief of German impactful group to Italy for associates landing repulse [1, p.213]. Immediately after the planned victory at Kursk, German authority, according to Soviet reconnaissance, supposed to develop a great offensive operation on the south in the general direction of Kupyansk (operations "Pantera" and "Yastreb"), and also in other directions further north than Kursky ledge [7].

According to the plan of the given operation, delivering of counter blows of military forces "Center" and "South" from the regions Orel and Kharkov in general direction to Kursk, for the purpose of besiegement and demolition of central and Voronezh fronts Soviet troops on the Kursky ledge was foreseen. Great forces were concentrated by German command – 56 divisions, including 16 armored and mounted divisions that allowed achieving a huge concentration of forces and facilities on the restricted field of the front. Consequently, 20% of infantry, 70% of armored and 30% of mounted divisions, 65% of aviation, dislocated on the East front, were concentrated on the Kursky ledge, the spread of which compiled 14%. All together German group in

this district counted 900 thousand of soldiers and officers, 10 thousand of weapons and mortars, 2700 of tanks and self-propelled guns, more than 2000 of aeroplanes [4]. According to the plan of Soviet command, at the beginning was planned to take on the strategic defensive on the ready-made boundaries of layered defense, secured from strategic enemy penetration and guaranteed to maximally reduce the opponent, and then assume the general strategic offensive. In addition, troops of central front, under the command of K.K. Rokossovsky, had to assume the counteroffensive of the enemy and occupy Orel, had rebuffed an attack of the enemy army group "Center" in the Orlovsky district. Voronezh front army under the command of the general N.F. Vatutin was ordered to assume the offensive on Kharkov had repulsed an attack of the enemy army group "South" from the Belgorod side. Reserve front was concentrated in the rear of the Central and Voronezh fronts, then on the 10th of July it was renamed as Steppe front, appeared to be the strategic reserve of General Headquarters. In case of emergency its troops had to liquidate all possible enemy penetrations and first of all become the basic crushing power in the Soviet counteroffensive. The main strategic attack force of the enemy on the main at that moment field of Soviet- Germanic front should have been absolutely defeated that would create necessary conditions for all-out offensive development to Ukraine. Soviet group counted 1,9 million of soldiers and officers, 26,5 thousand of weapons and mortars, near 5000 of tanks and self-propelled guns, 2900 of aeroplanes [1;214.Table.5.2].

Despite on numerical superiority, that in the middle of 1943 military industry and command of Red Army could achieve, German tank and tank-grenadier connections, having higher tactics-technical and ergonomic characteristics of armament, gained their superiority. Compared together possibilities of Wehrmacht and Red army in a part of material equipment, quality characteristics of staff battle training, structure and organization of forces, flexibility and efficiency of management, ability to concentrate superior strengths on decision points played a key role. Mainly quality condition and constant improvement of the armed forces in this context, to which the enemy always paid greater attention, let him after two years of military operations on the East preserve and in many cases advance its combat potential.

In such a manner, calculations of personal unit makeups and force quantity and also number of combat units, an automatic shooting armament, cannons, particularly with howitzer and heavy artillery systems, mortars, heavy, medium and light tanks, assault guns and SP guns, battleplanes and other quantitative parameters, have highly approximate relation to real military groups combat potential definition. From the other side, comparative evaluation of qualitative divisions and connections condition, more over in combination with quantitative indexes, which cannot be ignored, cannot by convention result to univocal conclusion about superiority of some or other side. Omnifaceted and real comparison takes place only in military collisions, in the course of operations conducting that allows post factum or just only in historical reserve establishes significancy of some or other qualitative and quantitative indexes. Of course, forecasting and evaluation of troops real possibilities taking into account already mentioned indexes can be conducted on the basis of previous, especially recent experience that is appeared to be the challenge of planners and operation leaders.

However, as the course of the military operations has shown either side was often strongly mistaken in similar evaluations. As a rule, they were mistaken in consequence of heterogeneous quality parameters underestimation, characterizing their forces and forces of the enemy, and mainly in wrong comparison and failure of some important aspects of their consideration. In the course of Kursky strategic defensive operation (5-23 of July 1943), appeared to be the first step of Kursky battle, which included front defensive operation in the Orel-Kursk direction and front defensive operation in the Belgorod-Kursk direction, troops of Voronezh, Central, and then Steppe fronts with great effort rebuffed an attack of German shock troops and in the course of intense battles practically deprived them their homes. Kursky strategic defensive operation became one of the greatest battle of Second World War according to its scope and intension. In the

course of the war Soviet troops lost 177847 soldiers and officers, also 70330 of people were murdered [9].

(It should be noted that 24th tank corps, which consisted of 17th and 23rd armored divisions and armored-grenadier division SS “Viking”, was located in Donbass, in the Stalino region. Corps entered into the composition of the 1st tank army, spread out along Severski Donets against troops of south-west front and constituted command reserve of army group “South”. Despite on intense battles, which were conducted by Manstein troops on the south face of Kursky ledge, the strong dynamic connection remained in support in case of complications in the zone of South or South-west fronts. Front offensive operation on the river Mius July 17 - August 2, 1943 of South front fettered enemy reserves in this district and did not let German command to deploy its significant strong armored forces to region of Kursky battle).

Soviet troops in the period of Orel strategic offensive operation “Kutuzov” (12 of July -18 of August, 1943), including Bolkhovsk-Orel and Kromsk-Orel front offensive operations, seriously defeated German army group “Center”, rescued a significant territory, including Orel, liquidated a very important in strategic relation occupied by the enemy Orlovsky ledge. Consequently, the whole situation on the central part of Soviet-German front changed greatly in favor of soviet troops, suppositions for the further offensive in the direction of Bryansk and then to Byelorussia were created. In the course of this operation Soviet troops lost 429890 of soldiers and officers, including 112529 of people who comprised irrecoverable losses [9; 286].

In the period of Belgorod-Kharkov strategic offensive operation “Rumyantsev” (3-23 of august, 1943) appeared to be the final operation of the whole Kursky battle, troops of Voronezh and Steppe fronts broke out mighty defensive lines of German troops in the Kharkov direction, clobbered the strong Belgorod-Kharkov group of the enemy, rescued Belgorod and Kharkov, provided conditions for the further attack to Left Ukraine. Soviet troops losses in the period of this operation consisted 255566 of soldiers and officers, among them 71611 were killed [9].

Not only collapse of military strategic plans of Hitlerite command on the East front, but also large-scale Soviet troops offensive became the outcome of the grand battle under Kursk. Leadership of the Soviet armed forces and the country met the challenge in the course of Kursk battle. Informed and well thought-out decision of the top Soviet politico-military leadership about deliberate defense transition absolutely proved itself. After our troops had inflicted significant losses to the enemy, broken considerably its tanks and committed the reserves, they assumed the counteroffensive, which outgrew in general attack at the front till 2 thousands kilometers” [5].

We should pay particular attention to the fact that according to the confession of E. Manstein, brought after the war, “The best parts of the German army were killed in the course of Kursky battle, where troops attacked with desperate determination to win or die...” [Quot.:8;202]. (Though E. Manstein didn’t reflect this absolutely true and forced confession in his famous memoirs. However, the reason of it, according to our opinion is absolutely clear – in this case he had to take on a significant part of responsibility for the loss of the most prepared military units and forces, formed the basis of the whole German army combat might, and more over considerably for German command strategic plans frustration of the given period of time with all ensuing unpleasant consequences for him. The fact that the failure of “Citadel” operation, described by E. Manstein in his memoirs “Lost victories” in a very entangle way and highly indistinct that “there were a lot of reasons, the main of which was the absence of suddenness...” [Quot.:6] or that “German command tried to manage the risk in relation to troops quantity and time” is considered to be notable [6].

After the Kursk battle strategic initiative on the Soviet-German front once for all passed into Soviet command hands and Hitler’s forces had to take on the strategic defensive and tactics. Kursk battle victory marked the completion of the fundamental crunch in the Great Patriotic War and the whole Second World War.

Despite on the very significant work, carried out by researchers according to detailed and circumstantial study of Kursk battle in whole, its separate component parts and various signifi-

cant events, up until now a lot of informative and evaluative aspects of the given epochal battle, some key episodes are still not fully investigated and continue to be the subject of intensive scholarly disputes. The famous Prokhorov battle can be taken as an example in the given relation. Published recently very informative and rather thorough investigation according to the given point, particularly, works of V.N.Zamulin and L.N. Lopukhovskiy [3], not only disallowed a question, but vice versa, strained a number of debating points on the given subject [2;67-68]. It eloquently speaks for complexity and multidimensionality of the problem under study in a whole and a number of its aspects in particular.

Despite on very informative and productive scholarly disputes according to a number of questions of Kursk battle, specialists-researchers didn't pay attention in our opinion to some basically important aspects. Secondly, why experienced German command having information about significant Soviet troops superiority on numerical strength and basic types of weapon, presence of power, dispersed in depth and perfectly prepared in mine-protective relation Soviet defensive positions in the region of "Citadel" operation, didn't presume a thought about possibility to cancel or though partially change the given operation. Apparently, he had very solid grounds for this. In addition, stake was placed on strength and unprecedented before then military technical power of German troops, especially of tank units, equipped with the most contemporary technique samples. (In this context it's enough to carry out tactical-technical analysis of Soviet and German armor samples, taking part in the battle, combat training and general military staff training). In particular Soviet tank units, who practically had no heavy tanks, stood against second corps as part of elite armored divisions "Das Reich", "Dead Head", "Adolf Hitler" and of 4th German tank army, fully equipped with modernized tanks T-VI "Tiger", T-V "Panther", heavy SP guns "Ferdinand", originally named as "Tiger Porsche". For instance, the 5th Soviet guard tank army, taking part in the battle under Prokhorovka, had only 27 English heavy tanks MK-4 "Churchill", 7 of which were on the deadline, 1 tank "KV", 11 SU-152 and 20 Su-122, and also light tanks T-70, which were practically unserviceable for the fight with German not only heavy, but also with medium tanks, generally aimed for reconnaissance, connection and fight with the enemy foot troops, comprised 30% of its structure. German command sent its superior troops, the best officers of arms under the Kursk. The most progressive elements of army operations strategic plannings and tactical maneuvers were used in the battle. (For instance, a great number of armor, besides of the most modern constructions was used in the areas of Soviet defensive break-through, "Tigers" which front armour could not be broken through by Soviet tank and antitank destroyers were used in the quality of ramming, and also waves of medium tanks and foot troops on armored trucks followed them.

Moreover a significant number of nose diving and bombardment aviation, forming groups and beginning continuous bombardments and deck-level attacks of ground targets was concentrated by the enemy on constricted route of the front (soviet soldiers nicknamed this enemy tactical maneuver as "big wheel" and power armored forces advanced to leading edges of attack for some time before the flap ending, and Soviet soldiers, who didn't have time for recovering after the powerful bombardment, had to literally immediately come into one-sided fight with enemy's tanks). According to numerous evidences of those events participants from one and the other side, Germans delivered never-before-seen armored thrusts to Soviet troops under Kursk, before which it was impossible to resist. Secondly, as is known, according to the plans of Soviet command, it was planned to maul the German shock troops in holding battles on the Kursky curve, and then not just pass to the decisive large-scale offensive, but also besiege the enemy shock troops and fully destroy them. Corresponding forces and means were prepared and spread for this (Steppe front and reserve parts of General Headquarters). Why was it impossible to realize this plan? The answer is evident – nobody supposed that the enemy would succeed in breaching power defense in depth, as it happened in reality in the zone of the Voronezh front, and for the enemy breach liquidation which had created immediate threat of this front rear defense, General Headquarters sent there 5th guard combined arms and 5th guard tank armies, had initially been

aimed at counteroffensive and strategic enemy troops besiegement. Why wasn't the enemy defeated, despite on introduction of two reserve armies into the battle, more than 100 thousands of soldiers and officers and 700 tanks and SP guns? These armies suffered heavy losses in the course of fierce battles and that's why they couldn't be used in a quality of crushing power on enemy troops besiegement. (According to the memoirs of the commander of the 5th guard tank army lieutenant general P.A.Rotmistrov, "When I.V.Stalin found out about our losses, he went into a rage, in fact tank army according to the General Headquarters plan was intended for participation in counteroffensive and aimed at Kharkov. And then - again, it is necessary to significantly replenish it. The supreme decided to destitute me and scarcely bring me to justice." [Quot.on:5;11]). Thirdly, to the reasons of Soviet counteroffensive actions failures at 8th of July and especially 12th of July on the Voronezh front, having serious negative consequences for the next development of the battle in the given field of Kursky battle. The fourth, to the committed in the period of the battle mistakes of the Voronezh front commander general N.F. Vatutin. (He committed a significant mistake in terms of the main enemy stroke orientation on its front: Vatutin was waiting for the German bulk strength offensive from the right, but they retargeted their basic weight to the left flank of Voronezh front. General Hermann Hoth the best German tanker of Second World War, brought to bear its 4th tank army to the least protected Soviet part of the line.

As some military specialists believe, Vatutin pitted its forces "too thin" (as opposed to Rokossovsky), that's why Germans reached Prokhorovka). Fifth, there were tragic impacts for Soviet soldiers, in consequence of the enemy necessary information absence and insufficient and sometimes mistaken case analysis. (In particular, the actual defeat of the 5th guard tank army under Prokhorovka, wrong positions attack of the Soviet 99th tank brigade and 2nd tank army, 183rd rifle division had tragic consequences). Sixth, this can seem paradoxial, but we should look at this situation from a new angle, besides we should look at this situation from different sides and in detail, at manifested courage and heroism of Soviet soldiers and officers, at their military skill, persistence, fearlessness, readiness to self-sacrifice for the sake of victory over the enemy. (For instance, act of bravery of 19-years old gun layer, senior sergeant Mikhail Borisov, who alone brewed up seven German tanks, of three anti-tank riflemen, who just for one day of the battle demolished five German tanks under Prokhorovka, using their Degtyarev antitank rifle from several tens of meters, whom anonymous photograph stands in the central museum of the armed forces, driver mechanic of the 2nd battalion of the 181st tank brigade A. Nikolaev together with charge man F.Chernov, who went on their tank into the enemy tank fatal ramming, and according to the evidence of the former intelligence officer of the 2nd tank corps V.F.Ivanovsky in the course of tank battle under Prokhorovka Soviet tankers did 20 tank rammings just for one day on the 12th of July.

Thus, up until now there are a lot of research gaps in the history of Kursky battle, which require the further, deep, detailed, comprehensive, purposeful research and analysis. The further progressive work of historians according to comprehensive, detailed and objective research, analysis and based on them evaluative judgements and total conclusions on problematics of the Great Patriotic War in a whole and its largest fighting - Kursky battle, in particular, will directly contribute to solution of actual, debatable questions of history of the Great Patriotic War and the whole Second World War, so will formulate scientifically grounded approaches on the given problematics in scientifically-educational sphere.

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