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## Introduction

*“Operation Citadel, that is death, that means blood, that compels us to despair! We are running against a wall of fire and steel, against a wall of anti-tank guns, against a rampart of artillery, against a barrage of enemy tanks.”<sup>1</sup>*

These words were penned by a former lieutenant of a German armored division, from his recollections of the Battle of Kursk, which occurred during the Second World War in the summer of 1943. What stands out in this quotation is that it does not convey the impression that the Battle of Kursk was a German 'victory' in any sense. This observation is far from insignificant, as the historiography of the Western world on this topic, at least in the tendency of its portrayal, leaves the impression that the Battle of Kursk was somehow a German 'victory.' This became evident just before the onset of a new conflict between Russia and the Western world (NATO/EU)<sup>2</sup> - i.e. shortly before the start of the war in Ukraine in 2022. In Russia, an annual commemoration of the Battle of Kursk is held near the small village of Prokhorovka. There, during the Battle of Kursk, a tank engagement ensued which is generally regarded as a sort of decisive climax of the battle.

This commemoration bears a strong resemblance to another World War II memorial event - the annual remembrance of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, the Russians commemorate a pivotal moment in the liberation of their country from a tyranny during the Second World War that had slaughtered over 20 million people within the territory of the former Soviet Union.

On July 9, 2019 - about two years before the war in Ukraine and just days before the 76th anniversary of the commemoration of the Battle of Kursk at Prokhorovka - the German journalist Sven Felix

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<sup>1</sup> Schäufli, Hans, Der Weg war weit - Panzer zwischen Weichsel und Wolga, Neckargemünd 1973, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> However, for an accurate definition of the term 'Western world' as of 2023, it would need to be expanded beyond NATO and EU countries to also include some Pacific nations not yet encompassed by NATO and the EU. This means that according to the author's perspective, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand also form part of what is termed the 'Western world'.

Kellerhoff published an article on the online portal of the newspaper 'Welt' in which he claimed that the Red Army did not win the battle at Prokhorovka and therefore the Russian victory memorial there should be 'immediately dismantled'.<sup>3</sup> However, since the battle at Prokhorovka is generally seen as a sort of decisive high point of the battle, this strictly implies not only that the Wehrmacht's armored troops had won a major tank engagement there on July 12, 1943, but also that the Wehrmacht's forces had secured a German 'victory' in significant parts of the Battle of Kursk.

It goes without saying that this article sparked a storm of indignation in Russia. The German journalist in question based his claim of such a German 'victory' on two contributions to Western historiography - specifically, on the accounts of historians Karl-Heinz Frieser and Ben Wheatley.<sup>4</sup>

This incident not only reveals the direct relationship between politics and historiography in the Western world, as in the author's opinion historiography was clearly used to slight a geopolitical opponent in the lead-up to a political and military conflict. It also shows that the way Western historiography is presented allows even an educated individual to infer a German 'victory' in one of the decisive turning-point battles of the Second World War. To understand the gravity of this claim, it should be noted that it would be roughly equivalent to asserting that the German Wehrmacht achieved a 'victory' in significant parts of the Battle of Stalingrad during the Second World War.

Given the catastrophe of Stalingrad and its severe implications for the history of the Second World War, such a portrayal would naturally be completely ahistorical. Thus, there is an evident need for clarification here - to be made from a viewpoint that refuses to turn the study of history into an instrument of any kind of politics. The question posed in this work is therefore:

*Did the German Wehrmacht achieve a victory in the Battle of Kursk, including the famous tank engagement at Prokhorovka – either in its entirety or at least in significant parts?*

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<sup>3</sup> Töppel, Roman, Die Panzerschlacht bei Prochorowka - Fakten gegen Fabeln; published by the Arbeitskreis Militärgeschichte e.V. 2020 (Toeppel\_Prochorowka.pdf ([https://www.portal-militaergeschichte.de/sites/default/files/pdf/Toeppel\\_Prochorowka.pdf](https://www.portal-militaergeschichte.de/sites/default/files/pdf/Toeppel_Prochorowka.pdf))), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

For context, the Battle of Kursk in 1943 was the largest battle of the Second World War and also the greatest (land) battle in human history. According to the historian Karl-Heinz Frieser mentioned above, a total of 69,000 artillery pieces, 13,000 tanks and self-propelled guns (SPGs), and 12,000 aircraft were involved on the side of the Soviet Union and the German Wehrmacht.<sup>5</sup>

To more precisely address the magnitude and historical significance of the battle, it must be acknowledged that the Western Allies during the Second World War cannot claim to have ever conducted an operation of this size. Battles where well over a million soldiers were engaged - consisting of massive troop formations on both sides - with nearly eight to ten thousand tanks and thousands of aircraft, were unheard of among the Western Allies. Particularly during the crucial phase of the war, they never engaged in a decisive battle on such a scale - on equal terms with the Wehrmacht. In 1943, well over 70% of German forces were still on the so-called 'Eastern Front' within the Soviet Union, and not in the deserts of North Africa or elsewhere in the Mediterranean, where the Western Allies preferred to attack smaller contingents of Wehrmacht troops and the weaker Axis forces.<sup>6</sup> The Battle of Kursk exceeded even the scale of the fighting in the Normandy landings, in which only half the total number of troops that had taken part in the Battle of Kursk had been deployed on both sides. Above all, the Wehrmacht forces involved in the fighting in Normandy were much smaller than in the Battle of Kursk.<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly, the Battle of Kursk was and remains not only the largest battle but also one of the decisive battles of the Second World War. In this introduction, the argument will be presented in four steps: Firstly, the historiography and the current state of research on the topic

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<sup>5</sup> Frieser, Karl-Heinz, *Die Schlacht im Kursker Bogen*, Munich 2011, p. 83.

<sup>6</sup> Heinrici, Gotthard and Hauck, Friedrich Wilhelm, *Zitadelle (I)*; in: Arbeitskreis für Wehrforschung (ed.), *Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau. Zeitschrift für Europäische Sicherheit*, Jahrgang 15, Heft 8, Frankfurt/Main 1965, p. 468.

<sup>7</sup> In June/July 1944, the Wehrmacht had 420,000 soldiers deployed in Normandy with 865 "operational tanks", while the Western Allied strike forces there comprised around one million men with 2,500 tanks. That would be less than half the number of troops deployed in the Battle of Kursk. - Cf.: 1) Bremm, Klaus-Jürgen, *Normandie 1944 - Die Entscheidungsschlacht um Europa*, Darmstadt 2022, pp. 194 - 195; 2) Schumann, Wolfgang et al. (ed.), *Deutschland im zweiten Weltkrieg*, Vol. 5 (*Der Zusammenbruch der Defensivstrategie des Hitlerfaschismus an allen Fronten, Januar bis August 1944*), Berlin 1986, pp. 635 - 652.

will be briefly outlined. Then, the specific argumentation of Western historiography will be examined in more detail to show which arguments and modes of presentation are used to create the impression of a German 'victory.' This will be followed by a general discussion of several prominent weaknesses and contradictions in Western narratives that require urgent revision. Finally, from the research question, the corresponding thesis will be formulated.

One could argue that the historiography of the Battle of Kursk began already during the Second World War with newspaper articles as part of war reporting. Of course, these accounts are biased. But so too are the works that imply the German Wehrmacht won a decisive battle of immense scale in the final phase of the war's turning point. The German historian Ahasver von Brandt wrote about this:

*"It is not within anyone's power to report entirely without bias, 'objectively', even if they - at least in modern historiography - make a serious effort to do so."*<sup>8</sup>

The historiography of the Battle of Kursk can be divided into two principal streams: firstly, Western historiography, whose territorial distribution largely aligns with NATO/EU countries, and secondly, the historiography of the former socialist countries in Europe, which includes the Soviet Union and the former GDR. Today, at least to some extent, this historiography is carried on by Russian historiography of the Second World War.

The historiography of the former socialist countries will only be briefly summarized here since it is not the focus of this study. Notably, it does not claim that the German Wehrmacht won a decisive battle of the utmost magnitude during the final phase of the turning point of the war. However, this historiography is significant because it produced the first post-war work in German (1947) in which the Battle of Kursk is portrayed as a pivotal part of the Second World War narrative. This account can be summarized as follows: in the summer of 1943, two heavily armed armies, particularly well-equipped with tanks, engaged in an unusually large tank battle within the so-called 'Kursk Salient' over several weeks. For four days, the German troops attacked an extremely deep defensive system of the Red Army, exhausting

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<sup>8</sup> Brandt, Ahasver von, *Werkzeug des Historikers - Eine Einführung in die historischen Hilfswissenschaften*, 16th edition, Stuttgart 2003, p. 62.

## 6.2 Foundations of Panzer Maintenance in the Wehrmacht

*“During my many years as a unit engineer, not even ten tanks were ever repaired outside the Panzer regiment.”*<sup>810</sup>

These words come from a commander of a maintenance unit within a Wehrmacht Panzer unit. These words evidently show how important frontline maintenance was for the Wehrmacht Panzer units. For the Wehrmacht, frontline maintenance was the very core of tank repair operations. This view is also shared by other authors in the field of military history.<sup>811</sup>

The Wehrmacht's maintenance and repair system was a crucial component of every Panzer and Panzergrenadier Division and was part of the so-called “rear services” of these units. The following discussion will only focus on the Wehrmacht's maintenance and repair system as it functioned in 1943. Given the limited scope of this study (the Battle of Kursk), it is not possible here to address the entire history of the Wehrmacht's maintenance system.

It should be mentioned here that, originally, no specialized maintenance units existed within the Wehrmacht for field or frontline operations. There were only minimal maintenance services available during peacetime. The Wehrmacht relied on a centralized maintenance system, whereby tanks with significant damage or defects were sent back to factories for repairs.<sup>812</sup>

However, as campaigns dragged on, it became increasingly necessary to repair tanks in the field – that is, directly in the operational area. For example, during the French campaign, a single maintenance platoon of a Panzer regiment had to carry out 327 major repairs on 100 tanks.<sup>813</sup> Notably, the French campaign involved only half as many

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<sup>810</sup> Friedel, Lukas, *Die Panzer-Instandsetzung der Wehrmacht*, Uelzen 2005, p. 20.

<sup>811</sup> See also, among others: Munzel, Oskar, *Die deutschen gepanzerten Truppen bis 1945*, Herford – Bonn, 1965, p. 183.

<sup>812</sup> Friedel, Lukas, pp. 12–13.

<sup>813</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

intense tank engagements as those experienced in the few days of the Battle of Kursk.

From 1940 to 1943, the maintenance troops experienced significant changes and fluctuations. Accounts from former members of these units regarding their size and composition differ widely.<sup>814</sup> By 1943, however, it can be assumed that a largely standardized solution for field maintenance units had been found. Within a Panzer or Panzergrenadier Division, two types of maintenance units must be distinguished:

- 1) The “Maintenance Detachment”
- 2) The “Workshop Company” of the Panzer Regiment

The maintenance detachment of a Panzer or Panzergrenadier Division comprised three maintenance companies and a “spare parts column”. The three maintenance companies had different tasks: The 1st and 2nd Maintenance Companies were responsible for wheeled vehicles. The 3rd Maintenance Company was responsible for “general motor vehicle services” as well as the procurement of spare parts.<sup>815</sup> The Maintenance Detachment of the division was not responsible for repairing tanks, nor was it equipped for such a task.<sup>816</sup>

The Panzer regiments and also the heavy Panzer detachments had specialized units for tank repairs, known as “Workshop Companies”. Each Panzer regiment and each heavy Panzer detachment had only one Workshop Company.<sup>817</sup>

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<sup>814</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>815</sup> Fürbringer, Herbert, 9. SS-Panzerdivision, Heimdal, 1984, pp. 42–43 and 73.

<sup>816</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>817</sup> Cf.: 1) Fürbringer, Herbert, pp. 20–21; 2) Agte, Patrick, Michael Wittmann und die Tiger der Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, 1st ed., Rosenheim, 1994, p. 182; 3) Friedel, Lukas, p. 27.

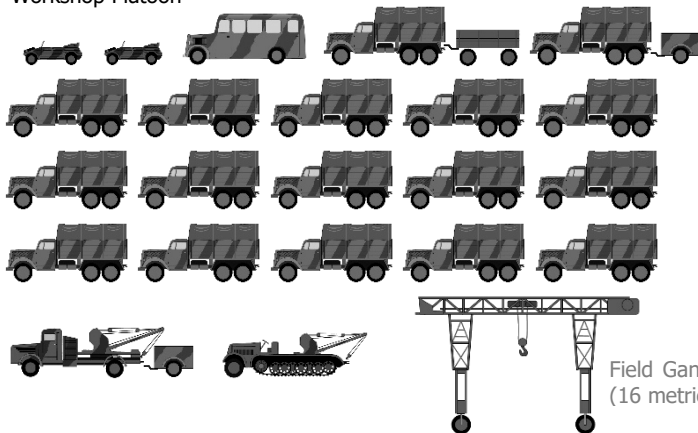


## Company Command Group

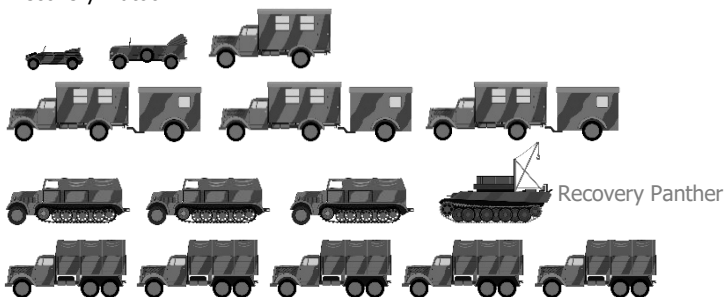
Workshop Company of a Heavy  
Panzer Battalion, 1944



## Workshop Platoon



## Recovery Platoon



## Armament Maintenance Platoon



These workshop companies were divided into three platoons: a *maintenance platoon* that carried out repairs, a *recovery platoon* responsible for towing disabled tanks from the battlefield, and the *ordnance platoon*, which was specifically tasked with repairing and maintaining weaponry.<sup>818</sup>

Only the workshop company of a Panzer regiment had a portable gantry crane (the 16-ton “Strabokran”) for repairing heavy armored vehicles, as well as a tractor unit (the “low-loader trailer” 22t or Sd.Anh.116), which made it possible to transport a heavily damaged and immobile<sup>819</sup> tank over long distances.<sup>820</sup>

The workshop company of a heavy Panzer detachment had the same equipment, but with two significant differences:<sup>821</sup>

- 1) Another Tiger tank or a Panther tank with its 700 hp engine was needed to recover an inoperable Tiger tank from the battlefield, as the Tiger weighed over 50 tons. Therefore, only these workshop companies had a “recovery Panther” (“Bergepanther”), without a turret and equipped with a type of towing apparatus.
- 2) The workshop companies of the heavy Panzer detachments did not have a tractor unit or a low-loader trailer, as the Tiger tank was too heavy to be transported over long distances.<sup>822</sup>

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<sup>818</sup> Agte, Patrick, p. 182. – Note: In certain cases, due to special circumstances, there were deviations from this usual composition (a). However, most of the workshop company structures reviewed by the author corresponded to the organization described here. – See for (a): Munzel, Oskar, *Gekämpft, Gesiegt, Verloren – Geschichte des Panzerregiments 6, 1740–1980*, Herford, 1980, p. 213.

<sup>819</sup> Unfit to drive and immobile are not the same. A vehicle is unfit to drive when it can no longer move under its own engine power. Immobile, on the other hand, describes a vehicle so severely damaged in all components necessary for movement (due to fire, rust-induced seizing, overuse, etc.) that even towing – or pushing, in the case of standard vehicles – results in little to no movement.

<sup>820</sup> See also: 1.) Friedel, Lukas, pp. 42 and 73; 2.) Fürbringer, Herbert, p. 21; 3.) Agte, Patrick, p. 182.

<sup>821</sup> See: Agte, Patrick, p. 182.

<sup>822</sup> A Low-Loader Trailer was designed for heavy tanks, but none of the divisional inventories I reviewed up to 1944 included such equipment. The same observation was

These small workshop companies of each Panzer regiment or heavy Panzer detachment were solely responsible for the repair of tanks - and only for the tanks within their respective units.<sup>823</sup>

Three circumstances had a devastating impact on the workshop companies of the Panzer units, and consequently on the availability of tanks for these units:

- 1.) severe work overload of the Panzer workshop companies,
- 2.) continuous heavy fighting in the division's area of operations,
- 3.) constant redeployment of the division or sudden withdrawal from the area of operations.

These three aspects will be examined in more detail below.

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made by Lukas Friedel, an expert on the history of Wehrmacht maintenance units. –  
See: Friedel, Lukas, p. 43

<sup>823</sup> See also: 1.) Fürbringer, Herbert, p. 73; 2.) Friedel, Lukas, p. 20.