

---

Karl-Heinz Frieser, ed. *Germany and the Second World War: Volume VIII: The Eastern Front 1943-1944: The War in the East and on the Neighbouring Fronts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Book Review

---

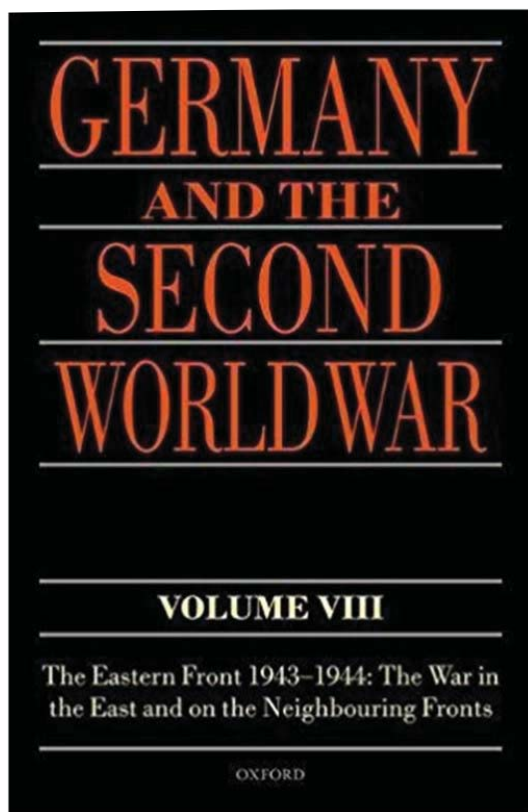
Robert Smith, PhD

---

*Germany and the Second World War: Volume VIII: The Eastern Front 1943-1944: The War in the East and on the Neighbouring Fronts* edited by Karl-Heinz Frieser is the newest volume of the official German History of World War Two from the Oxford University Press. Without reservation, this work is without peer in its treatment of the Russo-German War, commonly known as the War in the East for the period of 1943-1944. Having read approximately half the volumes in the series to date, one of the first things this reviewer noted is that the proofing and overall accuracy of the footnotes has vastly improved. The editors at Oxford ensured this volume was not to be plagued with some of

the spelling errors that Volume IV and IV/ I suffered from post translation. Better still for the reader are some subtle—and not so subtle—stylistic changes in the writing. In this case, the historians write less like old school historians and instead use argumentative conventions and an almost conversational tone that really bring the crippling strategic and operational dilemmas faced by the Third Reich to life.

The historians very ably lay out the cruel choices facing Hitler after the conclusion of the debacle of the summer 1942 campaign that culminated in the



surrender of the 6th Army at Stalingrad. The debate over what to do, and the thinking behind it is laid out with just enough consideration to the dangers pressing in from the other fronts, notably the defeats in the Battle of the Atlantic, Tunisgrad, or the loss of North Africa and the strategic cul-de-sac of the around-the-clock bombing of the Third Reich. The authors lay out methodically and clearly the ugly issue of what does one do when the only elements you have going for you are the benefit of interior lines and a still tactically superior army. These immutable facts lead directly to the Battle of Kursk, the last time the Germans were able to mount a summer offensive.

Kursk. Kursk was supposedly the largest tank battle in history. Allegedly as it has come down through popular military history, Kursk was the swan song of the German armored fist, the rock where the panzers in the East smashed up against that changed forever the fortunes of war—except the authors here show that was not true. A battle where tanks rammed each other at the Village of Prokhorovka and fired at near point blank range . . . except all of that is a bit distorted to some degree or another. The authors of this volume dispel surgically many of the myths surrounding this battle. In doing so, they note the why and how the myths arose, as these myths conveniently served the political and personal ends of the Soviets and Germans. The book takes to task a number of other authors and works in the public domain for their errors or simply erroneous conclusions. To a degree that is hard to fully assess, these authors did have a window of opportunity of the use of the Soviet archives in one of those periods of “thaw” with Russia. However, much of their material is a hard review of the surviving German archives and some solid analytical work on operational readiness and battle reports. The conclusion is astounding, leading the reader to understand much of what passes for shared knowledge and the history of the Battle of Kursk is simply wrong.

Part IV, The Swing of the Pendulum: The Withdrawal of the Eastern Front from Summer 1943 to Summer 1944 is in a word simply grim reading. The scope of the fighting and the resultant casualties boggles the western mind. The authors use several themes to good effect here such as Hitler’s “Attack or Perish” mantra, that building fallback defensive lines led to the collapse of morale in WW I, so therefore such a thought was anathema. Nearly as good as the analysis of Kursk is the catastrophe of German arms known as the Destruction of Army Group Centre. The overarching commentary of how the politicization of much of the Army leadership, turning it into an instrument of National Socialism, meant that leaders like Field Marshall Ernst Busch were elevated to command due to their political reliability, which in turn led to this defeat that serves as a model on how not to fight a defensive battle.

The collapse of Army Group Centre in the Soviet Offensive Operation Bagration was the greatest defeat in the history of German Arms. The picture painted here is of two armies that are now mirror images in some way of how they stood in June 1941. The German Army is now the one facing de-motorization, with an overreliance on horse motive power and marching, whereas the Soviets, due to American Lend-Lease, have a fleet of trucks. The German Third Armored Army in the summer of 1944 had NO tanks . . . but did have sixty thousand horses. Moreover, the German Luftwaffe was a chimera of itself on the East Front, having been deployed to defend the airspace over the Third Reich. In this defeat, the Soviet thirst for revenge begins that would continue for most of the rest of the war. At the Bobruisk Citadel, the Soviets slaughtered five thousand wounded soldiers of the German Ninth Army. They summarily shot prisoners who were unable to keep up on the marches to the Soviet transit camps. But as the authors note, the large public display of German prisoners marched past the Kremlin in the summer of 1944, a flagrant abuse of international law in terms of treatment of prisoners of war, probably saved the lives of many as the Soviet authorities knew “the Boss” wanted the largest number possible on display. Woven through is the recurring theme of how the Soviet troops treated the captured countrymen accompanying the Germans, the paramilitary auxiliaries and women, mutilating and defiling them.

The authors neatly detail the Soviet failure to break into Warsaw describing the generally unknown German defensive successes by their superior use of operational armor art in Poland in the autumn of 1944. The authors also note there were more than several opportunities for the Soviets to go bold and for broke, with little in the way of German forces to stop them from running riot. Instead, the Soviets chose to be more methodical in their efforts, ensuring, though, a higher body count for all concerned as the struggle continued. Although not brought up by the authors, it is this reviewer’s opinion that the shock and reversal suffered by Stalin at Warsaw in 1920 at the hands of the Polish Army was always in the back of his mind. Why overreach and perhaps suffer a defeat that would embarrass “the Boss” (as Stalin was known), when you could simply expend lives and grind the Germans down?

The chapters on Greece, Yugoslavia, Finland and the shedding of the Allies of the Third Reich: Italy, Slovakia, and Romania perhaps requires a little more knowledge on these satellite areas to full follow the story line. It was a section of the book that could have used more maps to help the reader follow the action in the Balkans. Some of the other lesser story lines, though, are easier to follow, such as the isolation and battles of Army Group Courland, formerly Army Group North. However, the historians again savage an accepted myth that this area

needed to be held for use as a testing bed for the new Type XXI U-Boat. Instead, Army Group Courland, and Hitler's obsession with the establishment of fortresses was that after defeating the invasion in the West, these locales would be utilized first to stabilize the front and then launch new offensives against the Soviets to turn the war in Germany's favor on the East Front. Of course as the authors note, "Hitler's troops would no longer counter the rapidly superior Soviet forces by active operational manoeuvres but would defend passively and let themselves be slaughtered in the killing fields of 'fortified places'"(p. 445).

The battles in Hungary and the Dukla Pass region truly get their due here as well. Hungary became the focal point for the Third Reich's survival. It was all about oil. The US Army Air Force's bombing strikes on the Ploesti oil fields and refineries, and then their subsequent capture by the Soviets meant Germany's last remaining oil was in Hungary. Most of Germany's major efforts offensively in 1944-45 on the East Front were to protect this last remaining source of crude. It is why, as the authors note, most of Germany's panzers were in Hungary, and not protecting the Vistula and in effect, Berlin. Without this oil, Germany stopped and the war in effect was over.

Be aware though, this is a huge work of over 1,250 pages. But sources? It is richly annotated and the bibliography contains a number of new works this historian was unaware of on the topics presented herein. One can spend several hours perusing the back of the book to gain new sources for areas of interest for a period of the war that gets overlooked by western readers. It is not an overreach to call this volume magisterial solely for its treatment of the Battle of Kursk, but it continues to relentlessly impress and captivate the reader. For any serious student of World War Two and those of the Russo-German War of 1941-1945, this is a must read.