

DESIGN NOTES FOR PROKHOROVKA: THE HISTORICAL BATTLE

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About four years ago I created the “Prokhorovka: The Ultimate Scenario”. In the design notes for that version I stated that though I considered it to be the final version of this battle in East Front, that if any new information came out on the battle then I would make changes to the scenario to account for it. Well in 2015 a new book was published on the battle by Christopher A. Lawrence entitled “Kursk: The Battle of Prokhorovka”. The book has become the primary information source on the battle. This monumental work, which was the product of over twenty years of research, has the most detailed information about the battle, including the events leading up to the battle, the battle itself, and the aftermath. I procured a copy of this book and after reading it through (1700 pages takes quite a long time to read) I realized that my Ultimate version was a flawed masterpiece. So the time had come to update it again.

Historical research of the battle of Prokhorovka over the past fifty years has been compared to peeling an onion. Every time you find new information you think that you have finally dispelled all the myths and misinformation about the battle, only to find another layer of myths and misconceptions that must now be addressed. While some of these myths and misconceptions are old and have long been accepted as fact, others are more recent, coming from researchers pushing their interpretation of the battle. I guess that it is fair to say that a 100% rendition of the battle will never be possible, but Christopher Lawrence has given it the ultimate try. His research has included dozens of interviews with veterans of the battle, many who have now past away, and scouring every last battle record and file that can be found from both sides of the battle. I do not think that any better rendition of the battle can ever be made again.

But besides my desire to put historical accuracy into my scenario, I must balance this with the fact that it must be playable for both sides. One fault that has been leveled against my Ultimate version is that it is strongly Pro-Allied. The German side has no chance achieving victory against a human Russian opponent, although victory is possible against a Russian AI opponent. The basic problem is that players have the advantage of historical hindsight and are not going to make the same mistakes that the real life commanders did in the actual battle. Also the Russian forces are just so over whelming that once they all get released the Russians are just going to close with the Germans and engage in a battle of attrition. The solution to this is to freeze most of the Russian forces in place and setting release turns corresponding to the actual historical time that they attacked. But I also had to freeze some German forces too as these unit historically had defensive mission and it would not be fair for them to move around the map supporting other Germans forces just because the German player or the AI knows that their original positions are not going to be attacked during the first sixty turns of the game. While this restores some historical limitations on the opposing forces, there was more to improving the scenario than just that.

Another problem was the length of my scenario, which is 100 turns. Many players think that it is too long. Several reported games of this scenario ended long before the last turn was reached. Besides the problem mentioned above, another problem is the nature of computer games themselves. While computer games are great in simulating the fog of war, they are not great in simulating the friction of war. These can be a few major problems or many small ones which can slow down the pace of operations. The combat at Prokhorovka on the 12th historically lasted sixteen hours, but this was not

sixteen hours of continuous combat. There were many lulls in the action during this time, lulls which are generally skipped in computer simulations unless they are player induced. Thus I had to take this into account. In my previous versions of this battle I set 100 turns (10 hours) to represent 160 turns (16 hours) of real life time. I have seen no reason to reduce this further, despite player requests.

The following design questions and answers are related to this version of the Prokhorovka battle and should be considered to be supplemental to the design notes of previous versions. One will note that there will be some corrections to some of my previous assertions as Lawrence's book provides evidence proving some previously known "facts" to be incorrect.

1. Why did you change the scenario mission type from "Meeting Engagement" to "Armored Breakthrough"?

Because it was an armored breakthrough type situation for both sides. Both sides endeavored to achieve an armored breakthrough but on different parts of the map. The German "Totenkopf" Division attempted to break through north of the Psel River against the Russian 95th Guards Rifle Division and the Russian 5th Guards Tank Army attempted a breakthrough southwest of the town of Prokhorovka against the German "Leibstandard AH" Division. This was in accordance with each side's operational plans for the day.

2. Just what were each side's operational plans for the day?

For the Germans the "Totenkopf" Division was to carry the main burden of assault that day. They were to assemble an assault force centered around the 3rd SS Panzer Regiment north of the Psel River and then attack to the northeast towards the Oboyan-Prokhorovka Road. Once they had reached the road, they were to send a force down the road towards Prokhorovka to take Hill 252.4 (Hex 74,28) where they would stop, causing an envelopment of the Russian forces east of the division. Once Hill 252.4 was secured, then "Leibstandard AH" Division was to make a limited attack towards that hill to link up with "Totenkopf" and complete the encirclement of the Russian forces to the west of them. Once this was done both divisions were to attack into the newly created pocket of enemy troops and eliminate it. The town of Prokhorovka was not scheduled to be attacked until the next day. "Leibstandard AH" was also supposed to extend its front line to the east until it reached a point north of Pravorot. The "Das Reich" Division was to attack east towards Pravorot, pushing the Corps' right flank further east. However "Das Reich" would not attack until "Leibstandard AH" carried out their part of the plan, who in turn would not attack until "Totenkopf" carried out their part of the plan. Thus everything hinged on "Totenkopf's" success that day and the other two divisions essentially treated the day as a day of rest for their troops, although "Leibstandard AH" did earmark one of their battalions, the 3rd Battalion/1st SS Panzergrenadier Regiment with some armor support, to actually attack towards Hill 252.4 and only if "Totenkopf" actually took it. Realistically they did not expect Hill 252.4 to be captured until late afternoon or early evening and thus there would be no time to carry out the rest of the corps' plan until the next day.

For the Russians the 5th Guards Tank Army was to attack in a south westerly direction towards the Sukh. Komsomolets Farm with the goal of destroying the "Leibstandard AH" Division as a fighting unit. To accomplish this the 29th Tank Corps, supported by two regiments of the 9th Guards Airborne Division, had the main burden of attack against "Leibstandard AH". Two tank brigades were to proceed down the west side of the railroad embankment through Sukh.Oktyabrsk, Hill 252.2, Hill 241.6, and on to the Farm. The other tank brigade was to proceed down the east side of the embankment through Sukh Stalinsk, the Smoroshevoye Forest and onto the Farm as well. The 18th Tank Corps was to attack

down Psel River Valley in two columns with two tank brigades in the first echelon and the third tank and the motorized rifle brigade in the second echelon. The left column had the mission of supporting the 29th Tank Corps drive across the hill mass to their left and the right column had the mission of driving through the towns by the Psel River to relieve the small Soviet force believed to be trapped in Vassilievka. The 2nd Tank Corps and the 2nd Guards Tank Corps were to launch supporting attacks to keep part of “Leibstandard AH” and all of “Das Reich” pinned down. The 5th Guards Army, through its 33rd Guards Rifle Corps, had the dual mission of supporting the 5th Guards Tank Army in its attacks against “Leibstandard AH” and “Das Reich” and defending against the attacks by “Totenkopf”. The attack was originally supposed to kick off at 10:30AM (Turn 40) but an attack by the German III Panzer Corps to the south (off map) early in the morning of the 12th of July caused a change of plans. Part of the 5th Guards Tank Army reserves (Group Trufanov) was ordered to move south to reinforce the Soviet forces facing the III Panzer. This caused a reshuffling of units within the 5th Guards Tank Army as Group Trufanov had to be reinforced first before it moved out and it also caused the attack time to be moved up to 8:30AM (Turn 20).

These then were the historical basic plans for both sides on the 12th of July. One of the big mistakes that earlier historians have made with “Leibstandard AH” is that they presumed that its limited attack on Hill 252.4 was to be the II SS Panzer Corps main attack of the day and therefore it was a full attack. This was a big contributor to the belief that the battle of Prokhorovka was a meeting engagement.

3. Why is there an anti-tank ditch on the map on the Hill 252.2 mass?

Because it played a critical part in the battle. This anti-tank ditch was made by units of the Russian 6th Guards Army which occupied the area during the early part of the battle of Kursk. When these units were pushed out of the area by “Leibstandard AH”’s attack on the 11th of July, they failed to pass on information about this anti-tank ditch to either the 5th Guards Tank or 5th Guards Armies which were coming into the area, thus both armies were ignorant of the ditch. This anti-tank ditch stopped the advance of the 29th Tank Corps two tank brigades west of the railroad embankment after they overran Hill 252.2. It also prevented the 18th Tank Corps' left column from properly supporting the 29th, forcing it to go further to the southwest where it was engaged by the Tiger Tanks of “Leibstandard AH”.

I made the anti-tank ditch by laying down its location with Gully hexsides and then overlaying them with Cliff hexsides. This prevents vehicles from crossing the ditch as it should, but it unfortunately also prevents dismounted infantry from crossing it too which it shouldn't. The proper way to make an anti-tank ditch is lay down a Gully hexside and then overlay it with an Escarpment hexside. This comes from the game Divided Ground. It stops vehicle units from crossing but not dismounted infantry. However, East Front does not have Escarpment hexsides so I had to compromise with Cliffs. Perhaps some future edition of East Front will include Anti-Tank ditches as a defensive feature.

4. Why are there hasty minefields in front of the 95th Guards Rifle Division's second defensive line?

Because recent evidence shows that they were indeed there. While the first defensive line was busy engaging the “Totenkopf” division in the morning of 12 July, the second line was busy improving its defenses. This included placing some hasty minefields in front of their positions with the help of the divisional engineers. But the placement of the minefields was irregular due to lack of time. When the “Totenkopf” division attacked the second defensive line in the late afternoon of the 12th, it did encounter some minefields where several of their tanks were immobilized. Thus this justifies their placement in the scenario.

5. Why are the front lines of the “Leibstandard AH” Division radically altered?

“Leibstandard AH” division's front lines represent the way that they really were when the battle started on 12 July 1943. The way they were in previous editions of this scenario represent what many historians presumed that they were if they hold true to the premise that the battle of Prokhorovka was a meeting engagement. The front lines of the previous editions really represent the front lines of the division in the late afternoon of 11 July 1943 as they finished their forward drive for the day. In the process of the division's drive they managed to isolate the Russian force in the town of Vassilievka, thus cutting it off from the main Russian front lines. Many of the earlier historians believed that the forward units of “Leibstandard AH” stayed where they were during the night in anticipation of resuming their forward advance the next morning. However this turned out to be incorrect.

After receiving its orders for the next day's operations the division pulled back both its panzer regiment and reconnaissance battalion. The panzer regiment was positioned south of the anti-tank ditch as the division's main armored reserve and also had the mission of protecting the division's western flank from the anti-tank ditch down to where the recon battalion east flank was. The reconnaissance battalion was pulled back because it was felt that it was too weak to both maintain a front line from the western flanks of Hill 252.2 down to the Psel River and to keep the Russian force in Vassilievka isolated. It was assigned the missions protecting the northern flank of the Sukh. Komsomolets Farm, keeping an eye on the Russian force in Vassilievka since it was no longer isolated, and to establish contact with the “Totenkopf” division's eastern flank in order to maintain a solid front line. Many later historians acknowledged this pull back for the night but presumed that both units moved back to their forward positions the next morning, again keeping with the meeting engagement interpretation of the battle. But neither unit had any intentions of moving back forward, except in accordance with the division's operational plan for the day mentioned above in second question.

6. If the battle of Prokhorovka was never a meeting engagement, how did the myth that it was get started?

On 30 September 1943, Lt Gen Rotmistrov, commander of the 5th Guards Tank Army, turned in his official report on the battle of Prokhorovka to Stavka. In it he described the battle as a massive meeting engagement occurring over a wide area. As the report was signed off by everybody in the chain of command above him, including the political officers, and supported by their reports, it was accepted by Stavka and was later used in a command study done on the Kursk Campaign the following year. After that it was locked away as a secret file, accessible only to top military and party officials for twenty years, until 1964 when the Soviet government under Leonid Brezhnev released an abridged version of it to the Russian public and also to the world in general. This was the first time that the world at large became aware of the battle of Prokhorovka, not only that it occurred, but also as the greatest tank battle in history. It was portrayed as a massive meeting engagement, even more so than Rotmistrov described in his report, at the insistence of the Communist Party. So even though it was Rotmistrov that started the myth in his report, it was the Party twenty years later that really blew it all out of proportion. To make matters worse, Soviet historians were only allowed access to a limited amount of data about the battle and only that data that supported the myth of the meeting engagement. Thus the Russian people were kept in the dark about what really happened in the battle.

Things were not much better in the West. While the myth of the meeting engagement could have easily been refuted by checking the captured German records of the battle, this was heavily discouraged by the western governments because of the ongoing Cold War. The western governments did not want

the Soviets to find out what they really knew about them. So they made it difficult for Western historians to get to these records and those historians that did were heavily pressured by their governments not to publish the truth, again because of the Cold War mentality that the Western governments were operating under at the time. It was not until the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Soviet government, and opening up of the Russian archives to the general public that the myth of meeting engagement could finally be challenged the newly available data. And even then this has been a slow process as the myth of the meeting engagement has become so ingrained in the public domain.

There was another factor that influenced public opinion in the West, if only indirectly. In 1965 a motion picture came out entitled "The Battle of the Bulge". In that movie there was a giant tank battle at the movie's climax. It was this cinematic tank battle that set the image in Western imagination on what a tank battle should be and made it easy to believe and accept the Soviet version of the battle of Prokhorovka when it came out about the same time. This may not have been the movie producers' intentions, but it was the end result nevertheless.

7. This brings up the story of the lying generals again, just what exactly did they lie about in their reports?

If there was something that the Russian military leadership was more afraid of than anything else, it was Joseph Stalin. The Great Purge of the Generals in 1937 and the mini-purge of those generals who could not stop the Germans in 1941 were still fresh on their minds. To report a loss or worse, less than total success, to Stalin brought the risk of a trial, imprisonment, and possible execution. Thus they had to come up with justifiable reasons for failure. They could not lie about anything about their own forces as these lies could be checked for accuracy. What they could lie about were the enemy forces. Overestimation of enemy forces, capabilities, losses in battle, etc. is a common problem in the military forces of all nations. But the Russians took it to such a high degree by taking every recon report of enemy forces, and casualties inflicted upon the same, as being of brand new enemy forces, not multiple reports of the same enemy units. Enemy losses had to at least equal those of friendly forces in order to be acceptable to Stalin. These lies could not be checked to any degree of reasonable accuracy. Sure, one can count dead enemy bodies and knocked out enemy tanks in one's possession, but those bodies and tanks recovered by the enemy after the battle can only be estimated.

Another factor that could be lied about was the interpretation of the events of the battle. The Russian 5th Guards Tank Army lost over 300 tanks on 12 July 1943 and the best way to justify these losses was classify the battle as a meeting engagement, not as an armored attack that failed. Stalin was so mad when he heard the initial reports about the battle of Prokhorovka that he wanted to relieve General Rotmistrov of his command and put him on trial. And it was General Vasilevskii who talked Stalin out of relieving Rotmistrov, not Zhukov as I had said in an earlier article. (Vasilevskii was the Stavka general coordinating the actions of Voronezh, Southwest, and Steppe Fronts during the first part of the Kursk campaign, up to 13 July 1943. On the 13th he was recalled to Moscow to explain to Stalin what had happened during the combat on the 12th of July, not just at Prokhorovka but all over his area of responsibility. General Zhukov was the general who relieved him before he left.)

It should be remembered that the Kursk campaign was the first time the Soviet Army got to use its new operational system that it had been developing after two years of war. Yes, it did work but many flaws were noted and these would be worked out over the next eleven months until Operation Bagration in June 1944 when the system operated at its finest ever. Until then the lying on reports had to continue in order to keep Stalin from interfering with the operation system's progress of its path to perfection.

8. Are the units on the map now set up in their correct starting positions?

Yes, most of the units are set up in the area where they were historically at 0630 hours on 12 July, 1943 (Game Turn 1). However there are some units which are set up in the areas where they ended up when they are unfrozen during the course of play in the scenario. These are primarily the units of Group Trufanov on the Soviet side. Many of these units would have been located on other parts of the board at 0630 hours if we were totally true to history. A case in point is the Russian 1447th SU Regiment. This unit was historically set up in the first echelon of the 18th Tank Corps at 0630 hours (Turn 1) on 12 July. At about that time it was relieved of its assignment to the 18th Tank Corps and ordered to move over to where Group Trufanov was assembling. It spent the next few hours moving behind the various units of both the 5th Guards Tank and 5th Guards Armies to get to the Group's assembly area, finally getting there about 0900 hours (Turn 25). To trust the Soviet player to follow the historical script and move those units from their historical starting locations to Group Trufanov's assembly area is ludicrous. Any player is going to find a way to get those units released from the script so they can use them with their main forces. So I cut to the chase and set them up where they ended up, relieving the players of the responsibility of getting them there and also relieving them of the temptation of using them elsewhere.

In another case there is the matter of the hasty minefields set up by the second echelon units of the Soviet 95th Rifle Division. Historically these were set up between 0730 hours (Turn 11) and 1130 hours (Turn 51). At the beginning of the scenario they should not be on the map at all. But again, to trust the Soviet player to follow historical script and use those units to place those hasty minefields during this time period is ludicrous. It was easier to just keep the Soviet units locked in place until the appropriate time and set the minefields up before hand.

9. Is this really the final version of the Prokhorovka battle?

I believe so. Yes, I know I said that the fourth version, the "ultimate" scenario, was the final one, but I also said that if any new data came up, I would update it. Lawrence's book was so extensive I do not think that any other source can ever match it. Plus the fact that the last survivors of the battle are passing away and there will be no more eye-witness testimony on the battle, only their recorded statements and interviews. Updating was out of the question, there was too much new information. So I had to make a fifth edition.

Conclusion

Hopefully, this finally ends a long journey for me that started twenty years ago when East Front first came out. The original scenario for Prokhorovka by Jay Karamales never filled the bill for accuracy and for that matter, did not even try to. It demanded revision. So during this time I have striven to create an accurate version of the Prokhorovka battle for East Front. With Christopher Lawrence's book, the true history of the battle of Prokhorovka has finally been put to rest. As the last survivors of the battle finally go to their well deserved rest, may they go with the assurance that their stories finally been told to support the truth, not to support some silly old myths that have long since lost their value and purpose.