

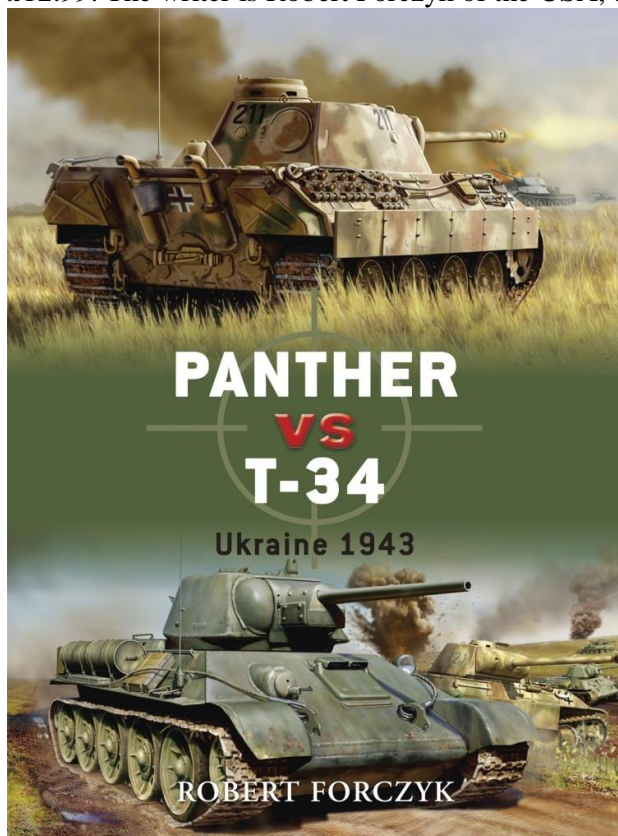
Panther vs. T-34: Ukraine 1943

Osprey Duel series No. 4 (2007)

Text by Robert Forczyk; illustrated by Jim Laurier and Howard Gerrard

Review by Rob Morgan

This book has turned up on the library shelves, but I'm not sure where it came from. Originally published in 2007, it's an interesting Osprey Duel title, and in fact very useful and interesting to the *OstFront* wargamer and model-maker such as I've been this 45 years. The selections of AFVs are never quite right, but in this case much better than many of the others. Larger than the standard Ospreys, they come at 80 pages, this one bore the cover price of £12.99. The writer is Robert Forczyk of the USA, a new contributor to me, with art work by



Jim Laurier and Howard Gerrard. It's well illustrated with some unusual and, for the wargamer, useful photographs of both tanks in a number of variants. The background scenario, if that's the right word to use, is Kursk 1943, history's biggest tank battle (so far). If there's a fault in the text it's that this is treated rather narrowly, in my opinion, as simply a tank against tank battle, and the overlay of artillery, ground attack aircraft and in the case of the Red Army sheer numbers is given something of a subsidiary role, but of course there are a host, literally, of other Osprey titles and proper books dealing with these features of war. For me, John Ericsson's account in 'The Road to Berlin' remains the best by far in all regards.

Where the two tanks are concerned, the introduction says it all, the Nazis focussed on the technical potential of the Panther design, all frills, while the Soviet Union steadily created a no-nonsense tank with great operational potential -- the Panther, though often described as the best tank of WWII, was far from that. Good yes, but never enough, not rugged enough and far too technically elaborate + options. Take the plain statement on page 43, that in the run-up to the Battle of Kursk in July 1943, the 192 Panthers of 51st and 52nd Pz Battalions had to be entrained and returned to the factories in the Reich for rebuilding, so for a month crews trained on foot in simulated drills! These two battalions suffered a breakdown rate of 10% of their Panthers on a 35km road journey to their assembly area on July 1st to 3rd! Yet, Forczyk reminds his readers of the well-known prototype journey of two T-34s from Kharkov to Moscow and back via Smolensk and Kiev, just under 2,000 km, with no breakdowns!

On July 5th 39th Panzer attacked with 166 Panthers, but by midday on 6th July, only about 50 of them were still operational. On July 12th there were only 10-15 Panthers operational,

points which need to be seriously remembered by wargamers. As is this: "only one out of eight Panther Battalions sent to the Eastern Front in 1943 managed to keep at least half its tanks operational for one week."

The fact that the bulk of the fighting, brittle "super-tanks" aside, was carried out by the veteran German Pz III and IV of which there were about 1,100+ at the start of the offensive must also be remembered. At many stages of this immense battle, an intact Panther tank platoon (5 tanks) was a rare sight. Continuing on the use of this volume to wargamers, the handful of Bergepanthers, armoured recovery versions of the Panther gun tank were, it seems, considered among the best assets of these units. Given the apparent rate of breakdown this must be true!

Hitler had decreed that no disabled Panther should fall into enemy hands, but Forczyk asserts that only a few damaged Panthers were properly destroyed by the German engineers. By 19th July an intact Panther was en route for inspection and testing at Chelyabinsk, and many others were captured barely damaged, but simply broken down. These were used in special captured platoons of three tanks each. The Soviet troops liked the tanks optics and gun equipment, but the Panthers were frail compared to the T-34s they were used to, and they couldn't be kept running for very long. Again a Red Army Panther platoon makes for an unusual wargame group.

The Osprey title deals not only with design and development, and technical specifications, crew and training too; but naturally also deals with the strategic situation in this first battle for the new German tank, Forczyk provides statistics and analysis of the encounters and the potential of the two AFVs and the aftermath of a most remarkable battle. For many readers, it will be the short, interesting descriptions of combat which makes the book useful. There are many instances of tremendous successes by small Panther units against substantial numbers of T-34s, especially in ambush or hull down, but ultimately these encounters were few and far between.

In the meat grinder of Kursk, Guderian, who believed the Panther was not ready for battle, was proved right; the Nazi armour did not break through, and the Panthers had not proved a decisive tank in the fighting, nor were they mechanically reliable. Forczyk considers some of the claims made, in terms of numbers of enemy tank destroyed and the ranges at which this was achieved, as "absurd," and provides sensible comparators.

I think the *OstFront* wargamer may find a score of small T-34 v Panther battles and fights to re-create on the table top in this slim volume, but for me one single recollection, one old-fashioned image returned again and again as I read this on the whole good, useful volume. Do you remember the Airfix 1/72nd models of these two tanks? When I first bought them they were two shillings each (so, enough nostalgia, let's move on). The Airfix T-34 was and still is a superb, easily built model, simple to turn into a fighting weapon in under half an hour. It looks a real tank. The Airfix Panther on the other hand has all that complicated road wheel set up, those amazingly complex axles, and the funny hard to get set together hull. It took a lot longer to make one. Fiddly. Very!

That's how it was in combat and support. The simple and effective against the complex, fussy and easily broken. The T-34 wins every time.

It did didn't it?