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THE STORY OF SOVIET ARMOR

Commentary

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In the May-June 1950 issue of the Armored Cavalry Journal, Mr. Garrett Underhill, in Part IV of "The Story of Soviet Armor," writes that the poor quality of Russian tanks is demonstrated by the fact that Germany made no use of the large numbers of Russian tanks (T 34 and KV) which it had captured, although it used Czech tanks and, in the Balkans, in the fighting against the Partisans, French tanks.

This gives a false idea of the situation. In order to clear up this matter, I should like to make the following points:

It is undoubtedly true that from time to time the armor used for Russian tanks was of very poor quality and often did not have the resistance to penetration normally required.

But there are other reasons for the fact that Russian tanks, especially the T 34, were not used by the German Army:

Mere possession of a captured tank is not enough. It is useless unless continuous maintenance of the vehicles is possible, and this depends on the availability of spare parts. Aside from technical difficulties, manufacture of spare parts for the T 34 in German factories would have been possible only at the expense of a reduction in the number of German tanks turned out. For this reason the use of T 34 tanks could not be considered.

In isolated instances the German Army organized captured-tank companies using captured T 34 tanks and tried to get the needed spare parts from captured matériel. But the method was unsuccessful, and these captured-tank units were dissolved very soon. It was impossible to get enough spare parts from the matériel captured. The method also involved an irrational expenditure of effort, which was increased by the fact that maintenance itself required special experts thoroughly trained in the work and the manufacture of special repair tools.

As far as the Czech and French tanks were concerned the situation was different. Factories and repair installations for these types of tanks were available. However, the French tanks were at best useful only to frighten peasants; they were altogether inferior to the T 34 regardless of the poor materials used in the latter's construction.

The fact that in the East the captured T 34 was not used except in a few cases had a second and equally important reason:

From a tactical viewpoint the T 34 was inferior to German tank types (Pz III and Pz IV with long barreled 75 mm gun) because it combined the functions of commander and gunner in one person. As soon as the commander began firing, he lost his overall viewpoint and was unable to direct his tank. Even as gunner, however, he was unable to

fulfill his mission because when functioning as such he had no commander from which to receive directions. As a result, the T 34 was in most cases hopelessly inferior to the German tanks, especially after German tanks were armed with a long gun, in the spring of 1942. I often saw Russian tank attacks in which the T 34's charged like a herd of wild bulls and continuously fired their guns, obviously without aiming, while driving forward. While the limited training given tank crews as a result of the high losses incurred may have been one of the reasons for adopting such tactics, it is certain that the union of the functions of commander and gunner in one person was a contributing factor.

Partly as a result of this tactical inferiority, in the Ukraine my Panzer regiment, from the end of October to the middle of December 1943, destroyed 356 Russian tanks, most of them T 34's, with a total loss of only 12 German tanks. The regiment was equipped with a little more than 100 tanks, half of them Pa IV and the rest Sturmgeschuetz III (self-propelled assault gun), both equipped with the long-barreled 75 mm gun model L 48.

Signed: B. Mueller-Hillebrand