

Day Trip to Kursk

James Kinnear took a 1300km road trip to visit the site of one of the most famous battlefields in World War Two history

Being based in Moscow has had some particular advantages. Over the years I've visited wartime Russian Front battlefields on what is today the territory of the Russian Federation and now independent Belarus and Ukraine. All these visits have been particularly thought provoking and poignant, but it was only recently that the opportunity arose to visit one of the most famous battlefields in Soviet World

War Two history; the battlefields near a provincial Russian city that is widely known across the world even by those with no particular knowledge of history or warfare - Kursk

The Battle of Kursk was the greatest clash of armour in history. Following as it did after the defeat of the German 6th Army at the Battle of Stalingrad, it was the definitive turning point of World War Two on the Eastern Front, and the

beginning of Red Army offensive operations that would eventually see Red Army tanks parked up outside the Reichstag in Berlin.

The Battle of Kursk, or more correctly the plural Battles of the Kurskaya Duga was not actually a set-piece battle, but rather a series of ongoing engagements fought in southern Russia over many weeks in the summer of 1943.

The Kurskaya Duga or salient was a break-





through from a Red Army bridgehead formed around the city of Kursk from which the battle takes its name. Though it was in the centre of the salient, the city of Kursk was not the epicentre of the fighting, which was concentrated on a pincer movement breakout in the region of Orel to the north and around Belgorod to the south, the overall area being just north of Kharkov. To give some perspective, the Battle of Kursk

was conducted over a front that was more than 300km wide, with fighting extending over thousands of square kilometres in an area of gently undulating farmland geographically larger than Wales.

Sources have always conflicted to some degree as regards the exact numbers of infantry, armoured vehicles, artillery and aircraft involved in the battles of the Kursk salient. ▶



ABOVE RIGHT: *The 'Kurskaya Duga' or Kursk salient was centred around the city of Kursk, with Orel in the north and Belgorod to the south To give some perspective on scale, the bulge in the pincer between the north and south is more than 300km wide*
 TOP: *Another plinth-mounted T-34-85 serving as a war memorial on the Prokhorovka battlefield*
 BELOW: *T-34-85 tanks 'in formation' with the Prokhorovka battlefield in the background*



'The Battle of Kursk was the greatest clash of armour in history'



ABOVE: Destroyed Red Army T-34 tanks among the ripening crops, typical of the Kursk battlefield in the summer of 1943

MAIN IMAGE: The view from the country roads surrounding Prokhorovka exactly 70 years after the battle has not changed in the slightest, with undulating fields of ripening sunflowers giving good cover for infantry and anti-tank weapons

BELOW: A Red Army SU-122 assault gun near Prokhorovka, Battle of Kursk, July 1942





These two T-34-85s with 'starfish' road wheels as introduced during capital repairs in the 1950s have Guards tank division markings

One of the main memorials in the region lists Red Army participants at the decisive Battle of Prokhorovka near the end of the overall Battles of the Kursk salient as 1,336,000 officers and men of the Central and Voronezh Fronts, with 19,100 guns and mortars (not including Katyusha multiple rocket launchers), 3,444 tanks and self-propelled guns and 2,900 fighter aircraft.

It was one summer weekend, when my colleague and driver Valery and I decided to visit the battlefields of the Kursk salient and some of the memorial complexes there, a 1300km round trip not including the touring around, the same distance as travelling from London to Edinburgh and back.

The Kursk salient is an area of generally flat land with low undulating hills, with rich and particularly loamy dark earth sown with corn and sunflower fields, which at the time of the Battle of Kursk gave infantry and anti-tank weapons significant cover. For tank modellers it should be noted that the crops were not ripe at the time of the battle, hence were for the most part

a pale green, not bright yellow.

The fiercest fighting was around the village of Prokhorovka, which is some 140km south of the city of Kursk from which the battle takes its name. The central Kursk battle memorial complex is located near the village and for many years was a simple memorial complex, but it has been recently renovated and is now bordering on what might be called a Russian tourist attraction, though the number of foreign visitors is obviously small due to the remote location.

The Prokhorovka complex, as with so many Russian memorial sites, has been completely revamped in recent years, and is now an impressive collection of tanks, self-propelled and towed artillery. Sadly, the actual tanks which participated in the battle, such as the early 76.2mm F-34 armed T-34, the T-70 and the SU-122 are not represented, all the tanks and self-propelled guns being later production types such as the T-34-85, the SU-100 and the IS-2. Nevertheless, the central display is impressive, with the tanks and other vehicles laid out as

This ISU-152 Self-Propelled Howitzer is displayed as a representation of the earlier SU-152 based on the KV heavy tank The slogan reads "СМЕРТЬ ФАШИСТСКОМУ ЗВЕРЬЮ!" which may have been more politically appropriate in 1943 than today, though maybe not...



There are many plinth-mounted tank memorials in the Kursk area. This T-34-85 is located at Prokhorovka Memorial Complex



This IS-3M at the Prokhorovka Memorial Park is also chronologically misplaced, the IS-3 making its first public debut at the Allied Victory Parade in Berlin in 1945. There are actually no appropriately in-period tanks on display at Prokhorovka



An SU-100 self-propelled gun The SU-100 was the last such wartime weapon, replacing the Kursk era SU-85 Though labelled as self-propelled guns, the primary role of these vehicles was as long-range tank destroyers



An IS-2M heavy tank The earlier KV was still the standard Red Army heavy tank at the time of the Battle of Kursk but there are no surviving KV tanks in the immediate region



A Soviet 45mm anti-tank gun looks out over the battlefield in the village of Pervie Voin, near Orel



Soviet heavy artillery was highly effective in the anti-tank role, armour penetration being achieved by sheer projectile weight. The 152mm M-1937 (ML-20) howitzer was particularly effective



This 76mm ZIS-3 dual-purpose gun at the Kurskaya Duga Memorial Complex at Yakovlevo was commanded by Sgt P D Azarov and destroyed during the Battle of Kursk, having taken a heavy toll on Axis armour

The main Kursk memorial complex at Prokhorovka has a large display of tanks. The memorial commemorates those that died in battle and now live forever in people's memories, seared into Russian understanding of the reality of war in a way that now seems missing in western Europe



'The Battle of Kursk was conducted over a front that was more than 300km wide'





The Battle of Kursk was as much a duel between tanks and anti-tank weapons as it was directly between tanks. The 76 2mm ZiS-3 divisional gun was widely used in the Red Army in the anti-tank role



A 122mm M-1931/37 (A-19) Corps artillery piece mounted as a war memorial



The 57mm ZiS-2 looks nearly identical to the 76 2mm ZiS-3, but was a more focused anti-tank weapon. It has a longer barrel without a muzzle brake



if crossing the surrounding plains. Though generally known historically as a tank battle fought over a large geographical area, direct tank-tank engagements were less common than combat between anti-tank weapons and tanks. The whole region is scattered with individual war memorials, many of which are anti-tank and artillery pieces that are dug-in as they would have been during the battle.

In addition to the main and most visited Prokhorovka complex (which today has all the tourist essentials including a café and souvenir shop) there are a myriad of markers and small museum complexes scattered around the region, many of which are perhaps more individually poignant. In many areas the original trenches have been left untouched as a stark reminder of the ferocity of the battle, while

A T-34-85 serves as a war memorial in the village of Pervie Voin. Tanks plinth mounted as war memorials are to be found throughout Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union, and are always a poignant reminder



MAIN IMAGE: A massed formation of T-34-85 tanks and SU-100 tank destroyers. Both are later versions of tank and SU-types that served during the Kursk offensive





ABOVE LEFT: A 7 62mm DT tank machine gun and other artefacts recovered from the battlefields, on display at the Kurskaya Duga Memorial Complex in the village of Yakovlevo

ABOVE MIDDLE & RIGHT: The gun mantlet from a 76 2mm F-34 armed T-34 M-1942 or M-1943 and damaged T-34 track links recovered from the battlefields around Prokhorovka

TOP: A Russian schematic of the Kursk salient, located at the Kurskaya Duga Memorial Complex and museum in the village of Yakovlevo. The Kursk salient covered an area of many thousands of square kilometres

the less touristic settings and in some cases the eerie silence surrounding the sites focuses attention on what Kursk was, and what it meant for the Red Army and the combatants on both sides of the conflict.

The battlefields of Kursk are not exactly easily accessible other than by car; though I do know one Russian-speaking British tank-nut who jumped on the local train from Moscow to Kursk and did the local journeys at the other end by bus.

Most of the sites are entirely open with the museums functioning by the usual Russian timetable of more or less daily 9-5 but with 'sanitary dien' (usually a Monday) for cleaning. Getting to the area without a car and strong nerves (the roads are excellent near Moscow but then gradually deteriorate as they get nearer the Ukrainian border, and driving standards are atrocious) is not advised unless a Russian speaker.

Prokhorovka is close to Belgorod, which is in turn just over the Russian side of the Ukrainian border. The nearest big city is actually Kharkov in Ukraine, but considering recent history it is easier to travel to Moscow and drive from there staying overnight at any of a number of hotels in and around Belgorod or Kursk. ◀



Memorial plaques such as this list the tank and other units of the Voronezh Front under General N F Vatutin reporting to Marshal G K Zhukov that participated in the battle at Prokhorovka