



Confronting Case Blue: Briansk Front's Attempt to Derail the German Drive to the Caucasus, July 1942 by Igor' Sdvizhkov.

Trans. and ed. Stuart Britton. Solihull, UK: Helion, 2017. Pp. vii, 420. ISBN 978-1-911096-43-6.

Review by James R. Smither, Grand Valley State University (smitherj@gvsu.edu).

The opening of Soviet archives after 1991 has made possible a re-evaluation of Eastern Front campaigns in World War II. We now know that the standard narrative, based mostly on German sources, incorrectly cast the Soviets as hapless defenders in the period before their counteroffensives around Stalingrad in late 1942; in fact, they were mounting counterattacks from the very beginning. While these usually failed, they managed to deplete German resources, while giving Soviet forces badly needed, if costly, experience. Most major revisionist studies of the conflict have concentrated on famous battles and large campaigns, of necessity from the top down. In *Confronting Case Blue*, military historian Igor' Sdvizhkov (Lipetsk Pedagogical Inst.) has produced an instructive microhistory of a failed nine-day Soviet counteroffensive in July 1942. His closer look at a comparatively minor battle shows the Soviet military system at work, warts and all, on a personal level.

The author has spent most of his adult life researching the World War II campaigns fought in his native region of Voronezh. His present book builds on his earlier Russian-language study of the mid-July counteroffensive of the Soviet 5th Tank Army, led by Gen. Alexander Liziukov. Dissatisfied with the results of this campaign, the high command disbanded the army, demoted Liziukov to command of the 2nd Tank Corps within the group, organized a new force out of units of the disbanded army, and ordered it to begin a new offensive—all within three days. The new attack quickly fizzled and Liziukov himself disappeared in the battle.

Sdvizhkov carefully traces the campaign from the initial orders and planning through the day-by-day actions, using both Soviet and German military records, along with such individual accounts and documents as he could find. While clearly identifying with the Soviets (“our side”), he is mindful of the distortions common in military reports and does not hesitate to criticize Soviet officers for their mistakes.

The campaign (21–29 July 1942) took place along a front of a few miles near Voronezh, an important city from which the Germans were launching their summer offensive. The book’s title signals the strategic goal of the counterattack—to keep the Germans from seizing the Caucasus oil fields. But this is misleading, since the author is more preoccupied with tactical details of the operation. In this regard, he adds little to what David Glantz and Jonathan House have written about it in their magisterial study of the Stalingrad campaign.¹ Sdvizhkov takes the reader inside the headquarters of Group Chibisov and follows its subordinate units themselves into the field of battle.

Throughout, the author skillfully combines often incomplete and inaccurate reports by commanders, staff officers, and commissars from units involved in specific actions in order to reconstruct as best he can what really happened in each phase of the battle. When the initial attack,

1. *To the Gates of Stalingrad* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2009) 2–3, 254–55.

spearheaded by Liziukov's 2nd Tank Corps, penetrated the German forward positions, one of his tank brigades, unsupported by infantry, got ahead of the rest of the corps, announced the capture of its objective, and then fell silent. It had been destroyed by the Germans, but no one to the rear knew this. General Chibisov, once Liziukov's subordinate and now his commander, ordered him to go to the front lines in person and take charge of the attack. Eager to prove himself, Liziukov took his commissar with him and headed forward in a tank, only to be ambushed and killed by the Germans, leaving his corps ineffective without officers experienced or enterprising enough to take charge. Subsequent Soviet attacks likewise fizzled, their occasional tactical successes wasted owing to inadequate communication, intelligence, and staff work. The Germans mounted a counterattack and by July 29 had restored their lines. The Soviets called off the offensive.

Sdvizhkov portrays a Soviet army blessed with expanding resources of manpower and equipment, but lacking the planning and logistical expertise needed to conduct a successful offensive. The commanders giving the orders had little idea of the state or even exact position of their forces and those they were facing. As an example, Sdvizhkov cites the command journal of a Rifle Division that was slated to provide infantry support for a major tank attack: unbeknown to the army or group command, it had been devastated by a German air attack.

Alas, for the men of the units of the 237th Rifle Division that were remaining in Murav'evka, that diabolical morning bombing, it seems, became the last drop that overflowed the cup of trials that fell to their lot. Dispirited by what was happening, demoralized by the defeat and the shocking losses they had suffered, the hungry and exhausted men simply could not endure this latest crushing blow to their nerves—it was already beyond their inner strength. As a result, the division's battalions were disintegrating into separate, widely scattered groups of armed (or else now totally unarmed) Red Army soldiers, and ceased to be combat-capable military units. (In general, the staff officer who was keeping the journal had to have a lot of citizen courage in that turbulent time, to write about everything so openly and honestly.) Thus, there was no infantry left in the 237th Rifle Division to support the attack of the 2nd and 7th Tank Corps on the morning of 25 July. (179)

In this particular case, Soviet armored units leading the attack had overwhelmed the panzer grenadier company opposing them, but then faltered due to German countermeasures, lack of infantry support, and poor command initiative. An (on paper) massively superior force (several divisions vs. one company) generated only a small gain of ground rather than the intended breakthrough that would have endangered the entire German position. Most other Soviet attacks were even less successful and incurred severe losses in men and materiel.

Using German sources, Sdvizhkov shows that the destroyed company had been a screening force protecting the flank of the rest of the 9th Panzer Division as it moved to encircle other Soviet forces, thereby leaving a hole that the Soviets might have exploited. Rather than redeploying to close the gap, the Germans took their chances and kept going, while the Soviets did nothing. The subsequent German after-action report attributed the Soviet inaction to the fierce German defense. In reality, the company surrendered on orders from its commanders once the position was overrun and Soviet tanks were behind them (211–12). The Soviet commanders failed to perceive a chance to do serious damage to the Germans; instead, fearing what might be in front of them, they dug in where they were. Sdvizhkov makes astute use of his sources to assess the strengths and weaknesses of both sides at this stage in the conflict. In so doing, he makes it clear that, once the Soviets took the time to train their officers properly and better plan their operations, they could defeat the Germans, as indeed they did at Stalingrad several months later.

Along the way, Sdvizhkov uses both German and, especially, Soviet reports to describe the personalities, experiences, and reactions of junior officers and commissars and the men around

them. He carries out extensive detective work to learn why it took the Soviets so long to determine Liziukov's fate. He observes that he had distinguished himself in combat in late 1941, but was tainted by association with a general who had defected to the Germans. Following his failure as commander of the 5th Tank Army and subsequent demotion, he was bent on proving himself. So, when Chibisov, who disliked him, ordered him to go up front and command his tanks personally, he got into a tank and headed where he thought his (already destroyed) forward brigade was located, only to be killed as he emerged from his disabled tank. In the confusion of the battle, it took several days for reports about him to filter back to Chibisov, who continued to send him orders. In the long run, Liziukov was recognized as a hero, and the mess of political agendas, personal grudges, and poor communication sorted itself out, as it did within the Red Army as a whole.

For all of its strengths, the book is not easy reading. The author's narrative style is florid, repetitive, and prone to jumping around in time and space. There is also an absence of the sort of oral history materials that enliven recent American and British works on World War II (oral history, in general, is less well developed in Soviet scholarship). This is odd in the present case, given the author's work gathering oral history material from civilians in the battle area and survivors of the fighting who participated in the dedication of a monument to Liziukov near where he died. His excerpts from a few of these accounts at the end of the book enrich his narrative. Overall, Igor' Sdvizhkov's engaging, narrowly focused study well complements works covering larger stretches of the fighting on the Russian front. One hopes others will follow his lead.