

Did I Just Write the Largest History Book Ever?

By Christopher A. Lawrence

The Dupuy Institute

I think I just wrote and had published the largest single-volume history book ever. It is a military history of a World War II battle called *Kursk: The Battle of Prokhorovka*.¹ Not entirely sure if it is the largest history book, but at 1,662 pages, the book has more pages than any other book I know of. The word count is 791,698, which may also be a record.² Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* is only 645,000 words long and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is a paltry 587,287 words (in English). But these are stories that the authors made up, not history. Hopefully nothing was made up in my book. We even considered the tacky tag line: "Larger than *War and Peace*, except there is no peace."

So how does one end up writing a 1,662 page book? It was never my intention. In July 1993 *The Dupuy Institute* obtained a contract from the U.S. Army's Concepts Analysis Agency (CAA) to prepare a database on the German attack in July 1943 in the southern part of the Battle of Kursk. This was carefully scoped to make sure that the project could be finished on time and within budget. As such, it only covered a part of this massive World War II battle. It was set up to be a database of combat, recording for every division every day such minutia as strength, losses, on-hand equipment, equipment losses, movement, air support, major events, and ammunition consumption. This database was to be used to validate army combat models, basically running the Battle of Kursk through existing combat models and seeing how the model performed. The material collected came from the actual unit records of both sides, German and Soviet. The Soviet Union has fallen on 25 December 1991 and suddenly it was possible in 1993 to obtain access to their unit records, or so we thought.

The project was originally intended to be conducted with the Russian Army's Military History Institute (MHI). The Soviet Union had fallen, the world had changed, the Cold War was over, and now was the time for a joint history project conducted in a sense of friendship that would hopefully define our new relations with Russia. But, old habits die hard. We had arranged for the joint research project over the preceding months before the contract was awarded, and suddenly, on the day that the contract was issued to us, MHI informed us that they could not longer participate in the project. This, of course, cut off our access to Soviet unit records. The foreign liaison officer at MHI told us that the decision had been made and that there was nothing they could do. When we

¹ Christopher A. Lawrence, *Kursk: The Battle of Prokhorovka* (Aberdeen Books, Sheridan, CO. 2015).

² *The Encyclopedia of Military History* (3rd edition) by R. Earnest and Trevor N. Dupuy had 1,376 pages. The font is smaller, so its word count may be higher. It weighs 6 pounds vice the 13 pounds for my book. I have put the books side by side and mine definitely looks larger. Of course, there is a certain irony in that *The Dupuy Institute* is competing with Trevor Dupuy, its founder, for the credit for largest single volume history book.

suggested that we come over to Moscow and meet with them, they told us that this would be a waste of time.

The Soviet Military Archives are in Podolsk, a town just outside of Moscow. They were under the direct control of the Chief of Staff of the Russian Army (and still are). The records of the Soviet Army in World War II are not in an independent archive under civilian control, unlike for most U.S. military records from Vietnam and earlier. The MHI also is a part of the Russian Army (similar to our Center for Military History (CMH)). As such, any joint project and any access to the archives would require approval from the Russian army staff. Obviously this was where the problem was.

The famous military historian Trevor N. Dupuy was founder and head of *The Dupuy Institute*. Never one to accept no for an answer, he immediately organized a trip to Moscow to meet with MHI and other parties and determine what could be done to keep the project moving forward. As Trevor Dupuy stepped off the plane in Moscow on 14 July 1993, he discovered that the day before an article appeared in the paper *Sovetskaya Rossiya* (Soviet Russia) called “Citadel-93, The Americans are Programming the Battle of Kursk”. It was a long article, which we quoted in its entirety in my book. Basically it stated that the project needed to be stopped by Russia’s parliamentarians and “competent organs”.³ It was clear from the article that the journalist who wrote it had seen a copy of the six-page proposal we had provided to MHI (and almost no one else). It was clear that someone at MHI had arranged for the article to be published the day before we arrived in Russia. It was intended to stop this study from going forward. As this person would have most likely been an officer in the Russian Army, it is hard to imagine that it did not have approval from higher up.

Clearly working with MHI was no longer possible, so instead Trevor Dupuy explored using a private team of researchers. One of the more amazing characters we met was a retired Frunze Military Academy professor and former Soviet Army Colonel Fyodor Sverdlov. This small bald veteran, who reminded me of Khrushchev in more than one way, had access to the archives as a former professor at the Frunze Military Academy. He could assemble a team of researchers and use his access to get us the data that we needed. Trevor Dupuy was understandably hesitant to take such a backdoor approach, but the situation was clear to Sverdlov, who at the end of our first exploratory meeting with him said, “You will get back to me.”

Sure enough we did. Yes, we did formally request access to the archives in a letter written by an Undersecretary of the Army to the Chief of the Russian General Staff, but were told that they were too busy with the upcoming 50 anniversary celebrations for the end of the World War II and therefore they did not have time to participate in this (paying) project. So, Colonel Fyodor Sverdlov, a Soviet veteran of World War II and a nascent capitalist, assembled a team of researchers whom we contracted to research the Soviet records.

We met with our research team in October 1993, in a trip that occurred the week after Russian Army tanks drove into Moscow and shelled their own parliament building

³ Lawrence, pages 22-24.

(called the White House). One Russian researcher could not attend the first day of the conference, as he was on patrol duty related to the recent uprising! We met in the Salyut Sanatorium away from the city center and the tanks. The first day of the conference was in an arboretum full of parrots. One of the legends of the Battle of Kursk was there was a swirling tank battle on 12 July 1943 that left a 100 destroyed German Tiger tanks near the town of Prokhorovka. Colonel Sverdlov started off the meeting by stating that he was at the Prokhorovka battlefield right after World War II, and he did not see 100 Tigers! Even in such an unusual setting, this meeting confirmed to us that we had the right research team. But as the day warmed up, the parrot chatter got increasingly louder, and we were forced to move the meeting to their library.

The team was headed by two individuals who were World War II veterans, published authors and retired professors at Frunze Military Academy. But this work was not officially sanctioned, and the archives did not know that this research was being done under contract for *The Dupuy Institute* (which was also a private company under contract). Just to make sure that no one asked too many questions, Sverdlov sat each of his team of six researchers in different rooms and sections of the archives so as to not draw attention. They also made hand copies the records, as doing extensive photocopying in 1993 in Russia would have certainly raised attention. Few in Russia at that time had the money to pay for such. They were restricted in that it could only be unclassified records. As such, we could not access the Army Front files and other high level formations, but otherwise, we had extensive access to all the records of the units involved in the Battle of Kursk.

And so the project proceeded for the next two years. It eventually resulted in 1,200 pages of Soviet archival material being sent to us, along with a wealth of other material and information. Perhaps one of the most useful aspects of this effort was the conferences and meetings we held with Colonel Sverdlov, where he explained from his own experience, sometimes caustically and humorously, how things operated in the Soviet Army in World War II. He was a battalion commander at the Battle of Moscow in 1941. His day he arrived at his new unit, three men were taken out and shot for desertion! He then fought in freezing temperatures and snow for days without food. Moved into staff positions, he was at the Battle of Kursk in the northern sector with the Eleventh Army and was in the Soviet Army until the end. He was wounded three times.

In 1995 Richard Harrison, Fyodor Sverdlov and I took a train from Moscow to Belgorod. Hiring a cab driver at the train station in Belgorod we spent the next three days driving across the battlefield, walking the fields (in single file...just in case of mines), and photographing the terrain. In 1996 we were contracted by a group of retired American military officers to serve as a tour guide for a private trip to the battlefield that they wanted to make. Being Americans, they decided to drive there. We drove from Heidelberg Germany, through the Fulda Gap, Poland, Ukraine and finally to Belgorod. This covered about half the distance of Europe. An entire chapter in General Julius

Becton's autobiography describes that trip.⁴ It was on this trip that I met Major General Dieter Brand, a still active duty Bundeswehr officer who had a strong interest in military history and good knowledge of the battle.

The Kursk project ended in March 1997 when the final database was delivered to the customer. My work with *The Dupuy Institute* then moved onto other areas. In 1999, with the help of a member of our board, George Daoust, I obtained a contract from Westview Press to write a book on the battle. We were sitting on a unique collection of material and records. We were the first people to have been able to systematically collect and review the unit records from both sides. Therefore, even though I was quite busy with our other contracted work, this was a way to present this unique body of work to the more general public.

But, my first thought that no one was going to want to read a book written from a database. This would be truly dreadful. I figured I needed interviews, personal interest stories, biographies and so forth. None of these we had collected during the initial research as that was not the purpose of that contract. Therefore, I went back to Colonel Sverdlov and contracted him to actually go assemble over eighty interviews from veterans. I would have liked to do some of the interviews myself, but it was very clear that a fellow Soviet World War II veteran would probably be able to get more honest, open and complete interviews than I ever would. There were also the problems of translation and the expense of living in working in Moscow for weeks on end. Also there was a serious time constraint as I was indeed fully employed with other contracted work. Besides, a young stranger from a foreign country is not the best person to interview these veterans. Many of the veterans Colonel Sverdlov knew from his service of the Soviet Army and as a professor at the Frunze Military Academy. His team also went to various reunions being held at the time to locate many of these hardy souls. He had done some similar work before and some had been published.

At the same time the now retired General Brand volunteered for a pittance to collect interviews from German soldiers and commanders who were at Kursk. In the case of General Brand, many of the men he interviewed had served with him in the post-war Germany Army. Being a German general, he was trusted by them, and this is demonstrated in the interviews. In fact, the interviews were stunningly comprehensive. I ended up using almost everything he collected. When it was finished, I had collected 115 interviews, only three done by me. I had also contracted Colonel Sverdlov to provide me with biographies of the Soviet commanders (many whom he had known),⁵ unit citations

⁴ Lt. Gen. Julius W. Becton Jr., *Becton: Autobiography of a Soldier and Public Servant* (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 2008), "An Improbable Journey," pages 230-240.

⁵ Many Soviet general officers had not completed higher level military schooling before the war. This was a result of the extensive purges in the 1930s and their rapid promotion because of the purges and the war. Therefore many of them attended the Frunze Military Academy after the war, where Sverdlov taught. As such, his biographies sometimes contained personal information that could not be obtained from official sources, for example about their conflicts with the Soviet authorities, their drinking problems, or their "front wives."

from the Hero's of the Soviet Union (which we never used) and pictures of the commanders. Now, I had a little bit more than a database to work with.

I started writing the book at the beginning of 2000. I cobbled together elements from the material I had, but it was hardly refined, as I had little time away from work to commit to the book. Therefore I was writing in the evenings and weekends when I had the time. Still, by the end of 2001 I had 900 or so pages and I was reporting on our website that I had all 28 chapters in a rough draft form.⁶ I was still trying to complete the book in 2002 if I could find the time. But finding the time was difficult and the book was larger than I had originally planned for.

In the middle of 2002 my son was born. Our work situation at the Institute was stable and I had good staff able to cover our on-going work. Therefore, during that time, I took two days off during the week to work on the book. It was then that I was able to systematically complete the description of each day of the battle from 4 July 1943 to the end. With my young son in a rocking swing next to my office, I would write, he would rock, and my wife would get a needed break (or be asked to translate more material).

I had in front of me the translated German records, the translated Soviet records, all the interviews and other material. They were all in electronic form, so in many cases, the writing consisted of downloading the German daily narrative from one of their divisions, checking it to their Corps and Army narratives, and then downloading the Soviet narrative of the opposing units. It was more downloading and editing than it was writing. Then there was the process of tracking both narratives on a map and seeing what matches and what does not match. There were many mismatches. Times of events rarely matched. Events reported by one side were not reported by the other. Details of events reported by both sides did not agree. It was also not unusual to see the Soviet units declare that they attacked, there be no report of an attack in the German records, no significant casualties on the German side for that day, and no significant casualties reports for the Soviet side either. The next day, the unit was in the exact same location. If I was working from only one sides' records (and many military histories are developed that way), then I might record that an attack occurred there. Clearly, they said they attacked but did not. This was a case that happened repeatedly.

This process, working two days a week plus usually a Saturday morning, continued for a little over a year. When it was done, most of the book had been written. Still, by the second half of 2003, I had to halt regular work on the book and return back to contracted work five days a week. The Kursk book was almost complete in 2003, although it would clearly take many more months of work to finish it. It was also at this time that I decided to figure out just how big of a book I had.

At the time we started the Kursk project in the 1990s, all of our material was developed on a word processing program called Word Perfect. This was a DOS-based program that we had been using for years and felt was superior to Microsoft Word. But, because of the file size limitations of the time, each chapter was saved as a separate file.

⁶ www.dupuyinstitute.org

Therefore, I had not seen the book in its entirety. It existed as over 30 separate electronic files.

I made the decision early on that I was not going to write a book of highlights. As I have sarcastically claimed at times, military history is the study of exceptions. They discuss the highpoints of the battle, the particularly bloody and nasty fights, and seem to ignore what most people are doing each day (which usually is not near as exciting). Therefore, one studies the exceptional situations, not the norms. I was determined not to be drawn into the trap of only discussing the days of heaviest combat, only discussing the tanks, or only discussing the culminating Battle of Prokhorovka. I had 17 attacking German units, 37 defending Soviet divisions and 10 Soviet tank and mechanized corps, and I was going to give them equal treatment. This resulted in some rather long chapters.

Added to that was my concept of the book was not strictly a narrative. Inspired in part by the formatting of James Dunnigan's *Strategy and Tactics* magazine, and in part by the formatting of excellent series of Elizabeth Hallem edited books on medieval history, I decided to include as sidebars to the book material like biographies, personal stories, side discussions, and the statistics of the battle. This allowed me to insert a collection of relevant material that did not otherwise fit well into the narrative. Therefore, I was able to maintain what I hope was a cohesive narrative and still provide all the detailed material on orders of battles, statistics, interesting asides and so forth. This also gave me the freedom to put anything of interest into the book (like a discussion on the use of dogs as antitank suicide attack weapons). This added to the girth of the book.

By the end of 2001, I was aware that the book was getting quite large and notified by editor of this. I proposed in the middle of 2002 that we do two books, a comprehensive book of 600-800 pages and a second smaller soft back general reader edition of 300 pages. Obviously the comprehensive book would be done first. But over the next year, they changed editors twice. Therefore, I was not sure how we should resolve the size issue, while Westview Press was already putting out the word that a 450-page book was being prepared and it was being listed as such on some sites (and still is). My book was clearly going to be much larger than that. Still, I was stunned in late 2003 when I finally added up each file, and discovered that somehow, in between work and watching my son, I had managed to produce something like 1,800 draft pages, and when it was completed would be over 2,000 draft pages.

But, 2004 was a very busy and tumultuous year at *The Dupuy Institute* where we ended up working six different contracts from a mix of customers from DOD, the Army, Boeing and the State of Pennsylvania. As I was the "Executive Director" and the senior full-time person with the company, the book had to be set aside while we hired and trained more people and made sure that the six different studies were completed on-time, on-schedule and hopefully of sufficient quality.

Towards the end of 2004, my work included doing an estimate of the situation in Iraq, where we made predictions based upon historical cases that estimated the duration and losses in a continue war in Iraq. Needless to say, this timely analysis took over all my working time in 2004 and 2005, along with the briefings, the follow-on work, and the controversy that entailed. As the war in Iraq exploded and worsened, our work expanded.

We eventually reached the point in 2008 where we had 10 people working on collecting and analyzing data on insurgencies for multiple customers.⁷ This was of course, work that was important and also paid. So, almost no further work was done on the Kursk book during that time. I would occasionally take a moment and work on part of a chapter, or get some additional material from friends, but other than bits and pieces, from 2004-2009, the Kursk book mostly sat fallow on a computer. Only in 2008 did I finally convert the files into Microsoft Word. So, perhaps the book could have been completed in 2004, but there was a war going on.

Finally towards the end of 2009, our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are winding down, the defense budgets are being cut, I am handing out pink slips, and now there is time to finish the book. Needless to say, Westview Press had understandingly lost interest and had also changed their business model. So, they cancelled my contract. I was now faced with marketing a manuscript of 2,000 draft pages. I was not sure who would publish such a book, but at this point, I was determined to publish it and finally had the time to complete it. *The Dupuy Institute* has a now inactive discussion forum on its website.⁸ One day, someone on the forum from Finland, who I did not really know, stated that some bookstore in Colorado was looking for a book to publish and would be interested in mine. He would talk to the bookstore owner. This odd contact eventually ended up with a signed contract with Aberdeen Books, a bookstore in Colorado that publishes one book every three or four years, all on World War II. In effect, an aficionado who does it for the love of the subject. As he was willing to publish the book I wrote, it did not take much deliberation to publish with him. The book was under contract by the middle of 2010 and the final manuscript was sent to the editors shortly thereafter.

The problem that lies with small publishers is their lack of resources. The editing process for the book took far longer than expected. Some of that was due to the nature of the material, where much of the book was developed from records translated from German and Russian, each by several different translators. Needless to say, there was little inconsistency. The sheer amount of time involved in editing 2,000 draft pages was staggering, and there were the usual interruptions from life that further slowed the process down. We also had to assemble a considerable collection of pictures, maps, charts, and other graphics that make up the book. And then there was the challenge of finding the printers for such a large book. The entire process took over four years, although most of that time it was not in my hands.

Finally, the book was sent to China in 2015 to be printed. I could claim that the book took 15 years to write, but at no point did I work on it five days a week for longer than a few weeks. I worked on it part time for four years (2000-2003) and then finished it up over a six month period of so in 2009 and 2010, and then edited it in bits and pieces

⁷ This work and the Iraq casualty estimate is described in my book *America's Modern Wars: Understanding Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam* (Casemate Publishers, Philadelphia & Oxford, 2015).

⁸ www.dupuyinstitute.org.

over the next couple of years. So, two or three years to write the largest history book ever? Perhaps it was more than that, but I never logged my time, so have no way of knowing.

So, is a 1,662 page book an exhaustive history of the battle? Far from it. The Battle of Kursk was the largest armor battle in history. In 1943, the Soviet Union ended up with a large bulge around the city of Kursk, some 90 miles by 120 miles. The Germans decided that summer to attack both the north and south sides of the bulge. After the German attack started the Soviet Union launched a massive counteroffensive in the north, and then later, another one in the south. The two German offensives lasted less than two weeks. The two Soviet counteroffensives lasted more like a month. The 1,662 pages were spent covering the German offensive in the south, not the north and covered neither of two Soviet counteroffensives. So massive were the campaigns and battles on the Eastern Front in World War II, that we could only cover less than a quarter of this one battle in this massive book.

Was it a mistake to write a book that large? No, in fact, it was liberating. I have now written, said and covered every aspect of that portion of the battle to the degree that I wanted to. If I had cut the book down to start with, then important and relevant material would have to have been left out. On the other hand, if I published the book I wrote, I could always write a shorter book later. I made sure my contract allowed for that. If I left something out in these rewrites, it was not an issue, as this unique data had already been published.

It is clear that I will never write a book of similar size again. Mainly because I no longer have the team of researchers, translators, and interviewers that gave me far more reach and the ability to conduct far more work than I could have done working alone. I was not a single author writing a book, I was a project manager with dozens of people supporting me. I hopefully listed them all in the acknowledgements.

In the end, I am glad I stuck to the original concept and published the book I wrote. Now we shall see if people actually read the book I wrote.

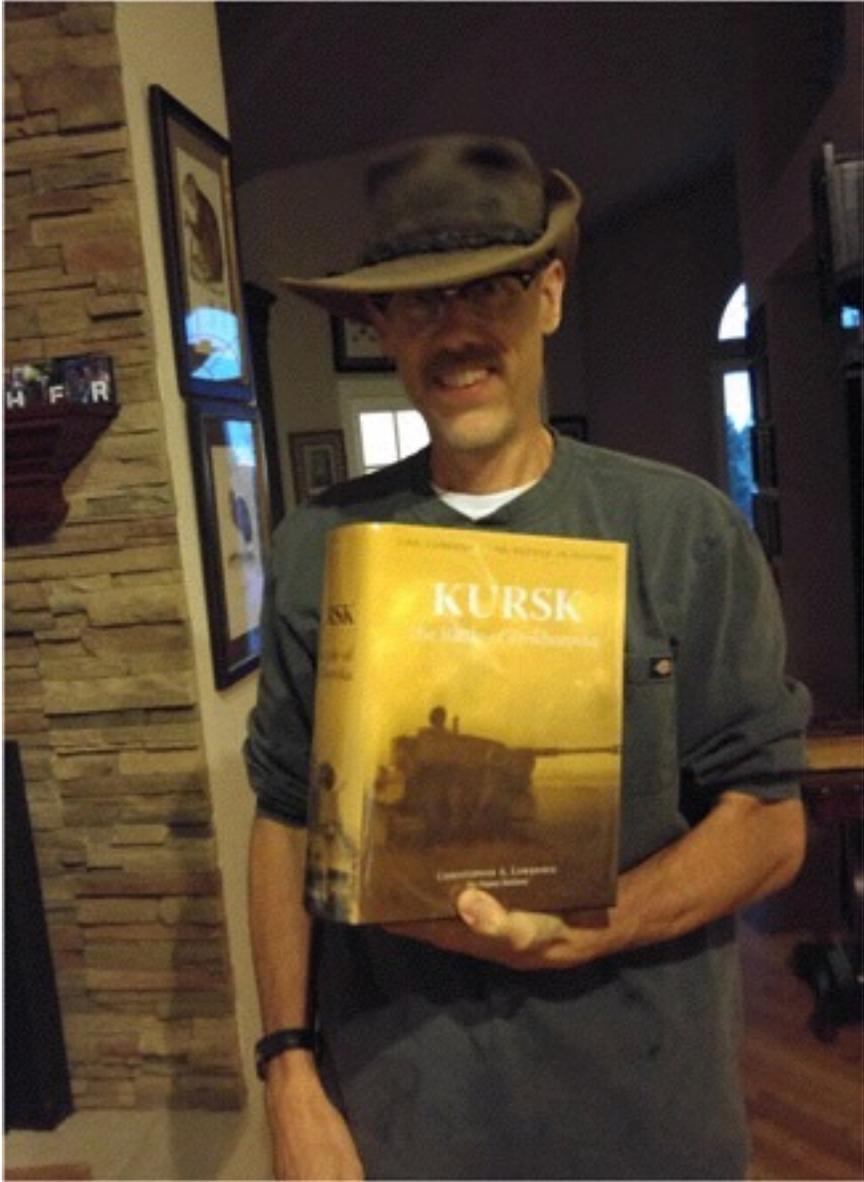
THE LARGEST TANK BATTLE IN HISTORY

KURSK

The Battle of Prokhorovka.



CHRISTOPHER A. LAWRENCE
The Dupuy Institute





DBASE

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*** KURSK DATABASE UNIT INVENTORY DATA EDIT SCREEN #1 ***

Unit Name: 6th PzD
 Date: 07/12/43 Nationality: G Page 2

ON-HAND EQUIPMENT TYPES

| | Amt | Dst | Dmg |
|----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|
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| 2 Pz III long | 11 | 0 | 0 |
| 3 Pz III 75mm | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 4 Pz III Flame | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 5 Pz III Command | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 6 Pz IV long | 4 | 0 | 2 |
| 7 Marder II | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 8 Marder III | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| 9 Marder II 76.2mm | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 10 Marder III 76.2mm | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| 11 Hummel | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| 12 Wespe | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 13 Pz III Command w 50mm 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 14 T-34 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 15 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 16 | 0 | 0 | 0 |