

Germany's Spanish Volunteers 1941-45
Osprey Men-at-Arms series No.103 (1980)
Text by John Scurr; colour plates by Richard Hook

Review by Rob Morgan

An interesting title, and an obvious direct follow-on from Osprey 74 on the Spanish Civil War, reviewed here previously. A good deal of the opening, the introduction, and the creation of the 'Blue Division' relates to the Civil War's end, and the Fascists' desire to hit back at the major supporters of the defeated Republic. The opening of Operation Barbarossa in June 1941 gave Franco his chance to provide a well-trained and experienced unit to fight alongside the *Wehrmacht* and its puppet states, but interestingly it was a single division in strength. Surprisingly so, as Scurr relates, and several contemporary Spanish sources agree 'the number of volunteers had been so far in excess of the 18,000 required that several divisions could have been formed.' It seems apparent that far from being a crusade, this was, in Franco's terms, merely a gesture internally, and to his Nazi allies.

After training and a lengthy trip into occupied Soviet territory, the division moved into the line on 11 October 1941, and was blooded at Possad, to the northwest of Novgorod. The book moves through a number of battles and encounters in the hard winter, many of them readily convertible into wargames scenarios. (Readers of the Society of Twentieth Century Wargamers *Journal* will recognise them. The Volkhov Pocket disaster, and the struggles at Lake Ilmen in 1942, the later battles at Poselok and at Krasny Bor, well known encounters, are all dealt with, from the Spanish point of view. Indeed, from this point of view the fighting in Russia, especially in winter was extremely hard, and though the Germans, says Scurr, regarded their Spanish allies as undisciplined, these were, almost to a man, soldiers who had fought and won a desperate Civil War a few years before. They could fight.

Spanish casualties were high, and for reasons which are still far from crystal clear, the decision was taken in October 1943 to repatriate the entire Blue Division to Spain, and the first draft crossed the frontier by the end of the month. It was replaced in Nazi service by a Volunteer Legion (some called it the Blue Legion, but with a strength of 1,000-1,500, it was far from that.

John Scurr's account of the activities of the Blue Legion is as short as was its existence. They were a force which lived almost entirely in retreat under relentless Soviet pressure and was back in Spain by April 1944. There was of course a Blue Squadron of fighter pilots which served alongside the army personnel, but these are dealt with in only a paragraph or two. Later titles award

them some place in history. There was one final small unit of Spanish volunteers who fought for the Reich, known as the *Unit Ezquerra* after its commander who obtained senior SS rank. It fought and fell in the ruins of Berlin.

The plates are of interest, in my opinion, largely to the Spanish Civil War enthusiast. The red beret of the Carlists, shown in Plates B and G, was never (or so it seems) worn in the front line; German military discipline demanded a very unified uniform for its combatant personnel, wherever they came from. The winter fighting shown in plate C illustrates almost standard German equipment and only the red-gold-red flashes worn as shields or as lozenges mark out the Spaniards from other *Wehrmacht* soldiers. The same applies to the grenadier of *Unit Ezquerra* in plate H; this is standard German very late-war equipment and uniform, with just a hint of decorations earned elsewhere.

What this means for the wargamer is that whatever his choice of scale and whatever stage of the war after the Spanish troops became involved, very little is needed to provide a unit of the Blue Division or its doomed successors. All you need is a touch of red and yellow paint here and there! I like the Peter Pig range for the late war, in 15mm, for cost and attractiveness, and ease of painting the little differences which make the force. However, for the *Unit Ezquerra* and the final fight for Berlin, then Mick Yarrow's rather interesting late-war Fall of Berlin series, with armed Gestapo, with auxiliaries and rag-tag infantry will give you a decent Spanish group to try to fight out of the ruins. Mind you, the Pyrenees are a long, a very long, way away, *Amigo*.

A readable title, and one offering a decent alternative for the table top. I can't ever understand the reason for the Spanish contingents being regarded as ill-disciplined. Maybe they didn't like the rations?

Men-at-Arms

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John Scarr - Illustrated by Richard J. Cook