

The Polish Army 1939-45
Osprey Men-at-Arms series No. 117 (1982)
Text by Steve Zaloga; illustrated by Richard Hook

Review by Rob Morgan

I expected much after this title was first published back in the early 1980s, but (and it seems odd), the Polish army remains very much neglected by wargames manufacturers, and is a force rarely seen on any table top.

This early Osprey would benefit from an update, I think, but is still a very useful title from which to start with any examination of the extensive Polish role in World War II. The Polish army, after all, along with elements of the navy and air force remained in action throughout the war. Zaloga reminds us that by the war's end, of the western allies, the Polish formed the fourth largest contingent after the USSR, USA and UK, and fought in almost every campaign of the war. In opening the standard format, 40-page Osprey title, the author examines the creation of the Polish army and its weapons and prospective enemies. In the 1930s, Poland occupied an unenviable position among European nations, little coastline and vast tracts of land attractive to mechanised warfare. There were little in the way of natural barriers, a few substantial rivers, and only the Tatra Mountain range to the south. The nation faced two significant enemies, the Nazis and their puppets on three sides and the Soviet Union on the fourth.

The day war broke out, September 1, 1939, saw the Polish army caught in the throes of mobilisation, and the small Polish navy en route for Britain. Poland's forces fought bravely, but their equipment, light tanks such as the 7TP and the little TKS tankettes were obsolete and fell easily to the Wehrmacht's heavy weapons. The Poles employed armoured trains, which frequently plugged gaps, but were themselves prone to dive bombing attacks. This first *Blitzkrieg* of the war wore down the Polish forces, and though attempts were made to avoid collapse, Warsaw fell on September 27. Ten days before that the Soviet armies crossed the border in the east, rapidly cutting off the escape route of many thousands of Polish troops in units which had been ordered to follow the government into Romanian territory to continue the war in exile. This was, in the last weeks, a war of remarkable courage, of small actions and savage counter attacks and of desperate rearguard encounters. The first of all Polish positions attacked, that of the Hel peninsula on the Baltic, held out until October 1, and on the day the Germans held their victory parade through Warsaw, fighting continued in the east of the country. Groups of Poles were still fighting until October 5, and some small units beyond that. Steve Zaloga's later Campaign title, 'Poland 1939,' No 107 in the series, deals more thoroughly with the complexities and the fascinating actions and battles of this opening war front, and should be read in conjunction with this title.

The Polish war effort continued in exile. A separate Polish army was formed in France around 70,000 strong; its Highland Brigade fought in Norway, and the Poles fought doggedly in the second *Blitzkrieg* in 1940, but the new Polish army was destroyed alongside their allies. The complexity of Poland's war from 1940 on is astonishing to read. Elements of the air force and of the army escaped to Britain and gained a reputation richly deserved, as sturdy combatants.

The Osprey goes on to describe the experiences of the captured Poles, the slaughter at Soviet hands of its officer corps, and the remarkable evacuation of a small element of their interned army to the Middle East under British control in 1942. The Poles fought at Tobruk, and at Gazala, and particularly in the Italian Campaign at Monte Cassino and beyond. The Polish 1st Armoured Division fought in the great tank battles in Normandy and closed the door on the Germans at Falaise, though with a casualty rate of over 20 percent. The Polish Parachute Brigade saw action at Arnhem. This story fills only the first half of Steve Zaloga's Osprey. The next chapter deals with the Underground Army, the resistance force which was even more complex in its formation and loyalties, and which kept up a vigorous conflict with the Germans until the Warsaw Rising of August 1944. This astonishing struggle is covered in a mere four pages, and the text should be read in conjunction with the Osprey Campaign title No. 205 by Robert Forczyk, 'Warsaw 1944,' which is a real tale to tell. As this Osprey states, when the Red Army entered Warsaw in January 1945, it was a 'ghost town' The Germans had flattened it.

The next section of the volume is a two-page description of a much overlooked force, the Polish People's Army (the LWP) which fought alongside the Red Army from 1943 onwards -- another remarkable force which deserves a title of its own. It was Soviet-equipped and trained, and holds one or two minor war records, as far as WWII is concerned: the last cavalry charge was at Schonfeld in March 1945, by the LWP's mounted arm, and it was this Polish army which entered Berlin during the last days of fighting.

The photographs in the Osprey title were interesting and rarely seen in many cases, when the book was first published, but since 1990 a substantial number of titles on Poland and the war have been published, and the role of Poland's forces is perhaps better understood now. The plates are delightful, and give enough detail for any wargamer to paint up a force. Poles, of course, can appear in British battledress, in early-war French uniforms and in Soviet, as well as the *mufti* of captured German gear which kitted out the Home Army in 1944. I very much like the figure at Plate C3, an officer of the Highland Rifles in one of the Allied armies' most distinctive uniforms. A pity it's almost impossible to convert.

In wargames terms, Poland is still a neglected table top force, but I don't know why that should be.

The Shermans of the 1st Armoured are more likely to be encountered in wargames than any other Polish unit, but this is an army worth exploring at any stage of the war. The most easily obtained 1939 Polish figures are in 20mm, and they are from HaT. But these are poor quality on the whole, and need to be carefully dealt with. Of the 90+ in the pack, the anti-tank riflemen, and BAR figures are useful, and there's a light mortar too, as well as four of the heavy 7.92mm mg's which were originally based on Brownings. Some of the infantry are useless. This company's apparently about to issue a Polish artillery pack with a 75mm gun. Hopefully, it will be a better moulding. The Frontline Company does make a dozen or so 1939 afv's in 20mm resin; the little TKS tankette in its several variants, and the 7TP's with one or two turrets, as well as the armoured cars and a few useful civilian items too.

Then of course, B and B Miniatures do have some Russian Civil War Poles which could be converted easily enough to add to this scale , but only in small numbers.

The Soviet-raised LWP is far better served by the Strelets company, their 20mm figures, largely in greatcoats and square topped 'rogatywka' field cap provide a decent force for the OstFront, and only need a few Red Army heavy weapons and maybe a few afvø. They used T34ø and SU 85ø as well as light tanks, all marked with the Polish Eagle in white, rather than the red star. This isnø a force to be sniffed at; they provided 10 percent of Zhukov and Konievø army in the drive on Berlin, and useful too for the Baltic coast. In wargames terms, this is by far the best option for a Polish unit. It will do for the first decade of the Cold War too.

The Home Army can be assembled in most scales from partisans and from converted Germans, another fairly easy force to make, but I suspect a very complicated one to field!

You could scavenge among the Peter Pig Russian Civil War Poles in 15mm for a scratch force for the latter encounters of September and October 1939, and, of course, they do have a 15mm armoured train option.

The Poles in French or British gear are of course little more than repaint jobs, with standard afvø, etc; but for a decent 1939 campaign itø only 6mm scale which comes up with enough to create the Polish army in numbers, as well as their opponents. Heroics and Ros have the old Skytrex figures, and most of the afvø and softskinned vehicles and artillery in metal.

