

Axis Forces in Yugoslavia 1941-45
Osprey Men-at-Arms series No. 282 (1995)
By N. Thomas & K. Mikulan; colour plates by Darko Pavelic

Review by Rob Morgan

If you want to understand the complexities of the Second World War as fought within and across and beyond the 1941 borders of the Yugoslav state, then begin with page 4 of this title. The map which shows the annexations, divisions and occupations of some quite ludicrously small territorial zones, all considered and offered by Hitler, will give a hint as to why this theatre was so involved, and ultimately, why the Axis was almost bound to fail! When Yugoslavia fell in April 1941, all of her enemies wanted a slice, and got it. A few troops loyal to the King escaped to Egypt, but the war effectively became a partisan war from the outset. The two partisan armies, one of these allegedly royalist, the Chetniks, dealt with and supported one or two of the invading armies, especially the Italians, and fought most of the others!

The second, larger and more effective, partisan army was that led by Tito, and his army fought the bloodiest battles of World War II, against the Germans, Italians, Croats, Hungarians, Bulgarians and the hated Chetniks. Ultimately, Tito won.

This was a war in which the Axis occupied the towns, coastal areas and patrolled, and from time to time actually controlled, the railways and roads. They organised massive offensives against Tito, sometimes managing to disperse the partisan forces, who took time to rebuild. The Italian surrender in 1943 netted a vast store of arms and equipment and weapons for the partisans, and from now on, although there were two more significant offensives, in one of which Tito narrowly escaped capture by Nazi paratroops, the tide of war had turned. By the late summer of 1944, the partisans and their former Bulgarian enemies, now their Bulgarian allies, moved into a more conventional but equally brutal form of war. Belgrade was quickly occupied, and the Germans fled from Greece and Albania and abandoned any hope of controlling Serbia, set up a defensive line in Bosnia, which was attacked by the partisans in March 1945. VE day, May 8, meant little in Yugoslavia, and with the British having closed the border with Austria, the Yugoslavs eliminated many thousands of Axis troops with no escape possible. It was by far the most complete victory imaginable; it could be called a Falaise of the Balkans.

A complex war, indeed!

The book moves to consider the German ground forces and briefly the sea and air forces involved in the three-and-a-half year conflict; and the Germans employed Dutch, Norwegian, Danish and *Jager, Panzer*, Mountain Corps, as well as SS and a host of quite motley infantry, *Festung* and cavalry units. The *Waffen SS*, especially the *Prinz Eugen* Division were notorious and were dealt with severely by the Yugoslavs at the war's end.

Italy's role as an occupation force was substantial, but without significant victories, being deployed as garrisons or convoy escorts rather than in the great anti-partisan sweeps. There were some Italian naval and air units present as well. The writers, incidentally, indicate that concentrated and in viable formations the Italians, were a match for the partisans, until the armistice of September 8, 1943 when 17 Italian divisions plus Blackshirt and other units, were stranded in Yugoslavia. One division, *Firenze*, deserted en masse, to the Albanians, and the *Taurinense* and the *Venezia* joined the Montenegrins. Other units deserted to the Croats, or fought the Germans, only to be summarily slaughtered. This had become an even more

complex war! Hungary, which played a very minor role, incidentally, isn't dealt with in the book.

Croatia, the Fascist puppet state which came into existence in 1941 and bled to death in 1945, had its own substantial army with a mountain division, and armoured troops. The national Order of Battle of the Croats is given, but Italy and Germany also organised and fielded Croat Legions! By this point, only page 15 in the text, the skills of the authors in describing and explaining the 'structures' of military forces with which they have to deal is worthy of much praise.

The next 'army within an army' dealt with is probably one of WWII's strangest. Around 76,000 strong by the end of the war, we're told, this ultra-extremist force, nominally Croat, consisted of an array of both elite and almost ad-hoc structures, of which the 'Black Legion' was and is the best known. The Croats had a small navy, and an air force too. Their array of police and auxiliary units seems remarkable even by *OstFront* standards.

That Serbia, the core of the partisans war, should have contributed manpower albeit on a relatively small scale to the Axis cause is often overlooked by writers, but there was a Serbian State Guard, and a Russian Defence Corps formed from the White *emigres* and exiles who had fled from Soviet power in 1921. Then the text goes on to consider some of the smaller armed units which existed on the fringes, including the 'Black Police' of the Banat, small groups but uniformed and recognised and which fought the partisans, as did the small army of Montenegro. In only seven paragraphs, the authors provide the wargamer with an astonishing array of rival groups -- some were Italian auxiliaries, some were Chetniks and others German-led.

Bulgaria, a substantial power in World War I, in 1941 fielded 10 infantry divisions, cavalry, armour and air, naval and auxiliary police units, and largely fought a limited anti-partisan war. It joined the Allies in September 1944 and fought against the Germans and her former partners. An intriguing army, and navy and air force, indeed.

The last of the combatant forces to be considered is Slovenia, originally divided between the two major Axis partners, but emerged as a small player in 1942, with the creation of such unusually named units as the 1,600+ strong 'Legion of Death,' as well as a rag-tag of detachments, with names like the 'Blue Guard' and 'White Guard.' After the Italian debacle, the Germans strengthened these units, but never to a degree where they posed a threat as potential deserters. Yet another phenomenon as a military unit was the 'Black Hand,' formed in early 1944 under direct Gestapo control.

This book has to be considered one of Osprey's best researched and presented titles. This was a war few in the Allied camp could truly understand, or often even influence. A similar statement could probably be made of the Nazis, Italians and Axis partners, Yugoslavia at war became a Pandora's box which, when opened, led to some astonishing alliances even if temporary, and some brutal and cruel encounters between forces of divisional size in some cases. This is a real wargamer's war, and a real wargamer's book.

The plates are delightful, but can only go so far in illustrating the combat units involved. Plates A, B and C of Italian, Croat and German troops are nothing special, but Plate D of Croat infantry and artillery provides some useful opportunities as does plate E with a Croatian naval figure. The Croat *Ustasha* units, including the Black Legion at plate F is valuable, as are the Plates G and H of the Bulgarians and Slovenes. It is, however essential, to read the captions of the black and white photographs within the text, as there's much greater detail provided there for painting, conversion and general issue of kit in fact, and for units barely described otherwise -- the Slovene Legion of Death's an excellent example.

There are also pages dealing with insignia, but in the case of the Croats and *Ustasha*, especially late war, these may not be critical!

10 out of 10.

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Wargames figures suitable for this amazing conflict are suggested, at least in 20mm in the notes for the earlier review of Osprey's *Partisan Warfare 1941-45* (Men-at-Arms No. 142), but a few extra details do crop up which I didn't include in that review.

There were numerous naval forces involved in coastal areas of this conflict, and Pegasus pack 72720, Russian naval infantry, can provide most of them; while Waterloo's set 010 *Mas* of Italian naval special forces post-1943 also has some potential. Incidentally, if you are the sort of person who has a pack of the old Airfix Arabs around, don't forget that the prone figure makes a brilliant sniper for Winter conditions in this little war, the kneeling figure might suit too, with a little trimming.

Almost all of the figures I've mentioned in these reviews are plastic, for several reasons, not least among them cost, but there's a range which provides a substantial number of troops, but being metal are obviously more expensive compared to my bargain basement suggestions! Ravenshorpe Miniatures, still around, have a large range of 25mm figures you can use. Their Hungarian Infantry figures are ideal for Bulgarians (SR-1-5), as are their Poles/Slovaks, (more Slovak than Pole, incidentally). The first bunch are in greatcoats, the second in tunics. Heads can be altered from Adrian helmets to side caps or *feldmutze*, depending on your force. They also have some decent Italian kit, as well as about 20 vehicles and guns, and I particularly like their small German range of late-war troops in the *Zeltbahn* smock/cape. They have sailor figures too, and a *universal* range which can turn into *Slovene Village Guards* or Serbian labour troops, or Bosnian Militia.

Worth thinking about.

