

Armies in the Balkans 1914-18

Osprey Men-at-Arms series No. 356 (2001)

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Review by Rob Morgan

A good volume this one, but destined almost certainly in the next three or four years to be superseded by perhaps three (or more!) titles dealing in greater depth with the armies considered here in brief. At least one more "Campaign" title too, I suspect!

Enjoyable though, and neatly written. It actually considers three campaigns, Serbia's catastrophe, the hard fought battles for Romania, and best known, the Salonika Campaign. Of course, of all the fronts and campaigns in World War I, the Balkans involved most nations, some nine armies. Only the Portuguese, Belgians and Americans were absent! Each of the combatants is considered, although in 48 pages it has to be a brief account in each case, and in many ways is simply a "taster," enough to arouse interest in a particular force. It succeeds.

The Bulgarians, for example, a very sizeable army of around 400,000 men in the service of the "Prussia of the Balkans" must as the centenary of WWI arrives be considered for an Osprey in its own right. The same applies to the forgotten Entente ally, Romania. There are also accounts, again brief, of the Serbian, Montenegrin and Albanian forces, all of which deserve a deeper recognition in years to come. The Ottomans, in many ways the "former colonial power," is dealt with in a mere dozen lines, but the Turks do have their own Osprey to laud their martial abilities, as do the Austro-Hungarians.

The British, Russians and French underpinned the campaign, especially at Salonika, though Russia did support Romania with several divisions. All are given, at the least, a mention in despatches, and for once the importance of operations afloat are recognized. The Danube gunboats and the several small flotillas active in the region are mentioned; worth a wargame, those monitors and gunboats (perhaps later, eh?).

I would have liked to see more information about the weaponry and equipment of these diverse and remarkable armed forces. There's a superb photograph of a Romanian gun crew and Vickers M1896 127mm howitzer, and another of a Montenegrin machine gun detachment with M1912 Maxims, and it came as no surprise that the Serbs, like the Americans, were sold the useless French M1915 Chauchat light machine gun -- probably the worst "automatic" (huh!) weapon of the 20th century.

But this Osprey, as a whole, is a start, literally, to developing an interest. The photographs are excellent, and the plates are very interesting, the information and uniform panels too. I liked the plates very much. There's a lot to think about: the ski companies (plate C2) and the Evzones of Greece (plate G2) and the French Colonial troops. I do recommend this book, as its contents are about to become a little more important in terms of wargaming interest than in the past, believe me.

As for figures, well, the Peter Pig 15mm range will provide many of the troops, British, Russian, and Central Powers. The Bulgarians can be converted quite easily in this scale -- from British infantry largely -- others are a little more difficult. Unfortunately, the lovely Greek manufactured Balkan Wars range in this scale which was formerly available from Mick

Yarrow is no longer available in the UK, and that would have extended the number of figures available for the Montenegrins, Albanians and Serbs particularly. Equipment is a problem too, though the Serbs were after their withdrawal to Corfu, almost entirely re-equipped from French and, to a lesser extent, British sources and stocks. The Romanians are a problem still. I've stuck to 15mm, simply because of the conversion needs. In 25mm, it's much harder to convert anything usefully.

