

Chinese Warlord Armies 1911-1930
Osprey Men-at-Arms series No. 463 (2010)
Text by Philip Jowett; colour plates by Stephen Walsh

Review by Rob Morgan

Described as 'one of the most exotic military environments of the twentieth century,' and correctly so, the massive jigsaw of states, powers, war-lordships and alliances which followed the demise of the Manchu Empire in 1911 is a field of opportunity which few military historians and far fewer wargamers have attempted to enter. With this title, and a decent map, you can!

These were wars in which the Chinese saying -- 'More Officers than Soldiers, More Soldiers than Guns, More Bandits than People' -- is aptly true. China from 1900 to 1950 was almost a continuous battlefield, one in which semi-Medieval remnants of forces, like the Boxers and small fiefdoms, gave way rapidly to 'westernised' armies, supported by mercenaries, and which used armoured trains, aircraft and artillery across huge tracts. Jowett suggests that between 1912 and 1933 there were no fewer than 700 separate conflicts in China's territory. By 1925, there were over a million and a half men under arms, making a vast war zone on land, in the air, and on the great rivers. The Japanese and White Russian exiles were involved too, and peripherally, the European Treaty troops played a minor role from time to time.

The book begins, as so often with the less well known Osprey subjects, with a chronology, which in this case is clear, helpful and easy to follow. Essential too! The Warlord armies incidentally, didn't all 'fade away' with the Japanese invasions and occupation from 1937 to 1945. Some of them, smaller armies, went on to serve the Japanese emperor and fight against Chiang Kai Shek's Nationalists and Mao's PLA.

The four main Warlord armies in existence are all dealt with briefly and effectively, well enough to be able to create a force from the information given. These four, dominant for short periods, existed only for a few years, before fragmenting and being replaced, or merging. Many other distinctive armies were known by the names of their commanding generals, 'The Model Governor,' 'Rotten-Pig' or 'Dog-Meat general' are typical examples. The last of these had an army of 60,000 men -- substantial numbers being Russians, well-trained, battle-hardened veterans of the Great War and Civil Wars, who would and could spear-head victories.

The National Revolutionary Army which thrived around Canton in the south-east and fought expeditionary raids and campaigns against the northern Warlords grew to 100,000 men, efficiently trained and with Soviet heavy weapons, field guns, mountain guns and mortars, as well as 300 Maxim machine guns and 24 DH-9 bomber aircraft.

The book moves on to deal with the foreign advisors and mercenary troops. There were White Russian Foreign Legions, 'White Guards,' and Japanese battalions active at several stages of these many wars. Though not mercenaries, the elite 'Big Sword' units of several armies, described as 'commandos' are worth noting, and fielding on the table top.

The section on arms and equipment is a tremendous opportunity to field WWI pieces of artillery, Austrian, Russian, British, German and French, a vast array of small arms (with

attendant ammunition supply problems) and machine guns of all descriptions, M1910 Maxims, 6mm US Colts, Madsen LMGs, Vickers hmg's and Japanese guns. Variants of the British 3in Stokes mortar and a range of old WWI heavy pieces abounded, but AFVs were few. One warlord had a small number of Renault FT-17s and a few Schneider heavies, as well as French half tracks with 37mm guns and some improvised armoured cars. The armoured trains of China, immensely valuable, are far too briefly considered. They deserve a title of their own! Chinese warlords also used gas as a weapon of war, but rarely, though there were warlord air forces, using DH9s, Morane-Saulnier monoplanes and some Soviet aircraft. These were flown by White Russians and Americans.

As for uniforms and distinctions, most of the Warlord armies fought in grey, not unlike the Confederate colour, though khaki prevailed in the south of China, and northern uniforms could be padded. Puttees and gym shoes were common. The headgear varied immensely. The peaked field cap was far from ubiquitous. There were fur hats, in the north, cotton Stetsons in the south and a range of peculiar hats -- some wore French WWI helmets or woollen pom-pom hats. Mercenaries kept some parts of their old kit, if possible.

The text ends with insignia, which was elaborate and frequently ignored (except by generals) and flags and banners, which are astonishing! Some are shown in the black and white photographs and these offer potential for a bright addition to a Chinese Warlord force on the table top. The illustrations are very good, and provide the basis for a range of units. Most are infantry, though a few cavalry are shown, and also some advisors. The arm bands and the headgear and distinctions make these armies. Though, do notice, that õgrey is not a single dull, drab colour. A really interesting scenario with more war game opportunities than seem possible at first.

10 out of 10!

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There is only one really sound option for war games purposes, and that is to use Irregular Miniatures 15mm FWTW range of figures. There are a dozen options, most with the peaked cap, and they include Big Sword men, cavalry and an HMG, mortar, field gun and howitzers with crews. Look at FWTC 7 by the way a rather õfurryõ Mongolian cavalryman, attractive and useful for WWII as a Manchukuo soldiers too. This range can be added to, by using some of the Peter Pig and Mick Yarrow WWI figures, especially those in heavier clothing for northern units, and adding some of the pack mules, horses and camels. (Bactrian two-humped camels were popular in the northern armies for transporting light artillery.) Peter Pig has a splendid range of heads, and you can swop his No.23 French WWI helmet, or 37 Sun Helmet, 30 German helmets and particularly 15, furry hats, and 27 Coolie hats for Irregulars.

AFVs from Peter Pig and Irregular, armoured train elements from the former. The rare aircraft from Tumbling Dice, of course, and ERM provide a few junks etc, if you want to go about the rivers.

An easy and relatively cheap, mainly infantry scenario. Highly recommended.

Men-at-Arms

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PUBLISHING

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