

## Hitler's Russian & Cossack Allies 1941-45

Osprey Men-at-Arms series No. 503 (2015)

By Nigel Thomas; illustrations by Johnny Shumate

### Review by Rob Morgan

I'd recommend reading this alongside some earlier *OstFront* titles, such as Nos. 131 and 142 on Eastern Front Allies and Partisan warfare, among, arguably, others. You'll notice that several of the photographs have appeared in previous Ospreys. The astonishing nature of war in the East is touched on by Thomas at the outset; he suggests there were no less than *nine* different categories of what he terms 'Soviet volunteers' serving the Wehrmacht and the German war effort -- this is probably too few, if the many Home Guard forces, police forces and other, often bizarre, auxiliary units are taken into account. Some served more than one master, as emerges in the text!

The standard volume is divided into three sections, each of which, as time passes, will be worthy of a title of its own. The first considered is the 'Eastern Troops' a term used to



describe the early security units recruited for anti-partisan work, as well as the *Ostbattalions* into which they were integrated after the capture of Vlasov in 1942, probably the Germans best piece of propaganda in the war against Stalin. The book lists the Russian Liberation Army (ROA) battalions, which Vlasov's huge force became in 1943, and it's staggering to recognise how many Soviet citizens were in arms against their state during the last three years of the war; they fought almost everywhere, France, Italy, Denmark, even in the Channel Islands.

The brief life of the KONR, the armed forces of the 'Russian People's Liberation Army' concocted by Himmler and Vlasov's ambition is examined, and so are the titles and distinctions and the uniform markings of these units. By the time of Vlasov's Prague declaration in November 1944, the end was

nigh, and all of these armies and smaller units were doomed. I suspect that many of the volunteers would be hard pressed to know exactly in which 'Russian' army they were serving! One KONR division, incidentally, fought vigorously and successfully against the Germans with the Czechs in Prague in early May 1945.

It was also interesting to discover the nature of the Eastern Air Force. Thomas calls it the 'Eastern *Luftwaffe*,' and the aircraft it flew. There was also an Eastern parachute battalion, the 9<sup>th</sup>, which saw active service in the infantry role in the last months of the war. This is a force which merits great investigation by historians, and I'd like to learn more of it.

The next section of the book deals with Independent Russian Volunteer Units. Interestingly, the divide and conquer rule always played a part in German strategic organisation and planning where the people of the Soviet lands were concerned, and it makes for great wargames units and uniform details, but for lousy war direction in the field! Take the RRNA, the Russian Nationalist People's Army, set up in March by a former anti-communist with 150 POWs, it grew to brigade strength, then vanished, disbanded under German suspicions after over 600 men deserted in February 1943! The SS, naturally, had their own private Russian army the *SS Verband Drushina*. Small in number, this bunch survived with substantial desertions (fairly rare events in the SS, as I recall) until the last half-strength battalion was disbanded in November that year.

The value in this Osprey is the fact that Nigel Thomas clarifies the often unbelievable structures which hampered the German war effort against the USSR and manages to identify and separate them and make them understood by his readers.

One of the most ridiculous military groups of the war was the RONA, the Russian People's Liberation Army. It began life as a small People's Police unit of 300 men at Lokot in Bryansk Oblast in Autumn 1941, created by the mayor, who died soon afterwards in an ambush. Led from Spring 1942 by one Kaminski, having been elected the new mayor, this private army grew to 10,000 strong with artillery and even armour, then spent much of the war committing atrocities in the East. Morale collapsed and suddenly in mid-1944 RONA found itself in the *Waffen SS* as a Sturm Brigade, and Kaminski became a high ranking SS officer. The Warsaw uprising led to some of the war's most astounding massacres by this bunch, and Kaminski as far as I am aware, remains the only SS commanding officer to be executed by the SS -- for war crimes!

The last force to be considered in this section of the book is the 1<sup>st</sup> Russian National Army, commanded by a man who began the war as Count Smyslovsky, and ended it as a major general who called himself Arthur Holmston. Its active service was very limited. Most of its members survived the war, and avoided repatriation to the gulags. These often chaotic military formations aside, the reason that most people will buy this title is the subject of the third section, the Russian Cossacks.

Never fully understood by most people, they were among the best of all units to serve in the Eastern war. Their active role began as mounted security troops, Hitler thought, well he would, that they were descendants of the Goths, and they acquired high status in the Nazi military structure. Thomas's description of these units as they developed and grew, and of their role in the war is sound. He provides in the space of a few short pages, sufficient uniform and kit information for any wargamer to create a range of Cossack units on the table top -- they took their families with them on the march to war, of course. His account does demand further reading, and his five-title reading list includes the best work on the subject De Lannoy's *Pannwitz's Cossacks*.

The author covers the main developments, including the creation of motorized units, artillery and the transfer of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cossack Division to the SS in August 1944. Competent text, detailed tables. I would very much have enjoyed learning more in these pages of the Independent Cossack Squadron named *Savoia* raised by the Italians of all people, in southern Russia in 1942, and which returned to Italy with its sponsors to fight to the war's end. A most unusual unit to create!

The plates are excellent, well produced, detailed and clear. Particularly useful is plate A1-3 for the earliest of these volunteers, and while many of the figures, such as C3, a Russian serving in Normandy, and D1 right at the war's end, are in standard German kit with just different insignia. Others, like E3 serving in the Caucasus, and Plate G1-3, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cossack Division in Croatia, are well worth the effort in converting figures or giving new paint jobs. Worth the price.

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As for wargames, well, In 20mm, for the odd RONA and ROA men, it's a mixture of available stuff, rather limited too, so go to 15mm. In 15mm, look no further than Peter Pig, in the WWII Russian range. Packs 179, 180 and 181 are Cossacks, vigorous figures and sturdy mounts; 218 is dismounted Cossacks; and at 220 there's a *Tchanka* mg cart, old, WWI, but suitable. The German cavalry has pack horses, set 524, and sets 198 and 525 will provide officers and German gear. Take a look too at packs 19 and 20 in the SCW range, since swapping heads is no trouble in this scale, Peter Pig does all the ones you'll need. Cossack heads, soft capes, helmets, etc. RONA and KONR men are just simple paint jobs, of course.