

BT Fast Tank

Osprey New Vanguard series No. 237 (2016)
By Steven J. Zaloga; illustrations by Henry Morshead
£10.99 / \$18.00

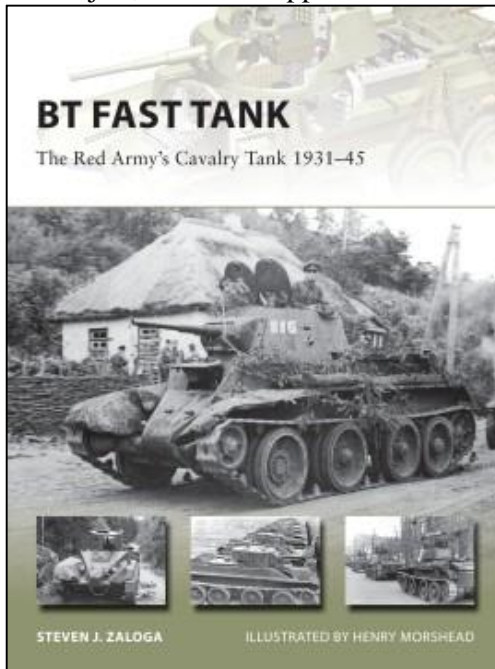
Review by Jonathan Aird

Contents:

Introduction
American Origins
The BT-5 Tank
The BT-7 Tank
The PT-1 Amphibious Tank
BT Artillery Tanks
Flamethrower Tanks
Flying Tanks
Combat Use

Comments:

Steven Zaloga has been writing about military topics, and specifically about armoured military vehicles, for -- quite literally -- as long as I can remember, and he has a quite vast knowledge of the subject, honed in support of his well-known interest in vehicle modelling. So his name on



the cover of this new release from Osprey is a seal of quality. The BT tank series has rather been overlooked in the literature until now ó at least in the English speaking world ó as the author notes it is mostly known as having contributed to the design of the more famous T-34, and was, whilst in front-line service, rather over shadowed by the contemporary T-26 tank series. This book serves to address this overlooking of an important tank design ó of all BT series types over 8,000 were produced ó by providing the story of the earliest shaky development right up to the last uses of a by-then obsolete vehicle.

The early chapters cover the origin of the series in the Soviet Union's desire to develop a modern tank fleet, driven partly by a fear of neighbouring Poland gaining an advantage through support from the UK and France. However, to advance the Soviet technological capability as fast as possible, they

looked to the USA for design assistance ó and most importantly to the designs of J. Walter Christie. There is a subtle irony that, thanks to Christie, the USA would provide the push to tank development in the USSR through the somewhat underhand provision of two tractor-tractors delivered covertly in early 1931. These somewhat immature Christie designs were further developed in the USSR ó and the story becomes a tale of design team work-arounds to create a suitable turret and gun combination ó with a German gun design being the favoured solution, but limited availability leading to older guns being recycled to make the first of very many

minor differences in the initial BT-2 design. The next major design changes came in with the BT-5; this would have a new 45mm gun and several versions also had new engine designs. Minutiae of turret differences and radio availability are well captured, further showing how the basic tank designation could vary from vehicle to vehicle quite significantly. As the development continued into the ultimate evolution of the design – the BT-7 – the story also becomes one of design team rivalries and the rewards and perils possible under the Soviet production system, with major players in the engineering bureaux responsible for the BT-7 finding that they could go from literal ‘heroes’ to demonised betrayers of the system in a matter of months.

Alongside the development story, Stephen Zaloga also provides a wealth of useful wargaming data – speeds, armour thickness, gun penetration capability, proportion of radio equipped vehicles – on the various variants of the BT Fast Tank which is accompanied by a generous selection of photographs and line drawings illustrating some of the differences to be found between tanks nominally of the same design standard. For example, a number of improvements in the engine and exhaust systems developed for the BT-5 would find their way onto BT-2s which had been reworked to extend their life and solve residual technical issues in the design.

There are also, naturally, a number of colour plates – most of these represent different camouflage schemes used on the BT tank over the years and in different operational arenas. The main cutaway drawing is of the BT-7, and well illustrates the cramped conditions in the vehicle. There are also two full-page ‘in-action’ colour plates – one of the up-gunned BT-7A artillery tank in Finland in 1940, and the other of a BT-7 in the Ukraine in June 1941. These two plates use computer-generated imagery rather than the usual artist’s paintings and whilst the tanks are well reproduced – if a little lifeless without their crew clutter and general scuffing up and weathering – the same cannot be said for the backgrounds which the views of the tanks sit rather uncomfortably on. It’s a small point, but I hope that Osprey aren’t going to go too far down this route for picture generation without doing a lot more work on making the backgrounds blend in with the vehicles.

Rounding out the history of the BT Fast Tank are two chapters, one on experimental variants – from the perhaps expected flame thrower vehicles and bridge laying engineering tanks to the rather more exotic amphibious and ‘flying’ concepts. The other last strand of the book is an overview of combat use, and this really is a sad story of misuse of the new vehicles in the Spanish Civil War to the desperate end of the majority of the now rather obsolete and, due to earlier operations in Finland and Poland, mechanically worn out BTs during the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Captured vehicles, it is noted, were little used by the Third Reich – with just a few making their way to third-line activity in policing and airfield defence roles.

Overall this is a very good Osprey – full of detail and lavishly illustrated but also having a good story to tell about a vehicle that went through incredibly rapid evolutions through the 1930s, only to find itself obsolete before the end of the decade. Under-armed and under-armoured, subject to mechanical failures and poorly used when it was sent to war, the BT series was nonetheless a vital link in the development of tank technology in the USSR. The evolutionary route to the T-34 is quite clear in some of the later experimental armour variants developed but not put into production. Anyone interested in tank warfare – and in particular that between the wars era of rapid design changes and competing ideas on what the tank was for – will find this a valuable addition to their library.