

German Light Cruisers 1939-45
Osprey New Vanguard series No. 84 (2003)
Text by Gordon Williamson; illustrations by Ian Palmer

Review by Rob Morgan

Well? Hm? This Osprey's an attractive and well-assembled volume about a group of German warships, six in all, which achieved absolutely nothing during the course of World War II. Of the six ships Williamson considers, *Emden*, built in 1925, and the oldest of the *Kriegsmarine*'s light cruisers, carried out a few minelaying exercises off the German coast, and some bombardments in the Baltic after the start of Operation Barbarossa, but thereafter was used for training. She only became active once more, and for a short time in the rout along the Baltic coast in early 1945. She was scuttled to avoid capture.



The Germans did build a class of three light cruisers. Intended for reconnaissance and scouting duties, they were of short range and limited endurance. *Konigsberg*, *Koln* and *Karlsruhe* were ships which had short and useless, rather than uneventful careers. *Konigsberg* patrolled in Spanish waters during the Civil War 1936-39, but for her WWII was brief, laying minefields at first. She was damaged by Norwegian batteries in April 1940, and sunk a day later by RAF dive bombers.

The second of these ~~Kø~~cruisers, *Karlsruhe* also served off Spain, and was torpedoed and sunk off Norway by a British submarine a day before her sister ship's loss.

Koln, like her two sisters, served in the Spanish Civil War, but was a little luckier and more active in WWII. She went on a raiding mission with the *Gneisenau* that was without any success, and the cruiser is perhaps best remembered as a footnote in naval history as the first warship to be involved in flying a helicopter. In the attack on the USSR, *Koln* was active in shore bombardment along the Baltic shores, and spent the rest of the war inactive and suffered bomb damage in raids. Her last warlike act was as a static gun battery against the approaching enemy.

The other two light cruisers, *Leipzig* and *Nurnberg* were attractive warships, single funnelled, and were both employed in the opening days of WWII in attempting to corner and destroy the small Polish navy as it left the Baltic for Britain, but also without success. Both were torpedoed in 1939 while on escort duties by *HMS Salmon*, a British submarine, both requiring significant repairs. *Leipzig*, along with her sister, carried out shore bombardment, not a task generally committed to the light cruiser, against the Red Army, and acted as a training ship and occasionally as an escort to troop convoys. In 1944 she was rammed by the cruiser *Prinz Eugen* and suffered serious damage, but was kept afloat, being capable of only 6 knots. Her last acts of

war were to embark Germans fleeing the approaching Soviet armies, and provide fire support for the retreating *Wehrmacht*. *Leipzig* was scuttled in 1946. *Nurnberg* was, after her repairs in 1940, kept in reserve for the planned invasion of Britain. With that prospect ended, she became another training vessel, only emerging from that role for the mandatory shore bombardment of Soviet forces in Operation Barbarossa. She did revert to convoy escort work in 1944, as the Reich began to wither away.

Nurnberg was laid up due to fuel shortages at Copenhagen in the final days of the war, and was involved in a brisk action on May 5th 1945, when her crew managed to beat off an attack by Danish resistance fighters attempting to capture the warship -- an unusual event in WWII! She survived the war to be handed over to the Soviet navy, where she was commissioned as a training ship, a role the old cruiser was familiar with. She wasn't scrapped until 1960.

Gordon Williamson tells the tales of these six unlucky vessels well, and this is a sound book, but of course for the wargamer the concept of a German light cruiser in World War II is far different from the fascinating tales of their forebears, with the same names, in World War I.

The illustrations and photographs are good, and his consideration of the firepower, fire control and radar of the ships is interesting. They were not good seakeeping ships, and were indeed, as the author states, "less than impressive" in action. Ian Palmer's plates, however, are very valuable for colour schemes, camouflage and detail, and the cutaway drawing of *Nurnberg* adds something useful to a good text.

As for wargaming, well, there's some use in a "Run to the West" 1945 Baltic game, and though I've not seen one played, there's some potential. Or simple convoy escort duties obviously. The *Kriegsmarine's* role in Operation *Weserübung*, the invasion of Norway in 1940 has a good deal to offer as a naval or a combined ops wargame, and frankly when I've encountered it on the table top the German navy's generally not as unlucky as it was in reality!

Wargames models of all of the WWII German fleet, heavy units, cruisers, destroyers and U-Boats are available in 1/3000th scale from Navwar, Skytrex, and Mick Yarrow. It doesn't cost a lot to create a German fleet, it's just putting them all together and using them effectively which seemed to cause their own admirals such difficulty!

If you want to add a light cruiser to your 1/1200th Airfix *Bismarck* and *Prinz Eugen*, and Revell *Scharnhorst* then, unless you want to turn to one of the immensely expensive manufacturers, like Mercator, it's Mick Yarrow's 1/1200th ex-Trafalgar metal model list for you. Only one of the WWII German light cruisers appears, and that's *Koln*, number 1345 at (as I write) £6.50. This model will give you all three of the K Class, and as two were lost early on in 1940, the basic model with its original anti-aircraft armament will suit, and they were near identical warships. In fact *Koln*, by 1943, had received only some single barrelled 20mm flak guns forward, and some minor hull and mast work. The interesting feature from a wargame point of view is the 1941-42 helicopter platform on *Koln's* Bruno turret, the upper turret aft (German light cruiser turrets were from the bow aft, named Anton, Bruno and Caesar). A simple oblong of thin card will do for this, not reaching as far as the gun muzzles. The old Trafalgar models, incidentally, can always do with a little extra detailing to bring them up to match their bigger compatriots.

A useful Osprey on a less than useful group of ships.