

Poles Apart.

Building and gaming a 1939 Polish Force

The seed is planted

As a callow (spotty) youth I pursued a career in the fickle world of music. I have lasting memories of a somewhat incongruous establishment amidst that endless stream of pubs and down at heel social clubs of the early 80's in which I practiced my craft - the Polish ex Servicemen's at the west end of Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow, Scotland. Mainly frequented by folk of pensionable age, it was in many ways like any other gig during which a fine rock n' roll band (us) had to endure the indignities of playing The Slosh, The Alley Cat and 'that bloody song' by Sydney Devine simply to turn a quid. At the end of the evening however, everyone stood up and sang the Polish national anthem with a passion which I confess intrigued and impressed me. It was my first experience of the Poles and it started a fascination which has gone the distance.

A one minute primer on the Polish military tradition

They receive a curious international press. Witness their portrayal in such movies as *The Battle of Britain*; excitable, crazy, somewhat daredevil and Barry Foster's nemesis. This was reinforced via the 1970's BBC TV series *Colditz* where once more we see them offered to us as perennially jovial and fearless but slightly loony. They appeared as Hollywood's pantomime villains in that highly accurate renaissance historical epic *Taras Bulba*. Western popular media and to an extent more serious literature, is guilty of creating and reinforcing many clichés and sadly I believe the Poles to be a much misrepresented nation generally but particularly in martial terms due to these activities.

Their role in the Second World War is often dismissed chiefly because the campaign in Poland lasted only a month. The surviving Polish troops were dispersed into other armies in which their traditions, tactics, élan and identity were diluted, ignored or subverted. The 'peace dividend' saw them dealt with most shabbily for which shamefully, the UK must shoulder much of the responsibility.

One only has to look to their excellent showing against Gustavus' Swedes in the early 17th century, the relief of Vienna in the late 17th century, Napoleon's love of Polish troops, their striking victory over the Bolsheviks in 1921, Monte Cassino, Mont Ormel or Sandomierz in WW2 to gain a rather more balanced picture of one of Europe's finest military traditions. The Poles are bold and brave soldiers with a proud history. Their country's position straddles routes east and west, north and south. Surrounded by some of Europe's most enduringly belligerent nations they have by necessity become familiar with the ways of war.

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Poles against the Wehrmacht September 1939

Clichéd images of lancers spliced with footage of panzers rolling across the Silesian Plain, have cultivated an image of lambs to the slaughter in 1939. Faced with odds greater than 2:1 in manpower, 4:1 in artillery, 8:1 in armour and 3:1 in aircraft, the Polish armed forces were still able to inflict heavy losses on the Wehrmacht. They acquitted themselves extremely well in specific actions if not in the grand tactical sense but then again, who did between 1939 and 1941?

The Luftwaffe lost more planes than it destroyed. 674 Panzers were knocked out (greater than the entire tank strength of the Polish Army) along with thousands of other vehicles and over 40,000 German personnel were killed or wounded. Of course Poland was ravaged and subjected to ethnic cleansing of biblical proportion but the defeat must be put in perspective. Sandwiched between Europe's two most aggressive dictatorships with no natural defensible obstacles and hamstrung by political pressure from London and Paris the odds were not good.

In relative terms this performance compares very favourably with that of the considerably more numerous and well equipped Western powers who were to face the Germans nine months later. The 'greatest' army in Europe, together with traditionally the 'most professional' army in the world,

numerically superior and with many defensible natural barriers, held out for about six weeks against the Wehrmacht. It must also be remembered that these two armies; French and British had the benefit of watching (from a distance) the birth of Blitzkrieg and all the lessons it brought yet still failed to stop the Grey Killing Machine. No one in 1939 could have imagined what combined ground and air ops could achieve yet the Poles punched well above their weight teaching the Germans many hard lessons before the end. For me, they are a highly worthy subject for a wargaming force.

The shape of the army in 1939

The Polish Army of 1939 is an interesting subject for wargaming. It has more than an echo of days gone by but at the same time, clear signs of its all too late awakening. The army relied predominantly on infantry who by the standards of the time were compatible in equipment terms and training with a large number of their contemporaries. The main weakness lay in battalion support weapons and artillery. Cavalry as the senior arm were well represented and kitted rather like light infantry that being the role they were trained to perform. The artillery was under equipped and perhaps the weakest link in the battlefield structure not simply due to the guns available but also to the fire control methodology. Contrary to some views, Poland did have an armoured presence but it was dwarfed in quantity by its neighbours Germany and Russia. Excluding the TK3 tankettes, the quality of their armour was reasonable to good in relative terms. Their performance in action substantiates this.

It is an army neglected by wargamers for a variety of reasons; Firstly the 1939 campaign is I suspect, seen as too short and too one sided. The Poles had little in the way of exciting or exotic vehicles and until relatively recently, a lack of available information on certain aspects of organisation, equipment and performance have not assisted popularity. The net result of this is limited choice for the wargamer although there are some nice figures in 28mm from SHQ which have been around for a while. I was delighted when GHQ brought out 1/285th Poles. I gamed with them against the Germans and they did rather well. Encouraged, I sought out their big brothers in 28mm but alas could find only a token few (now discontinued) by Alpha Miniatures of New Zealand. Undeterred I thought, I'll convert!

As my 'Polish project' had very finite scope I felt that the considerable conversion work could be justified. I intended to produce a force of roughly regimental size although it would effectively be a mix of all arms. I wanted infantry, cavalry (naturally), some field artillery, anti tank guns and a token armour representation. Whatever I ended up with I knew it would be a less than perfect compromise but certainly worth a go.

28mm: Converting available commercial figure ranges into Poles

The Cavalry

Having done fairly detailed sampling of available 28mm products I came up with several options. For the mounted cavalry I choose to use Copplestone's Back of Beyond Bolsheviks as my raw material. The single biggest problem is one I actually chose to ignore, that of the greatcoats. The Poles used a single breasted ankle length greatcoat whilst the Bolshevik figures have a double breasted. As long as this doesn't give you sleepless nights or cause spot checks by your local chapter of the Wargames Fashion Police then we're alright. The equipment is passable at a pinch so the main work for me was from the neck up. Unsuitable heads were chopped and replaced by Crusader Miniatures Early War French. The Adrian helmet was still in use by the Polish cavalry and some reserve infantry units at that time. For a little variety I spared the Bolsheviks with caps from the scalpel and decided to convert these to the square topped 'rogatywka' field cap. This was relatively easily achieved by filing the top flat, cutting a suitable shape from 20 thou plasticard which was glued to the top in the diamond position ('point' with the direction the figure's head is facing). The join line was concealed with milliput. I drilled out some sword hands and replaced these with lances. Open handed figures also took lances. Yup, I know, lances were not taken into action by the lancer regiments but I wanted them. Call it a nod to the cliché. These

figures are big relative to other 28mm ranges with the horses being particularly impressive. When put beside the Foundry German cavalry of the same period the latter look like midgets riding on donkeys. That's probably worth a +1 on Polish morale in the next game for sure.

For the dismounted cavalry I turned to the Foundry WW2 German infantry. The heads have to go and are again replaced with the Adrian French helmets, bare heads or even field caps like those worn by both British and German infantry. Another alternative is to use some of the Bolshevik heads and build up some more rogatywka. These jackbooted infantry substitute well for the booted Polish troopers. Polish infantry and cavalry equipment was modelled on the German pattern but in brown leather so a nice paint job can see the dismounted troopers using German equipment including the metal gasmask canister which was also widely employed. Cavalry were supported by Tczanka which often looked like wagons, carriages, or open topped horse drawn vehicles crudely converted to carry heavy calibre machine guns.

I wanted to make at least one Tczanka to support my mounted cavalry. Tczanka is originally a concept from the Bolshevik Revolution through which mobile fire support (usually machine guns) is provided for cavalry. The guns were often mounted on carriages or wagons drawn by horse teams (sometimes a four horse team in parallel as seen on large chariots). As the basis I used the Dixon's Wild West covered wagon and scratch built a firing deck on the back together with a raised seat for the driver. This was relatively straightforward. For the machine gun I used a British Tripod mounted Vickers as it has an appearance similar to many continentally manufactured weapons. You could legitimately use an American BAR (RKM wz 28 was the local version built under license in Poland and used to support the infantry), a French Hotchkiss, a captured Bolshevik Maxim or even pre MG34/42 German heavy automatic weapons. The crew were converted German heavy weapons crew from Foundry with Adrian helmets and the driver was a Black Tree Design German motorcycle rider with a new head and repositioned arms. My final touch was an identification pennon showing the company and platoon number. This is highly suspect but was the closest I could get to satisfying my flag fetish. To top the job off I made traces and reins for the horses from thinly cut lengths of thick paper appropriately painted.

The Infantry

The infantry were always going to be a bit problematic. The main challenges lie in the headgear and the lower legs. As previously mentioned the infantry's equipment was in the German style and thus presented little problem. The bodies were those of Crusader Miniatures and Foundry Germans. The cut of the jacket was also very similar and the fall down collar allows you to paint the distinctive zigzag pattern patches of the Polish forces. The army introduced a new pattern helmet in the late thirties whose shape resembled both the post 1941 Russian and American helmets although these were not exact duplicates. I chose to use Russian heads from Black Tree Design figures as the basis for my conversions and simply did the swap. The footwear was a bit of a fudge. The Poles wore long puttees in the French style until shortly before the war when some units swapped to ankle puttees. Of course the Germans wore long boots. I scored a line above the ankle and painted in an impression of gaiters whilst filing away the top of the jackboot and blending this area back into the trousers. This of course is not perfect but I did not want to start in with the milliput reconstructing 100 lower legs! Another alternative is to use French early war figures and swap over Russian heads. The back pack arrangement and webbing may then look a little too French for some.

The infantry could also be given field caps if you wish. On the front of some of the helmets I painted an impression of the Polish Eagle.

Uniform colours for WW2 units in any army are another area of huge debate. I am of course referring to the wide variety of interpretations within the same army not different armies. What I find particularly frustrating is the spectrum of shades offered in illustrations and photographs. Much of this is probably a result of inconsistent printing and colour setting, artistic interpretation and even that overly vivid colour characteristic of WW2 vintage photographs. Combine this with a multitude of garment manufacturers mass producing clothing under war conditions and the reason for actual variation becomes even clearer.

Hobby paint manufacturers add to the confusion and when those manufacturer's are foreign (such as my preferred choice; Vallejo) their translation can be misleading. For example, the use of the word 'uniform' on their pots does not refer to clothing uniforms but rather to the English use of the word in the context of 'standard' or 'universal'. This was an extremely convoluted way of saying I had trouble deciding exactly what colour to paint my Poles. First tries were distinctly brown in hue. When I did a different unit of infantry the look moved to a most definite green. Developing my preferences I have finally decided on a base coat of Vallejo English Uniform mixed with black, highlighted up in English uniform straight from the pot and finally highlighted in Vallejo Japanese Uniform which is in fact a very appealing light Olive colour. This combination of colours I have applied to my cavalry both mounted and dismounted.

From my research I have found references to some reserve infantry units still being dressed in the French fashion with Adrian helmets and also for some reserve units wearing the German 1916 pattern steel helmet. Renegade Miniatures WWI German stormtrooper heads could be used on your infantry in that case. This legitimized (in my mind) the use of Crusader early war French figures (unaltered) painted as a reserve battalion to support my cavalry.

I started writing this article in late 2004 and being a little tardy getting it to press events to a certain extent have overtaken me. BAM have now begun the release of an excellent range of 1939 vintage Poles. I have some of the infantry and am particularly impressed by them. In design terms they are very reminiscent of the Perry's Early WW2 Germans which Foundry released some years ago. I didn't buy the cavalry because they would not fit with my Copplestone conversions which would appear to be suffering from gigantism if directly compared. This is however good news and will make the Poles far more attractive to those who have no inclination for the conversion torture. I still think it worthwhile retaining the conversion ideas in this article as they offer alternatives and of course the equipment suggestions remain totally relevant. When painting my BAM infantry I opted for yet another colour combination in my Grail type quest for the perfect look. This time the uniform was given an Olive drab base coat, English Uniform mid tone shade and highlighted with a mix of white and Knaki (yes that is Knaki not Khaki) grey from Vallejo. I suspect it is in fact a typo on their label but curiously they also do another shade called Khaki Grey!.. take it up with them.

The artillery and anti tank guns

A good source of Polish guns is the Battle Honours 28mm WW2 range. The French 75mm field gun was used by the Poles. The Bofors 37mm AT gun (much feared by the panzers) was also used by the Finns. Both of these pieces are available through Battle Honours. For crew I suggest the conversion options already highlighted under the cavalry and infantry sections above although the soft hatted Finnish crewman(summer uniform) can be used as Polish artillerymen for the 75's whilst the French crew from the 75's can be used as cavalry AT troop gunners for the AT guns! (swap-fest!). Transport can be literally any available truck manufacturer. Russian Gaz or Zis, German Opels or even French vehicles could be used. Another source could be the Sloppy Jalopy range. For a force of the size that I planned to construct the need for large numbers of vehicles did not really arise.

The armour

Initially my token Polish armour was also a bit of a cop out although historically accurate. The main bulk of their meagre battle tank strength was built around the 7TP-J (a derivative of the Vickers light tank). I had no wish to scratch build AFVs, that's way out of my league. The Poles did however order a limited number of foreign tanks including some French R-35s. These are available from Solido/Verem albeit in French colours. A quick paint job later they passed for the Polish versions. My only reason for including them was because I wanted to repaint the existing Solido tanks that I had and the Polish three tone colour schemes are quite striking. Since the release of the BAM range I have added six TK tankettes which in 28mm scale are about the same size as a 15mm Tiger tank!! The BAM Team have informed me that it is their intention to

release a 7TP or Vickers, an armoured car and various other figures such as dismounted cavalry and weapons crews. That will be very exciting if the calibre of present offerings is maintained.

Yet another scale

My continuing love affair with the Poles has embarked on a new chapter when on attending Historicon 2005 I discovered True North's 15mm range. This is very impressive with no need for conversions of any sort. 15mm was a WW2 scale I would have totally ignored if it hadn't been for the emergence of Battlefront's Flames of War products. I now possess masses of the stuff and the True North miniatures fill an early war gap that is right in my period of interest. The result has been the creation of a 15mm force on the FoW model for which I intend to do an army list very shortly. I thoroughly recommend these to anyone interested in early war forces. They also do Belgians, Dutch, Rumanians and Hungarians all well worthy of a look.

Gaming with the Poles.

My experiences are as yet a trifle limited but my Poles have put up a splendid showing, encouraging enough in fact for me to consider expanding considerably.

As far as scenarios are concerned there are myriad opportunities to get them into action against the Germans where they will stand far more than a sportsman's chance of victory. Defensive positions anchored on light artillery and anti tank guns supported by infantry and backed by off table heavy howitzers will be very hard to take. A Mobile force of cavalry (used as mounted infantry) supported by light field guns, anti tank guns and tankettes will cause the Panzer MkIs and IIs a helluva headache as they did at Bzura River. Urban scenarios with light field guns and AT guns positioned in defence at street corners will also give the Germans something to think about as happened during the first abortive attempt to take Warsaw on September 7th 1939 by 4th Panzer Division. With realistically set objectives I think they can match a German force pretty well until their guns are silenced. You could of course opt for a bit of Historo-fantasy and mount a full blown cavalry charge against a German column or infantry unit. I came across a fascinating article when surfing for data on the Poles written by a recently deceased Emeritus Professor of History who claimed to have partaken in the last brigade size cavalry charge in history. Allegedly it involved three full regiments and took place on September 9th. A reference can be found in the Warchest – Archive section of my website www.leagueofaugsborg.com.

A great little story..

At Partizan in 2004 I ran a game representing the Sandomierz bridgehead fighting on the Eastern Front in the late summer of 1944. The Polish 1st Armoured Brigade of the 1st Polish Army was heavily engaged against elite Panzer (19th Panzer Division and Hermann Göring Panzer Division) forces on the banks of the Vistula River. A member of the public got really excited when he saw the game and told us his uncle was a T34 crewman in the 1st Armoured during that battle. He even went back out to his car to bring in the uncle's wartime rogatywka which for some reason he had with him. He told us a wonderful story about these tank crews lashing huge white painted Polish eagles to the glacis plates of their T34s as they rode into battle. When told by their Soviet overlords that this was not permitted and would make them easy targets they insisted that they be allowed to do it as they wanted the Germans to know exactly who they were fighting. Maybe the producers of Colditz got it right after all.

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GHQ MicroArmor, The Game, Hernandez: GHQ (army lists)
<http://home.golden.net/~medals/historia.html>- Links to Polish Military History
www.leagueofaugsburg.com
<http://derela.republika.pl/armcarpl.htm>