

The 'Grossdeutschland' Division in World War II

The German Army's premier combat unit



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Elite • 255

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ORIGINS

The origins of Panzergrenadier-Division ‘Großdeutschland’ (GD) are to be found in the Wachregiment Berlin, established in early 1921 but quickly disbanded. While Wachregiment Berlin’s primary functions were parades and ceremonial guards, it maintained the ability, and some would argue projected the threat to practise violence on behalf of the state. Soon thereafter, the Kommando der Wachtruppe was established, and in this organization, the nature of the future GD can be discerned. The *Kommando* was staffed by soldiers from all over Germany, usually for a period of three months, and clearly had a mostly ceremonial intent; *Großdeutschland* (‘greater Germany’) thus provided the nexus for the future division. The unit was an enjoyable temporary post for many soldiers. German units were regional, and usually quite local, and the camaraderie provided by soldiers from other areas who often had different accents, food, outlooks and regional quirks and philosophies was welcomed.

Beginning in 1934, the Nazis fundamentally transformed Germany. The Wehrmacht began to rearm rapidly. In 1934, the Kommando der Wachtruppe was redesignated Wachtruppe Berlin, and in June 1937 as Wachregiment Berlin. The unit was still largely ceremonial in nature and paraded not only for the public, but for a variety of dignitaries and diplomats whom the Nazi elite were eager to impress or intimidate through overt demonstrations



Amid a group of senior officers, Generalleutnant Wilhelm Heye of the Reichswehr and Argentine General Severo Toranzo salute the Kommando der Wachtruppe, August 1929. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-08315/CC-BY-SA 3.0 de)



A *Schütze* wears the regiment's new dress uniform, 16 June 1939. GD's eventual divisional symbol, the *Stahlhelm*, equipped the soldiers throughout the war. The Stahlhelm 35 that most troops wore in 1940 was an evolution of the Stahlhelm 16 first issued during World War I. As with the Stahlhelm 16, the Stahlhelm 35 was a solid piece of engineering. Utilizing an innovative stamping process that kept the thickness of the manganese steel almost completely uniform, the Stahlhelm 35's centre of gravity was located at the crown above the centre of the head, which resulted in remarkable stability; even without the chinstrap, the helmet resisted coming off. Moreover, the flaring shield around the neck not only helped keep water at bay, but also gave meaningful protection to the neck. Vents on the helmet helped to dissipate pressure from nearby explosions and thus reduce the possibility of injury to the soldier. (Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock Photo)





On 2 August 1939, a *Grosser Zapfenstreich* ('Grand Tattoo') was held at the Kleiner Tiergarten, Moabit, Berlin, to mark the 25th anniversary of the German mobilization for World War I. Note the use of the standard Heer parade uniforms and the absence of *Ärmelstreifen*. Oberstleutnant Wilhelm-Hunold von Stockhausen, the regimental commander, and Major Werner Frotscher, the commander of the 5. Kompanie, are moving towards the camera. Stockhausen led IR (mot.) GD from its formation, missing part of the French campaign through illness but leading his regiment in the Balkans and the early stages of Operation *Barbarossa*. Promoted to *Generalmajor* in April 1941, Stockhausen was succeeded by Oberst Walter Hörnlein on 1 August 1941 and subsequently commanded the 1. Schützen-Brigade and then the 281. Sicherungs-Division. (Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock Photo)

of strength. In June 1939, the order came for the Wachregiment Berlin to convert to Infanterie-Regiment 'Großdeutschland'.

THE WAR BEGINS

On 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Despite Berlin's proximity to Poland, Infanterie-Regiment (mot.) 'Großdeutschland' (IR (mot.) GD) did not participate in operations. The regiment was still in the process of formal organization and establishment as a regular combat unit, and although the pace of training increased, the relatively short duration of combat operations in Poland precluded the need to commit the regiment.

Like most Heer (Army) units, IRGD underwent extensive training during the winter of 1939/40 in western Germany. The training during the period was quite intense and the winter weather made conditions more difficult for the regiment's troops. The time was well spent, however, and it allowed IR (mot.) GD to integrate its attached support troops and work them into operations. In addition, IR (mot.) GD's four battalions were able to train together, sometimes with live ammunition, and in concert with other units. By the end of March 1940, the regiment was cohesive, very well established and thoroughly trained in its battle drills.

With Oberstleutnant Wilhelm-Hunold von Stockhausen absent through illness, Oberstleutnant Gerhard Graf von Schwerin commanded IR (mot.) GD and its attached units during *Fall Gelb* (Spaeter 1992: 56–57). During the invasion of France, the regiment was provided with considerable assets for a unit of its size. For *Fall Gelb*, the regiment consisted of four battalions of four

OPPOSITE

The new dress uniforms decreed for IR (mot.) GD are modelled by (left) a *Schütze* wearing a *Mantel* and gloves and (right) a *Hauptfeldwebel* with the *Deutsches Sportabzeichen* and the standard NCO's sabre, 16 June 1939. (Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock Photo)