

The German Army 1939–45 (3)

Eastern Front 1941–43



Nigel Thomas • Illustrated by Stephen Andrew

Men-at-Arms • 326

The German Army 1939–45 (3)

Eastern Front 1941–43



Nigel Thomas • Illustrated by Stephen Andrew

Series editor Martin Windrow

GERMAN ARMY 1939-45 (3)

EASTERN FRONT 1941-3

THE CONTEXT OF THE EASTERN FRONT

The High Command of the army and Wehrmacht 1941-3

As head of state, Adolf Hitler had (since 4 February 1938) held the nominal post of Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces (Oberster Befehlshaber der Wehrmacht). He became convinced that his own intellect and experience, as a regimental messenger in the First World War, had granted him a unique insight into military strategy. He continued to ignore GFM Wilhelm Keitel, as Chief of the Armed Forces High Command (Chef des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht, the OKW) the senior professional soldier, but now even overruled the strategic and tactical decisions of the Army High Command (Oberkommando des Heeres, or OKH) and did not disguise his contempt for the generals. This dysfunctional relationship further deteriorated in late November 1941, when the German advance, which Hitler had predicted would be unstoppable, ground to a halt before Moscow. Hitler blamed the generals and on 19 December 1941 dismissed GFM Walther von Brauchitsch, the Chief of the Army High Command (Oberbefehlshaber des Heeres), taking over his post. Within six months thirty-nine more top commanders, including Gen.Obst. Heinz Guderian, the architect of *Blitzkrieg*, had been dismissed.

Hitler moved from Berlin to the 'Wolf's Lair' in Rastenburg (now Katrzyn), East Prussia, then in July 1942 to Vinnitsa in occupied Ukraine. He directed military operations isolated from the Army High Command and surrounded by the generals of its rival, the OKW, led by General der Artillerie Alfred Jodl, the Chief of the Armed Forces Operations Staff (Chef der Wehrmachtführungsamt) and Keitel's nominal deputy. Now Hitler's military advisers were easily dominated 'yes-men' such as General der Infanterie Kurt Zeitzler, who on 24 September 1942 replaced Brauchitsch's deputy, Gen.Obst. Franz Halder, as Chief of the Army General Staff (Chef des Generalstabes des Heeres).

The strategy

On 23 August 1939 Hitler had concluded an alliance of convenience with the Soviet dictator Stalin to protect Germany's eastern borders during the 1939-40 western campaign. Nevertheless the Soviet Union remained Germany's arch-enemy, and on 18 December 1940 Hitler announced that Operation Barbarossa, the attack on the Soviet Union, would commence on 15 May 1941, a date postponed to 22 June 1941 by the invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece. It would be the biggest conflict in military history, with some three million German troops and about



The German officer's service uniform remained virtually unchanged from March 1935 to May 1945. Walther von Brauchitsch, Chief of the Army High Command from 1 September 1939 to 19 December 1941, was one of the nine generals to be promoted Generalfeldmarschall by Hitler on 19 July 1940 in a move designed to devalue the importance of the German army's highest rank. He wears the M1935 officer's service peaked cap with bluish dark green cap band, gold wire pipings and chin cords and matt aluminium eagle, cockade and wreath. His M1935 officer's field tunic has a bluish dark green collar, bright red collar patches with the two-leaf *Alt-Larisch* design for general officers, gold buttons, cloth loops for his medal ribbons, a gold hand-embroidered breast-eagle on a bluish dark green facing cloth backing, and gold-silver-gold plaited shoulder boards on a bright red backing with a silver crossed marshal's batons. He wears the Knight's Cross around his neck. (ECPA)

900,000 allies facing almost 4.7 million Soviet troops, and its outcome was to colour post-war European history for 50 years.

The German army supported by the Romanian, Finnish, Hungarian and Slovak armies would attack the Soviet Union with three army groups spearheaded by Panzer and motorised divisions organised in four reinforced army corps, designated Panzergruppen. These would trap and smash the bulk of the Soviet Red Army in Belarus and occupy the three key cities of Leningrad (the cradle of Soviet communism), Moscow (the nerve centre of Soviet power), and Kiev, capital of the agriculturally rich Ukraine and gateway to the Caucasian oilfields.

The German army would then advance to the Ural Mountains–River Volga line, some 1,300 miles from the German border, build a 3,000-mile defensive line against Soviet Siberia and Central Asia, and occupy European Russia. Soviet Karelia would be awarded to Finland and Romania would annex Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and 'Transnistria' (Moldova and Odessa). The remaining territory would be divided into four huge 'German provinces' (Reichskommissariate); Ostland (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, north-western Russia), Moskau (northern and central Russia), Ukraine (Ukraine and southern Russia), and Kaukasus (Transcaucasia, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan). The local populations would be ruled by up to 100 million German, Dutch and Scandinavian settlers, who would ensure permanent Nazi domination of the Eurasian land mass.

As in the 1939–40 western campaign there was a destructive tension between two strategies; Gen.Obst. Heinz Guderian's 'armoured concept', whereby armoured troops had to advance rapidly to capture the enemy power centre, and the classic 'decisive manoeuvre' strategy of Army High Command, which needed time to destroy pockets of trapped enemy forces. In the event neither strategies achieved their objectives. The rapidly advancing tanks wasted precious days waiting for supporting infantry to catch up, allowing Red Army units to reform and consolidate their defences. 'Decisive manoeuvre' inflicted heavy losses during 1941 – Soviet sources suggest 3.1 million killed and taken prisoner, German sources 7.5 million – but Moscow, the Soviet capital, was not captured, and the bulk of the Red Army was able to retreat, re-group and counter-attack in December 1941. Hitler's caution prevented the Panzer forces advancing as fast as they wanted, and he stubbornly forbade local tactical withdrawals which might have avoided disasters such as Stalingrad, but nothing in the western campaigns had prepared the Wehrmacht for the defiance, tenacity and resourcefulness of the Red Army.

Stalingrad marked a reversal of German fortunes and the turning-point in the Second World War. Henceforth it would be the Wehrmacht that was outnumbered, outequipped and outmanoeuvred, and the Allies who would take, and retain, the strategic initiative until the German surrender on 8 May 1945.

The development of army units

The German army in Operation Barbarossa was organised as for the western and Balkan campaigns, with three (from 1942, five) army groups originally deployed in the western campaign. Each army group (Heeresgruppe), initially averaging one million troops commanded by a Generalfeldmarschall, controlled Army Group HQ troops and three to

four armies. An infantry army (Armee), about 200,000 strong under a Generaloberst, comprised Army HQ troops and two to five infantry corps and sometimes a reinforced armoured corps (a Panzergruppe, by January 1942 upgraded to Panzer army, or Panzerarmee) with Panzer and motorised (in June–July 1942 also designated Panzer) corps. The independent 20th Mountain Army operated on the Arctic front under OKW control.

Infantry, motorised, mountain and Panzer corps comprised about 60,000 men under a General der Infanterie (or equivalent), with corps HQ troops and two to five divisions. In September 1942 the 61st and 62nd Reserve Corps were formed to control reserve divisions in Ostland and Ukraine respectively.

The Infantry Division (Infanterie-Division) retained its 1939 organisation, with three 3,049-man infantry regiments and five divisional support units – an artillery regiment, and reconnaissance, anti-tank, engineer and signals battalions. It had fewer divisional services – about four horse-drawn and motorised transport (soon replaced by Russian *panje* cart) columns, medical company, field hospital, veterinary company, military police troop and field post office. From January 1942 many infantry divisions were reduced to two infantry regiments, theoretically offsetting this reduction with increased firepower and on 15 October 1942 all infantry regiments were redesignated 'élite' Grenadier regiments to boost morale.

Security divisions (Sicherungs-Divisionen) were formed with an infantry regiment, territorial rifle (Landesschützen) battalions and various divisional support units to garrison the occupied territories. They were joined after September 1942 by units of the home-based Replacement Army (Ersatzheer). 16,000-strong reserve divisions (Reserve-Divisionen), with two to three reserve infantry regiments and divisional support units, had the role of training recruits and undertook garrison duties, whilst training divisions (Feldausbildungs-Divisionen), with two to four regiments comprising 16,000 recruits, underwent advanced combat training and awaited allocation to front-line units.

The 14,319-man M1940 Motorised Division (Infanterie-Division (mot.)) had two motorised regiments (on 15 October 1942 redesignated Motorised Grenadier) and motorised divisional support units (including a motorcycle reconnaissance battalion) and services. The army's most prestigious unit, the Großdeutschland Motorised Regiment, actually an independent reinforced regiment with four motorised battalions, support and artillery battalions and services, fought in Belarus and Central Russia. On 12 March 1942 it became a motorised division and then deployed to Southern and Central Russia.

The 13,000-man Light Infantry Division (leichte Infanterie-Division), first formed in December 1940 as an élite non-motorised 'pursuit' unit, had two infantry regiments, and from 28 June 1942 was redesignated a Rifle (Jäger) Division. The 14,131-man Mountain Division



LEFT As the 6th Army commander in the victorious western campaign of 1939–40, Walther von Reichenau was another '19 July Field Marshal'. He is wearing his Knight's Cross and bright red collar patches with the three-leaf gold wire *Alt-Larisch* design introduced on 3 April 1941 for the Generalfeldmarschall rank. Reichenau was appointed to command Army Group South on 1 December 1941, but died seven weeks later, on 17 January 1942, from a stroke. (ECPA)



A section first gunner on the march in June 1941, with his MG34 machine-gun slung over his back instead of over his shoulder as prescribed. Note his mess kit and shelter-quarter strapped to his A-frame and his bayonet, M1930 gas canister, M1931 bread bag and M1931 felt covered canteen and black-painted cup. (Friedrich Herrmann)