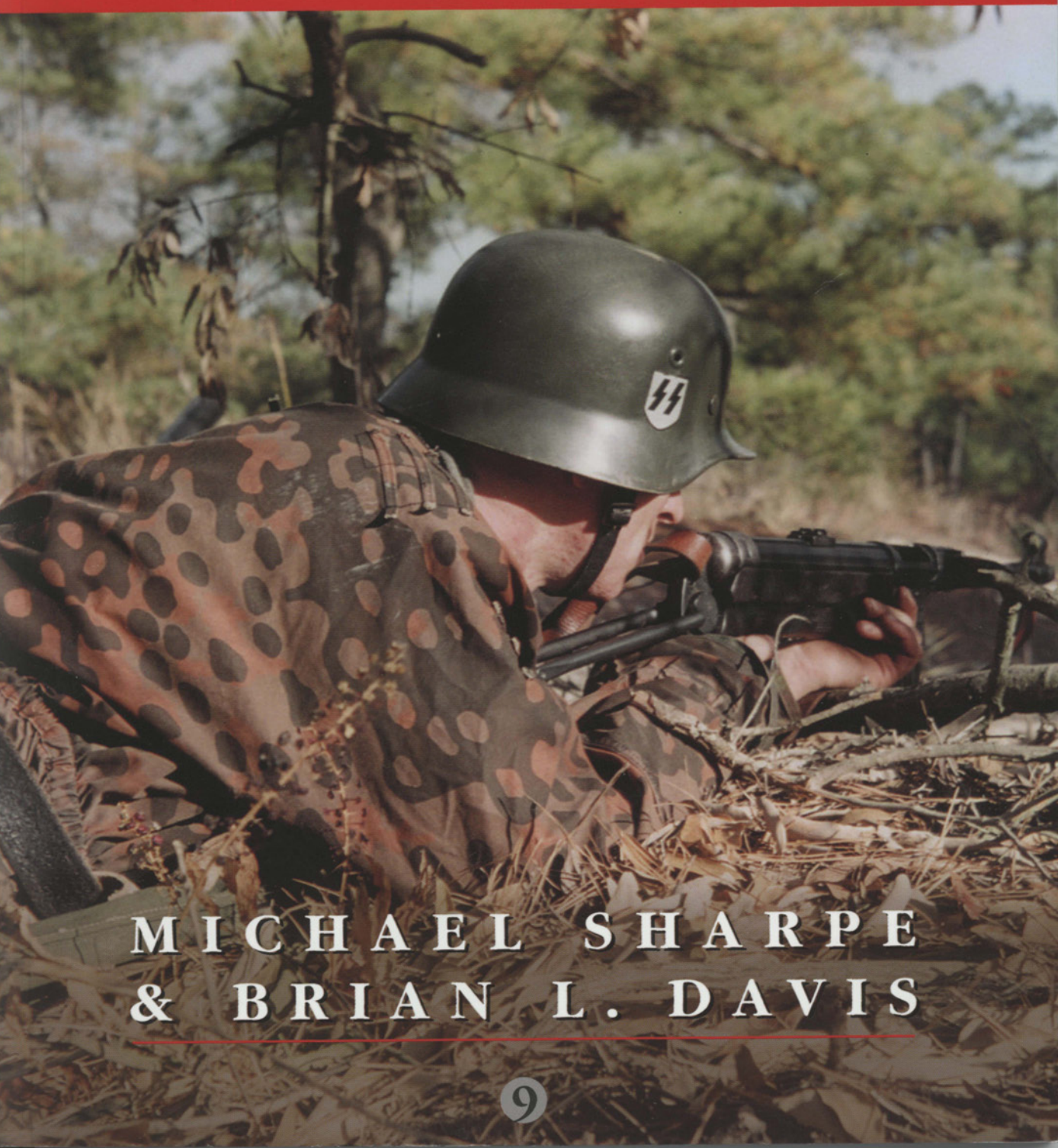


◀ S P E A R H E A D ▶

DAS REICH

Waffen-SS Armoured Elite



M I C H A E L S H A R P E
& B R I A N L . D A V I S

← SPEARHEAD →

DAS REICH

Waffen-SS Armoured Elite

Another Soviet attack has been stopped in its tracks. Waffen-SS artillery observers, wearing clean loose fitting snow camouflage coveralls over their parkas, carefully study the enemy lines through their stereo telescope. Any new movement by the Soviets will result in another fire order to bring down artillery fire on the enemy's positions.



◀ S P E A R H E A D ▶

DAS REICH

Waffen-SS Armoured Elite

Michael Sharpe &
Brian L. Davis

Ian  Allan
PUBLISHING

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Abbreviations

AC	Armoured car
APC	Armoured personnel carrier
Arty	Artillery
Atk	Anti-tank
Bn	Battalion
BdE	<i>Befehlshaber des Ersatzheeres</i> (Commander of Replacement Army)
Engr	Engineer
Hy	Heavy
leFH	<i>leichte Feldhaubitze</i> (light field gun)
Lt	Lieutenant; light
MC	Motorcycle
Mor	Mortar
Mot	Motorised
NSDAP	<i>Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei</i> (Nazi party)
OKW	<i>Oberkommando der Wehrmacht</i>
OKH	<i>Oberkommando des Heeres</i>
Pak	<i>Panzerabwehrkanone</i> (anti-tank gun)
PzBefWag	<i>Panzerbefehlswagen</i> (armd comd vehicle)
PzGr	<i>Panzergranadier</i>
PzJr	<i>Panzerjäger</i>
PzKpfw	<i>Panzerkampfwagen</i> (tank)
RHQ	Regimental HQ
SA	<i>Sturmabteilung</i>
SP	Self-propelled
SPW	<i>Schützen Panzer Wagen</i> (APC)
SS	<i>Schutzstaffel</i>
SS-VT	<i>SS-Verfügungstruppe</i> (militarised troops)
Tk	Tank
WH	<i>Wehrmacht Heer</i> (as in car and MC numberplates)

Dates

20/7/54 20 July 1954

SS Ranks

Mannschaften (Enlisted men)

SS-Schütze
SS-Oberschütze
SS-Sturmmann
SS-Rottenführer
SS-Stabsrottenführer

Unteroffiziere ohne Portepee

(Junior NCOs)
SS-Unterscharführer
SS-Standartenjunker

Unteroffiziere mit Portepee

(Senior NCOs)
SS-Oberscharführer
SS-Hauptscharführer
SS-Sturmscharführer

Offiziere (Commissioned Officers)

SS-Untersturmführer
SS-Obersturmführer
SS-Hauptsturmführer
SS-Sturmbannführer
SS-Obersturmbannführer
SS-Standartenführer
SS-Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Waffen-SS
SS-Gruppenführer und Generalleutnant der Waffen-SS
SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS
SS-Oberstgruppenführer und Generaloberst der Waffen-SS
Reichsführer-SS

Waffen-SS formations/unit structure

Abteilung Similar to a battalion, a formation of combined units designed to be independent on the battlefield.

Armee (army) Comprised of several Korps, plus any independent formations, the *Armee* operated on the strategic level.

The only Waffen-SS *Armee* was Sixth SS Panzer Army.

Aufklärung (reconnaissance) Waffen-SS recon units were well-armed and had two coys of ACs, plus several MC coys and a motorised heavy weapons coy.

Bataillon (battalion) Tactical unit of three or more *Kompanien*, sometimes with additional *Züge* and a strength of between 500–1,000 soldiers.

Batterie (battery) A group of support weapons operating as a unit.

Brigade Independent formation, usually of 1–7,000 soldiers. Most Waffen-SS brigades and/or legions were foreign volunteer units of varying size and thus not relevant to *Das Reich*.

Division Combination of several regiments and *Abteilungen*, with manpower of anything between 10–21,000 soldiers. Waffen-SS panzer divisions tended to have a large complement.

Feldersatz (field replacement) When possible, Waffen-SS divisions would have an *Ersatz*, or replacement formation, often in Germany, which fed new troops to the front line units.

Feldpostamt (FPA) Military post office.

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Flak AA units usually had a mixture of towed heavy 88mm, motorised med 37mm and lt 20mm quad AA guns.

Kolonne (column) An independent transportation unit, varying in size, transporting equipment or supplies such as a bridge column or a light infantry column (which consisted of a number of horse-drawn vehicles capable of transporting a fixed tonnage).

Kommando (detachment) Tactical military formation of indeterminate size.

Kompanie (company) Tactical unit of three or more *Züge*, with a strength of 100–200 soldiers.

Korps (corps) Ideally the Waffen-SS corps (formed from 1943) comprised two or more divisions, plus several attached *Abteilungen*, and the HQ staff. Although the I SS Panzer Korps was the model, manpower shortages meant that the size and quality of each varied.

Nachrichten (signals) A signals unit, comprised *Fernsprech* (telephone), *Funk* (radio) and supply units.

Nachschubtruppe Supply troops, which included non-combatants such as the veterinary unit, the *Bäckerei-Kompanie*

(bakery), *Fleischerei* (butcher), news and QM units.

Panzer (armour) Tank battalions were organised into companies, with one or more command (*Befehl*) tanks per company, and *Werkstatt* (workshop/repair) and supply companies allocated to each regiment. Each Pz Div had attached a deep-maintenance *Kraftfahrzeug* detachment, including a workshop, weapons and a spares unit.

Panzerjäger (anti-tank) A PzJg unit usually contained a mixture of motorised and stationary anti-tank weapons.

Pionier (assault engineers) In addition to building bridges and fortifications, *Pionier* troops were trained as assault troops, specialising in urban fighting and weapons like flamethrowers and satchel charges. Usually split into an armoured company, several *Pionier* and special companies such as *Brücken* (bridging) and assault boat.

Regiment Comprising several *Bataillone*, with anywhere between 2–6,000 men.

Sanitätstruppe (medical troops) These included the *Feldlazarett* (field hospital unit), comprising the *Sanitäts* companies

and the *Krankenkraftwagen* (motorised ambulance) section.

Stab (staff) Headquarters unit comprising officers who would be assigned to a specific role such as: Ia = operations; Ib = supply & transport; Ic = intelligence; Id = training; IIa = personnel matters, officers; IIb = personnel matters, men; III = judge advocate; IVa = administration; IVb = medical; V = motor transport. Div HQ included the CO, plus staff officers, cartographers (*Kartenstelle*), a signals unit, an MP unit (*Feldgendarmarie*), plus an escort force and transport team.

Trupp (troop) Tactical, sometimes independent, unit of 10–20 men.

Werfer (mortar) Compared to Allied formations, German units were much better armed with mortars. A divisional *Werfer* unit typically had three batteries of six 150mm towed mortars and a battery of six 210mm towed mortars. After 1943 six battalions of SS *Nebeltruppen* (specialised rocket launcher troops) were raised and equipped with *Nebelwerfer* (a multi-barrelled rocket launcher).

Zug (platoon; plural *Züge*) A tactical unit of 30–40 soldiers.

ORIGINS & HISTORY

Fame and infamy in equal measure surround the 2nd SS Panzer Division *Das Reich*, the most decorated of all World War II German armed units. With the 1st SS Panzer Division (*Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*), 12th SS Panzer Division (*Hitler Jugend*) and the 3rd SS Panzer Division (*Totenkopf*), *Das Reich* formed an elite core of highly-skilled, motivated soldiers within the Waffen-SS that won the deserved plaudits of both friend and foe on the battlefields of Europe, and equally deserved condemnation for its actions outside the sphere of military operations. No fewer than 69 Knight's Cross recipients fought in the ranks of *Das Reich* during the five and a half years of war, testimony, if any were needed, to the elite status of this much-vaunted division. The history of the division was both brief and spectacular, but with the other elite Waffen-SS divisions, *Das Reich* has left an indelible mark on the history of arms, both through the ferocity of its actions and for the scale of its achievements. Measure for measure they are unequalled. This title in the *Spearhead* series therefore looks at the career of the 2nd SS Panzer Division, its antecedents and related units, in peacetime and in war.

The story is all the more remarkable when one considers that prior to October 1939 no formal SS Division existed. As with all Waffen-SS units, the elements that coalesced to form 2nd SS Panzer in 1941 were fostered in the violent political scene of 1920s Germany, by an upstart political party (the Nazi NSDAP) seeking to defend itself from

Right: Pre-war photograph of men from *Germania* during a training march. The SS Standarten (regiments) *Germania* and *Deutschland* were the main constituent elements of the *Das Reich* Division. Both were created in the mid-1930s after the Nazis came to power.





attacks by rival groups and, in turn, harass opponents. The rise of the party through fair means and foul, and the transformation of these political protection groups, is covered in more detail in the companion volume in this series, *Spearhead 5: Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*. Suffice to say that by 1930, the Schutzstaffel (SS) had been formalised as a personal bodyguard unit for Hitler under the leadership of the ambitious Heinrich Himmler, with detachments in most of the main German cities. There had been a name change, too, to Politische Bereitschaften (Political Stand-by detachments) which had the unofficial status of police squads.

Soon after the *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power) in January 1933 the NSDAP leaders set about consolidating their hold on power, using the Allgemeine (general) branch of the SS, the SA and the Stahlhelm, which were all authorised to act as auxiliary police units, to cast a long shadow over Germany. The Politische Bereitschaften were expanded in the principal municipalities, and rapidly any trace of opposition to the self-proclaimed Nazi 'revolution' was eradicated.

The ruthlessness of such measures was soon graphically demonstrated. Hitler had recognised as early as 1922 the threat that lay within the ranks of the SA membership (this in part prompted him to form the Adolf Hitler Shock Troop that became the 1st SS Panzer Division *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*). By the end of 1933 SA membership stood at approximately 3 million, dwarfing the 50,000-strong fledgling Schutzstaffel. The brown-shirted SA regarded itself as the true strong arm of the party, and under Ernst Röhm, a close friend of the Nazi leader, its members had become a significant and increasingly belligerent threat to Hitler's dominance of the party. Furthermore, they had been encouraged to believe that they would replace the German Army as the country's national defence force. The delicate political balance on which the Nazis were still dependent could, of course, countenance no such threat to the status quo and in January 1934, a year after his appointment to power, Hitler used SS murder squads to decapitate the SA during the infamous 'Night of the Long Knives'.

Above: 'Eyes Right!' The 2nd Company of SS Regiment *Deutschland* salutes SS-Obersturmbannführer Keppler and company commander (and later *Das Reich* commander) SS-Hauptsturmführer Willi Bittrich, both of whose heads and upper bodies are cut off in this photograph. The regimental band plays on.

SS-Standarte Deutschland, February 1935

HQ Company

3 x SS-Sturmabteilung each of 3 x Infantry Stürme,

1 x Signals Platoon, 1 x MG-Sturm

SS Motorcycle Sturm

SS Trench mortar Sturm

SS Armoured Car Platoon

3 x Motorised supply columns

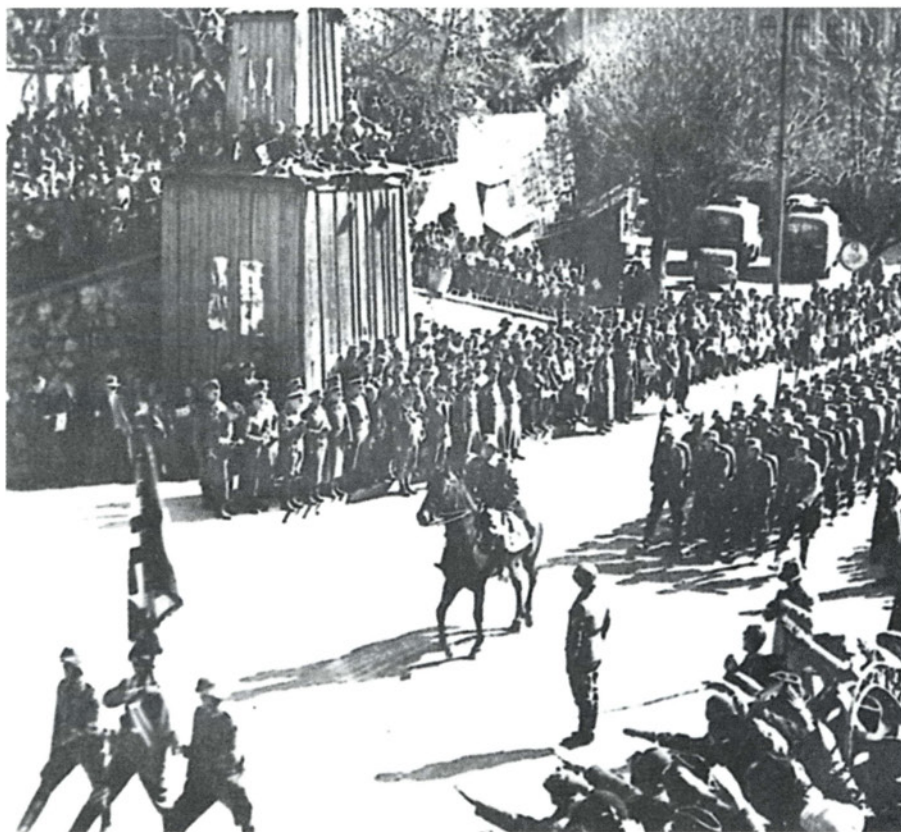
Band

REGIMENT *Deutschland*

Prior to this event, in October 1933, some nine months after Hitler's appointment to the Chancellorship, a group of 35 men selected from each of the Standarten of the Allgemeine-SS was chosen to form the cadre of the 1st Battalion of a new SS regiment. These men were posted to the Munich Regiment of the Bavarian state police and, after selection, began officer training at the SS academy at Bad Tolz. They, together with a group of NCOs, formed the nucleus around which the Waffen-SS and *Das Reich* were built.

Unchallenged by the SA after the savage purge, during the mid-1930s the SS underwent a rapid expansion, under which the SS platoons within the Munich police grew into the Politische Bereitschaft Munich, with a strength in mid-1934 of three infantry companies, one machine-gun company and an infantry-gun company. From this unit we can trace the lineage of the Regiment *Deutschland*, one of the two main formations from which the 2nd SS Panzer was created.

Under orders from Himmler, from late 1934 the SS-Politische Bereitschaften were formalised into the three Standarten (regiments) of the Verfügungstruppe (*Adolf Hitler, Deutschland and Germania*) to allow for more effective administration, and to further steps toward fulfilling Hitler's ambitions for the SS. As part of this restructuring, in October the Munich unit was amalgamated with two similar formations into Standarte 1 of the SS-Verfügungstruppe (SS 1.VT), becoming 1st Battalion (I./SS 1.VT). (Although it was originally to have been the 1st SS Regiment, Hitler later decreed that the *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* was not to be included in the numbering sequence for SS units, to emphasise that it was to remain instead his personal domain.)



Above: *Deutschland* commander SS-Standartenführer Felix Steiner takes the salute of his regiment in Kufstein, March 1938.

An NCO cadre was selected around which the sub-units of Standarte 1 were organised along military lines. But although the newly formed regiment had all the bearing of a military unit, and nominal administration passed from the Nazi party to the 7th Infantry Division, it was not yet considered to be a regular Army unit. All the same it was stationed in regular barracks accommodation, with the battalion taking up residence in the quarters at Munich Freimann in which the regimental headquarters was established in 1939.

At the same time, the 4th Battalion, which to all intents and purposes was the renamed Politische Bereitschaft Württemberg, was formalised and quartered at Ellwangen barracks. The men were predominantly southern Germans from Nazi strongholds in Bavaria and Württemberg.

During the Reichsparteitag celebrations of 1934 Standarte 1. SS-VT was given the title *Deutschland* and the constituent battalions received colours. Later an honour cuff band bearing the same legend was awarded, and a 2nd Battalion taken on strength and quartered in Ingolstadt Landstrasse. This was comprised of the Hilfswerk Schleissheim, (a group of expatriate Austrian Nazi volunteers) which had been drafted into the SS-VT at the suggestion of Himmler to circumvent a diplomatic clash with the Italian dictator Mussolini over the secondment of foreign volunteers to the German forces. The 3rd Battalion was not formally established until July 1936 at the Munich Freimann barracks, around a cadre of volunteers and transferees from the 1st and the 4th Battalions, and recruits drawn mainly from Württemberg and Bavaria.

In October 1936 SS-Sturmabteilung N (Nürnberg) was formed around a cadre from SS-*Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* and SS-*Standarte Deutschland*. It took part in the annexation of Austria as a part of SS-*Standarte Deutschland*. It was then converted into a motorcycle battalion in November 1938 and redesignated SS-Kradschützen-Bataillon N.

SS-Standarte 2. VT Germania, October 1934

3 x Sturmabteilung
1 x Trench mortar Sturm
1 x Motorcycle Sturm

as at February 1935

3 x SS-Sturmabteilung
each of 3 x Infantry Stürme,
1 x Signals Platoon, 1 x MG-Sturm x 3
SS Motorcycle Sturm
SS Trench mortar Sturm
SS Band
3 x Motorised supply columns

REGIMENT *Germania*

The second of the two principal units of the future *Das Reich* was Regiment *Germania*, formed as SS-*Standarte 3./VT* in 1934. It was renamed SS-*Standarte 2./VT* when Hitler ordered that SS-*Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* would not be included in the numbering sequence. In September 1936, SS-*Standarte Germania*, then stationed in Hamburg, received its colour standard at the Reichsparteitag in Nuremberg. It was organised formally as a regiment on 1 October of that year, with three infantry battalions and three heavy weapons companies. Although these units were administered together, they rarely coalesced and lacked both a common training schedule and true cohesion. Even so the regiment played a role in the annexation of Austria, was responsible for security during Mussolini's subsequent visit to Germany, and also took part in the annexation of Sudetenland under detachment to the Army. *Germania* later served as a guard regiment in Prague, as Wach-Regiment des Reichsprotectors von Böhmen und Mähren, until July 1939. For the invasion of Poland it was attached to Fourteenth Army and following that campaign formed part of the SS-Verfügungstruppe Division.

By the end of 1936 the two core units of the SS-VT – and thus *Das Reich* – had been established. At this time they had a combined nominal strength of 5,040. To these were later added further battalions of pioneer, artillery and signals troops and, after the annexation of Austria, the 3,500 men of the *Der Führer* Regiment (see below). Together with the separate wholly separate *Leibstandarte* Regiment (2,600 troops), and the concentration camp guards of the *Totenkopfverbände* (3,500 troops), these regiments comprised the armed strength of the SS.

Below: *Germania* march past led by the regimental band. Pre-war photograph taken in Hamburg.

REGIMENT *Der Führer*

Completing the triumvirate of SS-VT units was the SS-*Standarte Der Führer*. It was formed as SS-*Standarte 3./VT* in Vienna in March 1938, following the annexation of Austria, of Austrian volunteers around a cadre from SS-*Standarte Deutschland*. At the Reichsparteitag in Nuremberg in 1938, while still stationed in Vienna, it was renamed SS-*Standarte Der Führer* and received its colour standard. Command of this unit was temporarily transferred to the Army during the mobilisation in October 1938. It took part in the occupation of Czechoslovakia and later served as a guard regiment in Prague, as Wach-Regiment des Reichsprotectors von Böhmen und Mähren. There was no role for the regiment in the invasion of Poland, during which it was stationed on the West Wall.



READY FOR WAR

From the earliest days of the Third Reich, both Hitler and Reichsführer-SS Himmler gave voice to their shared desire to see the SS develop into a paramilitary force of 'soldier-policemen' that could take over responsibility for law enforcement from the established police force. Hitler believed that it should have sufficient military bearing to impress its authority on the public and that the right to such authority could only be won in combat, thus concluding that the SS-VT should undergo training to prepare it for military service in time of war. This was the rationale behind the creation of the SS-Verfügungstruppe, which in due course became the Waffen-SS, or 'armed SS'. One of the strongest indications of the military role that Hitler and Himmler envisaged for the SS-VT came with the issue of field grey service uniforms to the troops in 1935. The publicly stated role of the SS-VT was the protection of the Nazi 'revolution' but in 1935 Hitler admitted that it would be incorporated into the Army in time of war, and by the outbreak of hostilities it had been trained for a very different role than the one for which it was first conceived.

Below: IIIrd Battalion of *Deutschland* returning to quarters after training. The column is snaking through Soltau, on the edge of the Lüneberger Heide, an area well-known to British servicemen who served in the postwar BAOR.



BELIEVE! OBEY! FIGHT!

This slogan was borrowed from the Italian Fascist call, *Crederè! Obbedire! Combattere!* and adopted as the motto of the SS. It accurately sums up the ethic that pervaded the ranks of the SS-VT. There was a flood of applicants to join the party's elite corps, attracted by the boldness of such rhetoric, by the kudos that membership was thought to confer, and the absence of discrimination toward Germans outside the ruling classes. However, of these, only a small percentage were deemed fit to wear the SS uniform. Earning the right to wear the SS-Verfügungstruppe insignia was far from easy. Recruits had to pass a stringent selection, including a physical examination, with measurements of 'racial features' like the shape of the skull, nose and ears, the distance between the eyes and other such criteria, and a detailed investigation into their family lineage. In 1931 Himmler, who was obsessed with such matters of race, introduced the rule that each SS man had to be able to trace his Aryan ancestry back to 1750, with no Jewish, Slav or other 'extraneous' blood. If he wanted to marry, his future wife was subjected to rigorous mental and physical vetting by SS doctors. Interestingly, although the physical standards for entry to the SS-VT were much higher than for the Army, intellectual standards were somewhat lower. This stands in contrast to the other branches of the SS, the ranks of which were swelled by an influx of middle-class German professionals.

TRAINING CENTRES

Deutschland recruits, and those of the other SS-VT regiments, underwent training at a number of purpose-built infantry schools, the so-called Junkerschulen, and at Army facilities. Junkerschule (Officer Candidate School) Bad Tolz and, to a lesser extent, the Officer Candidate School Brunswick (Braunschweig) were the premier Waffen-SS training

centres for officers in the 1930s and during World War II. By 1937 the SS schools were graduating over 400 officers a year, in two sets of classes. The spirited aggressiveness taught at the school was not without cost – by 1942, nearly 700 Waffen-SS officers had been killed in action, including almost all of the 60 graduates of the 1934–35 Bad Tolz class. In addition to the two SS Junkerschulen, there were many other training grounds, schools and assembly areas.

Although the basic tenets of the training philosophy matched those of the Army, with weapon handling and drill as its foundations, SS-VT training differed radically, at least equalling and in some cases exceeding the standard required by the Army. Because of its status as an elite corps, with a prominent public image, the SS-VT training initially emphasised parade ground drilling. But in addition, certainly under the influence of Felix Steiner, and later Paul Hausser, the training had a very serious military purpose that was to pay untold dividends in battle. While serving during the Great War, Steiner had commanded a detachment of Stormtroopers from whom the post-war Freikorps, and later the SS, drew so much of their inspiration. These were small, select groups of heavily armed but mobile assault infantry tasked with using fire and movement to make small penetrations of the enemy lines to create a larger breakthrough. They had achieved considerable success in Germany's 1918 spring offensive and impressed upon a generation of German veterans the effectiveness of such tactics.

Not least among these veterans was Paul Hausser, upon whose appointment to the command of the Inspectorate of SS-VT troops on 1 October 1936 the SS gained a capable and influential leader. Hausser, a former Stahlhelm volunteer and Sturmabführer in the SA, and until 1932 an officer of the Reichswehr, was formerly commander of the SS officer training school at Brunswick before promotion to Brigadeführer when the responsibility for training the SS-VT was handed to him. Furthermore, Hausser introduced a more open and flexible command structure. During the war he proved to be among the finest of SS officers.

From the late summer of 1935 Felix Steiner was commander of the 4th Battalion *Deutschland* Regiment, barracked at Ellwangen, and from the following July, regimental commander. Steiner broke with traditional, inflexible methods of training in an attempt to create a fighting soldier who was at once a superb marksman and athlete, and who excelled in fieldcraft and could think for himself on the battlefield. With such skills as these, he rightly surmised, the soldier stood a better chance of surviving, and the slaughter that had been witnessed during the Great War could be avoided.

Steiner's *Deutschland* Regiment, in particular, emphasised the benefits of physical fitness to the combat soldier. The commander believed, and was later proved correct, that a physically fit soldier could function in conditions of greater deprivation and hardship. Stamina and endurance were honed by long marches carrying weapons in full combat dress, at the end of which the soldiers were expected to be capable of functioning in the field. Hausser implemented the methods that Steiner had pioneered with the 4th Battalion throughout the entire Waffen-SS establishment as well as introducing his own. These drills have since been adopted by almost every regular Army, testimony to Steiner's visionary approach to combat training.

However, the importance of physical fitness was not the only one of Steiner's tenets; of equal importance was a soldier's ability to function as a leader should his own be incapacitated. And instead of the old, unwieldy field units his men were divided into small detachments, again similar to the stormtrooper battalions of the Great War.

These may not sound particularly revolutionary ideas today, but introduced as they were at a time when Western armies were practising infantry tactics that had seen little advancement since 1918, and maintaining the rigid hierarchies of their command structures, they represented a major advance. Throughout the war, there were countless



Above: Paul Hausser would end the war as an SS-Oberstgruppenführer und Generaloberst der Waffen-SS. 'Papa' Hausser (as his men called him) lost an eye on the Eastern Front and sported a black eyepatch thereafter. His military prowess is undeniable: his best-known exploits being the retaking of Kharkov in February 1943 and his leadership during the Falaise Pocket battle in Normandy in 1944. See biography page 84.

SS-Standarte Germania, September 1939

Regiment Staff

1st, 2nd, 3rd Infantry Battalions (motorised)

13th Infantry Gun Company (motorised)

14th Anti-tank Company (motorised)

15th Motorcycle Company

Intelligence Platoon

Motorcycle Platoon

Band

SS-Standarte DeutschlandOrder of Battle identical to *Germania***SS-Standarte Der Führer**Order of Battle identical to *Germania*

episodes in which SS troops demonstrated extraordinary soldiering skills, pointing to the effectiveness of the methods Steiner pioneered with the *Deutschland* Regiment. Furthermore, the training was continuously adapted to take account of the changing nature of combat – when Sturmabannführer Stadler took over the Panzer school in August 1944, he updated its methods based on his experience during the Normandy Campaign

Basic training lasted three weeks, although after 1942 all parade ground drilling was eliminated. Unlike in most modern armies, the SS recruit was immediately placed in his branch of service at the beginning of his basic training. However, he was also exposed to an above-average amount of multi-disciplinary training – meaning that artillerymen would learn how to use radios, signals troops would learn how to fire machine guns and so on. The Waffen-SS was also open to new ideas and innovations – by way of example, panzer crews of the 12th SS Panzer Division *Hitler Jugend* were required as part of their training to spend a week working on the assembly line at the MAN tank factory in Nuremberg.

Typically, the early morning reveille would be followed by ablutions and breakfast, a brisk period of exercise and drilling followed by a hearty lunch. The troops then proceeded to the ranges for practice in fieldcraft and weapon handling. Sports activities, particularly those such as boxing that involved physical contact (to imbue a toughness in the men), played a major part in the programme, and unarmed and close combat techniques, with bayonet and knife, were practised with instructors. Steiner's vision of the *Deutschland* at the spearhead of rapier-like thrusts into the enemy line ensured that speed in the attack, which had been a key aspect of the stormtrooper tactics, was constantly emphasised by the instructors.

Lectures on political matters were another regular feature of the curriculum – what one might today call indoctrination – which impressed upon recruits the idea that they were elite warriors in a race war, a war that would make Germany the great power that she had once been. The supposed heroes of those times – Frederick the Great and Barbarossa, for example – were co-opted for Nazism, and lauded along with latter-day Nazi figures as Horst Wessel. Other topics were the philosophy of Nietzsche, reinterpreted and taken out of context by Nazi theoreticians, and the ideology of race theorists such as Houston Stewart Chamberlain and the Comte de Gobineau. Furthermore, every recruit was required to read Walter Darre's (the head of the SS Race and Resettlement Office) *Blut und Boden*, and *The Myth of the 20th Century*, an anti-Semitic diatribe penned by the influential Nazi 'philosopher' Alfred Rosenberg that came as close to a Nazi Bible as existed.

The courses to indoctrinate Waffen-SS troops with Nazi ideology were not as successful as the hierarchy hoped. Far more productive in this role were the informal *Kameradschaftsabend* – SS 'comrade evenings' – in which unit members would gather together to eat, drink, sing traditional folk songs or patriotic and Nazi anthems and receive ideological instruction. Officers and men addressed each other as '*Kamerad*'. These evenings were a frequent feature of the pre-war Allgemeine-SS, but the tradition seems to have been carried on into the Waffen-SS as well.

In contrast to the *Leibstandarte* Regiment, the SS-VT regiments actually enjoyed good pre-war relations with the Army. Because of the lack of combat experience within the SS-VT ranks, the training staff were initially drawn from the ranks of the regular Army, and this helped to dispel some of the hostility that had sprung up between the two forces. But a certain contempt remained. The accusation most often levelled at the SS-VT by the Army was that it was merely a parade ground force, and its members were derided as 'asphalt soldiers'. The accusation rankled, particularly with Himmler, who determined to silence some of the critics. Although the critics were still vocal even after the Polish campaign, a perfect opportunity presented itself at the annual spring

manoeuvres in 1938. At these the SS-VT was to have the opportunity to show off its finely honed battle skills. In front of a clutch of high-ranking observers, in the final stages of an attack the regimental assault detachment skirmished up to, attacked, and overran the enemy trenches, to the evident delight of the onlookers. Hitler had an opportunity to see for himself the effectiveness of the training at manoeuvres in May, 1939, when he observed a *Deutschland* assault under live fire.

THE *BLUMENKRIEG* (FLOWER WAR)

Of course all this was not without purpose and even as these manoeuvres were taking place Germany was advancing headlong on the course to war. Behind the scenes political machinations by Hitler and the Austrian Nazi movement (which been outlawed for murdering Chancellor Dolfuss in 1934) had destabilised the Austrian government while Nazi calls for *Anschluss* (union) of the two countries became increasingly strident. After the resignation of Chancellor Schuschnigg his replacement, the puppet leader, Artur Seyss-Inquart, requested the German Army to intervene, ostensibly to restore order. The *Deutschland* Regiment was among the units that crossed the border on 12 March 1938, to a rapturous welcome.

Hitler then began demanding the transfer to Germany of the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia, and in a speech on 26 September 1938 claimed this would be his last territorial claim in Europe. At the Munich conference shortly thereafter the Sudetenland was duly ceded to Germany, and occupied by the Army with the SS-VT in support. 'Not bullets but flowers greet our soldiers', said Propaganda Minister, Goebbels. The next spring Hitler moved to occupy all of Czechoslovakia (Fall Grün), and the newly created *Der Führer* Regiment moved to take up occupation duties in Prague, where it remained until the outbreak of war.

Below: A long way from the flowers and garlands that they received in 1938, these battle-hardened Panzergrenadiers of *Das Reich* are taking part in the battle of Kharkov, 1943. The unit's 'wolf's hook' symbol is faintly visible on the rear of the vehicle.



IN ACTION

POLAND

The war for which the SS-VT had been so rigorously preparing began in the east, against Poland. According to Nazi ideology, the independent status of Poland stood directly in the way of legitimate German expansion into the areas currently occupied by the 'subhuman Slavs'. 'The bleeding frontiers of the east', a reference to the loss of Prussian territory brought about by the Treaty of Versailles, were stressed in Nazi propaganda from the earliest days of the movement, and from the early 1930s Nazi leaders began to use the metaphor *Polnische Wirtschaft* ('Polish Business') to suggest a state of chaos in Poland and prepare the population for war, as part of the projected drive east.

In 1934 Hitler temporarily adjusted difficulties with Poland by concluding a ten-year military and commercial pact, but five years later the pact was broken when he insisted upon the annexation of Danzig and the creation of a roadway between Germany and the separate German province of East Prussia. Great Britain and France guaranteed the independence of Poland and assured Hitler that aggression would be met with force. Nonetheless, on 3 April 1939, Hitler issued a general directive to Field Marshal Keitel, chief of staff of the OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht – High Command of the Armed Forces), on preparations for war. Annexed to the directive was a document containing details of Fall Weiss, the plan for a projected attack on Poland.

The Armies

The Polish Army, with a potential strength of 1,800,000 men, was hardly an insignificant force, well regarded in Europe and reputed to have the continent's finest cavalry. The infantry were skilled in the arts of anti-tank warfare and heavy German losses of armour during the campaign would point this out. In a man-to-man infantry fight it was clear that the Germans had no advantage over the Poles, whose tactical style was based upon their experiences in the Russian-Polish War and emphasised manoeuvre and the use of combined arms. But this combined arms doctrine looked back to the First World War, and since the Polish Army moved on foot or horseback, speed of manoeuvre was limited to the pace of the slowest horse. Another critical weakness was the complete lack of modern communications equipment even at the highest command levels. In other areas, a German signal battalion had twice as many trucks as an entire Polish infantry division, most of the weaponry was of First World

Below: Troops of *Deutschland* during the Polish campaign – as part of Panzer Group Kempf, the first pairing of Army and Waffen-SS units. The regiment performed efficiently and without the problems that *Leibstandarte* experienced.



War vintage, and although the Poles possessed about 1,000 armoured vehicles, three-quarters of them were small tankettes of questionable value. Two brigades of 7TP light tanks comprised the bulk of the force. While they were to prove superior to the Panzer I and Panzer II and were a near match for the Panzer III, the Poles were hopelessly outclassed in the tactical use of armour. Most crucially, the General Staff had chosen to disperse this force along the frontier, rather than concentrate it at the most gravely threatened points.

Germany's forces were by comparison larger (for the campaign they employed some 2,600 tanks and over 2,000 aircraft of all types), more modern and well balanced. As well as a numerical superiority in weapons they had modern communications equipment, and were expert in the doctrine of combined arms.

Panzer Group Kempf

It will be remembered that after the bloodless Anschluss, the *Deutschland* Regiment participated in the occupation of Bohemia and Moravia during March 1939. Hitler ordered that the regiment should be expanded to a division, but as the war loomed nearer, this event had to be postponed.

In July, the OKH (Oberkommando des Heeres – Army High Command) decided to create a unique unit in preparation for the assault on Poland, which duly formed in the summer of 1939 from a mix of Army and SS-Verfügungstruppe units in East Prussia. The OKH remained highly sceptical of SS abilities away from the parade ground, but had little option but to acquiesce with Hitler's wishes for the SS to be included. On 25 July 1939, units of the SS-Verfügungstruppe arrived by rail and sea at Stettin and Königsberg. Independent of the SS-VT units, the 7th Panzer Regiment (which had previously been part of the 4th Panzer Brigade) was transferred by freighters to Königsberg and proceeded to its assembly area near Zinten.

Officially this sudden movement of troops was a part of the preparations for the upcoming Tannenberg celebrations, being staged to commemorate the German victory over the Russians won there by Hindenburg in 1914 (a large memorial had been constructed at the battle site in which were entombed the remains of Hindenburg and his wife).

The new unit was designated as the Kampfgruppe 'Panzer-Verbände Ostpreussen' (East Prussian Tank Units) and command was given to Generalmajor Werner Kempf, the former commander of the 4th Panzer Brigade. Under his charge, the unit was referred to as Panzer Group *Kempf*. Along with Kempf, other members of the 4th Panzer Brigade (which was subsequently disbanded) formed the core of the new divisional staff. As a part of this formation, during the invasion of Poland, SS Regiment *Deutschland* was first blooded, fighting at Mlava, Rozan, Lomza, Kliczym and Modlin.

The staff set up headquarters at the Stablak Training area, south of Königsberg, East Prussia and made preparations for the remaining units of the division to arrive. Recognising the potential for further expansion of the Waffen-SS, Gruppenführer Paul Hausser accompanied the unit as an observer for the duration of its operations in Poland.

Panzer Division *Kempf* was unique, in that it was the first Army division to be composed of both Army and Waffen-SS units. Despite the fact that Panzer Group *Kempf* was structured as a regular Army panzer division, in material strength it amounted to little more than a reinforced panzer brigade. There was only one motorised infantry regiment as opposed to the authorised strength of two regiments and additionally, except for the 7th Panzer Regiment and the SS Reconnaissance Battalion, the unit was severely lacking in vehicles with cross-country capability. Notwithstanding the shortfalls, the experiment was to prove a success, and serve as the precursor of the first SS division.

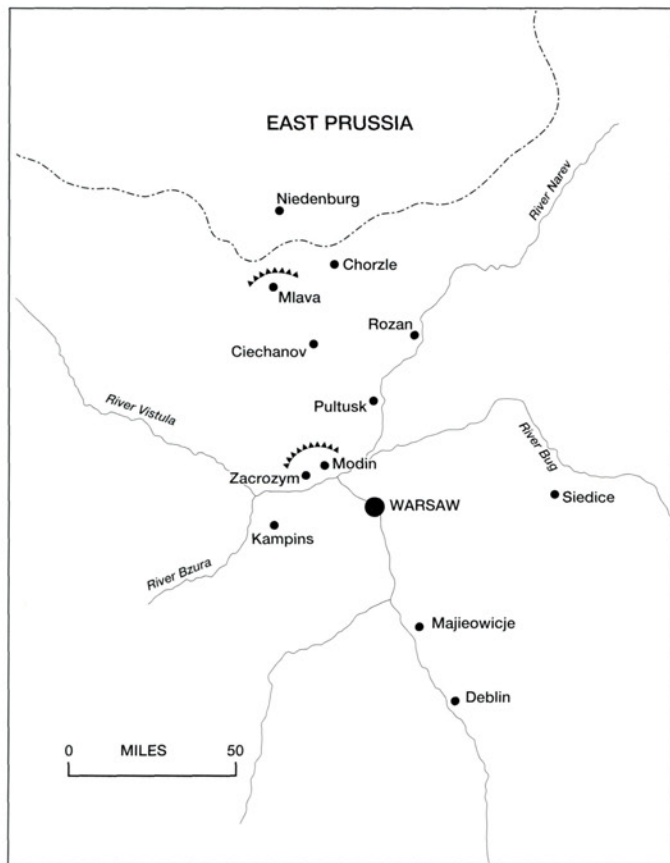
Throughout the month of August, the soldiers of Panzer Group *Kempf* engaged in manoeuvres while some diversion was found in assisting the local population with the



Above: Motorcycles were used extensively during the war by all sides. This is a captured Soviet motorcycle that is being brought back into service by a Waffen-SS soldier. In the background is a captured Soviet 76.2mm ZIS-3 dual purpose field gun, one of the most successful Soviet artillery designs, and a most desirable piece of booty. Slightly modified, captured guns of this type made excellent anti-tank weapons and were widely used mounted on various German tank chassis. The machine gun lying next to it is the standard Russian 7.62mm StP Maksima Mod. 1910 on a typical Russian wheeled carriage complete with armour plate that afforded some protection for the gunner.

Panzer Group Kempf, September 1939

7. Panzer Regiment
 SS-Regiment *Deutschland*
 SS-Artillery Regiment
 SS Signal Battalion
 SS Reconnaissance Battalion
 II./47. Heavy Artillery Battalion
 2./SS Anti-Aircraft MG Battalion
 505. Pioneer Battalion
 Field post detachment
 171. Admin Service Unit
 Transport Column 502
 Supply services
 Medical services



Above: The operational area in Poland, autumn 1939.

harvest. Preparations for the Tannenberg celebrations continued apace, disguising the true purpose of the military build-up. To help authenticate the ruse, veterans of the Great War from all over Germany gathered in the area.

On 19 August Panzer Group *Kempf* and the 61st and 11th Infantry Divisions, were assigned to the I Army Corps, and were subsequently moved closer to the border with Poland. Here, as the diplomatic crisis between Germany and Poland deepened, the units of the division continued to practice for the parade planned for the Tannenberg celebrations. The parade, scheduled for 24 August, never took place. Instead the division was moved further south to Kommusin Forest near Neidenburg, well within sight of the Polish border. From here the various regimental and battalion commanders and their adjutants made regular reconnaissance trips, scouting out possible assembly areas for the division.

On 25 August the protracted negotiations between Germany and Poland collapsed, and, in a last minute attempt to intimidate Hitler, the British announced that they had entered into a full military alliance with Poland. It was to no avail. *Kempf's* group was ordered to move forward to the I Army Corps assembly area. Notice arrived soon after that the attack would begin the next morning at 06.00. Using the tactics of Blitzkrieg, the OKH planned to use maximum surprise in the attack, code-named Fall Weiss. Throughout July and during early August some 98 Wehrmacht divisions had been mobilised and moved quietly

into positions east, on the Polish border, and west, to meet the expected counter-attack by the British and French. The plan called for an attack in the north from Pomerania by General Fedor von Bock's Fourth Army while his Third Army (together constituting Army Group North), advanced from East Prussia to complete a pincer movement. To the south Generaloberst Gerd von Rundstedt's Eighth (Blaskowitz) and Tenth (Reichenau) Armies were to strike from Silesia toward Warsaw, and the Fourteenth (List) to move on Krakow in the south-west to cut off any Polish retreat.

Panzer Group *Kempf* (attached to I Corps, Fourth Army) had orders to occupy the southernmost position in East Prussia, directly in front of a strong Polish bunker system known as the 'Mlava position'. As part of this movement, under the cloak of darkness, sub-units of *Deutschland* deployed along the border, while the divisional artillery emplaced the gun batteries that would support the morning assault.

At daybreak on the 26th, barely minutes before the attack was due to commence, came an order to postpone. But poor communications, hampered by a poor road network made worse by a recent rain storm, ensured that the message was not passed to all elements of *Deutschland* in time. A reconnaissance patrol from 9./*Deutschland* advanced several miles across the border and, although there was no contact with the enemy, it required considerable effort to disseminate the belated order. Nearly three hours had passed before all units had been recalled to their assembly points, a somewhat ignominious start to the campaign. However, there were some useful lessons to learn from this apparent bungle. Prime among them was the suggestion that Polish forces would not engage the division at the border, and that the first point of resistance would most likely be encountered in front of the Mlava position.

Negotiations began once more in earnest. I Army Corps was withdrawn from the Polish frontier, and reassembled at the former divisional command post at Neidenburg. Four days later, on 30 August, the talks broke down again, and once again the troops of Panzer Division *Kempf* were mustered.

Their officers were called to a briefing at the divisional HQ at Neidenburg for the commanders of I Army Corps regiments. At the meeting Generalmajor Kempf, to the evident amazement of the officers assembled, ordered the division 'back into their old foxholes'. This was an extraordinary order considering one of the basic tenets of war is never to reoccupy assembly positions if they have been made known to the enemy. Despite this, the men of SS Regiment *Deutschland* moved into their old positions and waited for the coming events.

The attack was set for 04.45 on 1 September, and this time no halt order arrived to arrest the invasion. On the night of the 30th, SS units staged incidents along the border including a hoax Polish raid on the German radio station at Gleiwitz (Operation Himmler). Shortly before 01.00 on 1 September some 37 German divisions began to move from their start points toward the German-Polish border, and began to cross at dawn. Preceded by an artillery bombardment and attacks by dive-bombers, Panzer Group *Kempf*, which had been entrenched near Neidenburg, moved from its start lines against the positions in front of Mlawa. *Deutschland* troops had as their first objective the small villages of Dvierznis, on the right flank of the line of advance, and Zavadski, on the left. The 1st and 3rd Battalions, respectively, were charged with capturing them, and then the high ground beyond. Moving south down the Mlawa road the regiment initially met little resistance and took the villages, but at the base of the bare ridge lying behind, on which the Poles had sited strong defences, the attackers came under heavy fire and were halted.

At 15.00 the attack began anew, with a frontal assault by the SS on a hill designated Point 192. On this sector the defences were strong; the supporting armour of 1st Panzer Battalion was soon ensnared in the steel traps, providing Polish gunners with easy pickings until the mounting losses forced the panzer commander to break off the attack. The order left the infantrymen, who had worked their way through the barbed wire barricades and at one point advanced to within 150 metres of the enemy, exposed on the ridge. Here they stayed under a rain of Polish fire until nightfall, when they withdrew back to the main defence line under cover of darkness.

Rozan

The following day *Deutschland* was pulled out of the line at Mlawa and redeployed to the east, to the area around Chorzele, where a breakthrough had been achieved. Marching south-east with the 7th Panzer, the regiment ran up against the Polish defenders in the Tsarist-era forts at Rozan on the River Narev. Initial attempts to seize the town were met with fierce fire, halted, and then repulsed by counter-attacking Polish cavalry. Forced temporarily onto the defensive, the division was regrouped and successfully invested the town, then carried the advance south-east, behind the capital Warsaw, to Loriza, Czervin and Hadbory, all the time fighting in high summer heat through cloying soil that sapped the energies of the exhausted soldiers and ravaged their arms and machines.

Warsaw

Within five days Bock's Army Group North had overrun the Danzig corridor, and by 7 September elements of Reichenau's Tenth Army

Below: A captured Polish officer is taken to HQ for interrogation.



Division name

As it expanded *Das Reich* underwent a number of name changes, which are detailed below.

SS Division Verfügungstruppe (mot) (10 October 1939–1 April 1940)

SS-V Division (1 April 1940–2 December 1940)

SS Division *Deutschland* (3 December 1940–27 January 1941)

SS Division (mot) *Reich* (28 January 1941–May 1942)

SS Division *Das Reich* (May 1942–9 November 1942)

SS Panzergrenadier Division *Das Reich* (9 November 1942–January 1944)

SS Kampfgruppe *Das Reich*** (17 December 1943–27 April 1944)

2nd SS Panzer Division *Das Reich* (January 1944–May 1945)

**While the majority of *Das Reich* returned to France for refit, portions of the division remained behind to fight as an independent battle group

(Army Group South) had advanced from Silesia north-east to within 50km of Warsaw, in the first move of a double pincer envelopment, and succeeded in cutting off Polish forces before they could retreat behind the Vistula. That same day the Eighth Army succeeded in taking Lodz, 120km south-east of Warsaw.

With the route to Warsaw now wide open, Tenth Army turned its axis of advance north and advanced toward the capital from the south-west, while the Fourth Army closed from the north. Instead of withdrawing east to escape the pincer movement, on 10 September the Polish commander, Marshal Rydz-Smigly, ordered a retreat to south-east Poland. On the day of the Polish withdrawal *Deutschland* crossed the River Bug at Brok, attempting to link up with the southern arm of the pincer and intercept the retreating Poles.

With their defensive perimeter considerably diminished, the Poles now had the advantage of concentrating their forces, and the resistance thickened. They struck south at the Eighth Army, protecting the northern flanks of the Tenth Army, and caught the Germans temporarily off balance, but without air cover, much of which had been destroyed in the first days of the war, the Poles faced an untenable position. In the ensuing week Guderian's armoured corps advanced from the north-west, linked up with Kleist's armour moving from the south at Brest-Litovsk on the 14th, and effectively cut off any potential escape route for the encircled armies. *Deutschland* had by this time advanced as far as Siedlice, and now swung to the south-west towards Majieowicze as the great battle in the Bzura bend destroyed the last credible Polish opposition.

The final prize, the capital Warsaw, was as yet untaken. On the north-western fringe of the city lay the towns of Modlin and Zakroczym and it was at these that the regiment was ordered to strike, and the forts to west and north-east of Modlin.

Investing them proved to be a formidable challenge that engaged the regiment for the better part of nine days. The first preparatory assault went in on 22 September, with the pioneer battalion clearing paths for the main attack. In the interim the Luftwaffe sent droves of bombers to weaken the defences, until finally, at 05.30 on the 29th, *Deutschland* troops began crawling through the breaches in the wire and formed up for the assault. At 06.15 artillery opened up on the town of Zakroczym and the No.1 Fort. Following in the wake of the barrage came the infantry. In a little over an hour and a half the town was taken, and a concentrated bombardment forced the men holed up in the No.1 Fort to capitulate in the early afternoon.

Although scattered resistance continued until 10 October, the capture of Warsaw and its forts effectively brought an end to the campaign. It marked, too, the end of Panzer Group *Kempf*, which was shortly disbanded. The campaign had lasted less than two months and ended in the destruction of the Polish Army and the Fourth Partition of Poland. German losses were surprisingly heavy considering the brevity of the campaign. The casualty total was some 48,000 men of whom 16,000 had been killed. Fully a quarter of the tanks the German committed to battle were lost to Polish anti-tank guns. The Luftwaffe was forced to write off some 550 aircraft. Despite the losses, the stunning success of Fall Weiss confirmed to the German commanders that the military machine that they had built was indeed the best in the world and worthy of their confidence.

Right: The Western Campaign, 1940. A Waffen-SS NCO from SS Regiment *Germania* (note the cuff title) discusses the next move with members of his reconnaissance patrol. Note the lack of the usual Waffen-SS camouflage jackets and the SS collar patches normally worn on the tunics. The soldier on the left, holding a P08 pistol, is carrying, slung on his back, a tripod for an MG 34.

THE WESTERN OFFENSIVE

On the day that Warsaw fell Hitler notified the OKH to begin planning an attack in the west, to take place as soon as possible. Code-named Fall Gelb, as first outlined on 19 October this was limited in scope to taking ground in Belgium for air bases and ports on the North Sea. A week later, Hitler proposed an attack directly into France avoiding Belgium, and then at the end of the month, he suggested an attack through the Ardennes.



The enormous complexity of the preparations, and the need to rest and re-equip the armies forced several delays. Over the winter, Fall Gelb was scheduled and cancelled four times. At a conference of 180 top German commanders staged on 23 November Hitler, aware that every day gave the Allies further time to prepare, tried to instill some urgency. Finally, Fall Gelb was set to be ready for 17 January 1940, but a week prior to the scheduled attack, a communications aircraft ferrying a German staff officer, with highly classified documents outlining the attack plan, crashed in Belgium, and despite his attempts to destroy the documents, portions of Fall Gelb were soon in the hands of the Belgian and the Dutch commands. Both gave the order to mobilise. Learning of the disclosure, the German military attaché in Holland notified Berlin, forcing Hitler to cancel Fall Gelb the day before the attack.

Orders were given for the OKH to come up with a new plan. Of the numerous proposals the most radical was that of Rundstedt's chief of staff, General Erich von Manstein. Through good connections he was granted an audience with Hitler, and on 17 February spent the entire day presenting the 'Manstein Plan'. Hitler was favourably impressed with the plan and thereafter over-rode any objections. A draft, code-named 'Sichelschnitt' (Sickle Stroke), had been produced by 24 February and formed the basis for the Western offensive.

Below: The Western Campaign, 1940. A Waffen-SS NCO catches up on some sleep after hectic action.



It was typical of the bold, mobile warfare favoured by the forward thinking staff officers of the time, of whom Manstein was perhaps the most brilliant. His plan, the Manstein Plan (which was in fact a variation on the original OKH plan), was central amongst the advantages that the German forces enjoyed during the Western campaign. These were certainly not numerical, for the French Army was considered to be the finest in Europe at this time and in pure numbers outweighed the Germans in key areas. Rather, it was the deployment of the forces that was crucial.

The plan relied on deep strategic penetration by independently operating armoured forces, with tactical air support, a technique which had proved so devastatingly successful in Poland. The offensive was to have three parts: the first an attack on Holland to provide a base from which to attack Belgium and France; a subsequent attack upon the Belgian defences; and finally a coordinated thrust from points north and east into France. For the offensive three Army groups, A, B, and C, under Rundstedt, Bock and Leeb were created. Army Group B, which included the Eighteenth (Küchler) and Sixth (Reichenau) Armies were to aim at Holland and Belgium respectively. The key tank units, including the 5th and 7th Panzers under Rommel, the Kleist Armoured Group (with the XIX Corps under Guderian) and the 6th and 8th Panzers under Reinhardt were attached to Rundstedt's group. It was charged with the most daring element of the plan, a drive through the ravined and forested Ardennes region behind the main concentration of Allied forces, thus bypassing the formidable French Maginot defensive line, and a race to the undefended



Left: The war in Poland was effectively over by the end of the second week. Warsaw held out until 27 September and Modlin (illustrated here) capitulated on 28 September. The last organised resistance ended on 6 October. In the campaign the Germans took 694,000 prisoners, and an estimated 100,000 men escaped across the borders into Lithuania, Hungary, and Romania. The Germans lost some 16,000 killed of around 48,000 casualties; Polish losses will probably never be known.

Channel coast, before turning to complete the encirclement. Bock's attack on Belgium, where the Belgian Army was concentrated on a defensive line on the Albert Canal and Meuse River lines aimed at diverting attention from this, and at seizing the strategically important fortress at Eben Emael.

In contrast to this highly mobile concept of warfare, the orthodoxy of French and British military thinking still favoured static deployments with armoured support. The Anglo-French Plan D, formulated by the Allied commander-in-chief General Maurice Gamelin and approved by the Allied Supreme War Council, demonstrated a total failure to grasp the nature of Blitzkrieg and left the Allies unprepared for the attack that fell upon them.

THE SS-V DIVISION

After the fall of Poland *Deutschland*, with the SS-VT *Germania* and *Der Führer* Regiments, moved into barracks at Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. Here on 19 October the separate Standarten were combined into a designated SS-V Division, with an artillery regiment, battalions of signals, reconnaissance, pioneers, anti-tank and anti-aircraft gunners, under the command of Paul Hausser. With the British and French forces strung out along the Maginot Line, and little activity in the west to speak of (called the *Sitzkrieg* or 'sit-down war' by the German soldier), the division underwent a six-month period of training to prepare it for the coming battles.

In December, with planning for Fall Gelb already well advanced, the SS-V Division received preliminary orders under which it was revealed that various sub-units were to be parcelled out to the Army. *Der Führer* and a battalion of the artillery regiment plus a pioneer company and the transport column were placed under the command of the 20th Infantry Division and the divisional reconnaissance battalion together with a platoon of *Deutschland's* armoured cars were seconded to the 254th Infantry Division. The remainder of the division was placed under the command of the Eighteenth Army (Küchler). Army Group B had as one of its objectives an envelopment of the southern flank of the densely populated 'Fortress Holland', a region formed by rivers and canals around the five major Dutch cities – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, Leiden and Den Haag. The most important of the Dutch defences were the IJssel–Maas river line, the

Areas of operations

Czechoslovakia, Poland and Germany (October 1939–May 1940)
 Netherlands and France (May 1940–April 1941)
 Romania, Yugoslavia, Austria and Poland (April–June 1941)
 Eastern Front, central sector (June 1941–June 1942)
 Germany (June–July 1942)
 France (July 1942–January 1943)
 Eastern Front, central sector (January 1943–February 1944)
 France, Belgium & Western Germany (February–December 1944)
 Ardennes (December 1944–January 1945)
 Hungary & Austria (January–May 1945)

Countries in which *Das Reich* men served: Belgium, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Ukraine, Yugoslavia

Grebbe line in the north and the Peel line in the south and from the Zuider Zee to Maastricht. Inside of them the 400,000-man conscripted Dutch Army had concentrated.

It was also likely that the Dutch would open their dikes and flood the land, and create another obstacle to the invasion force. To counter such a move, it was essential to capture bridges intact, and for this objective the SS-V Division received thorough training in waterborne assault during the spring of 1940.

In February the threat of a British invasion of Norway forced a temporary diversion and further delays to the opening of the western offensive. After further postponements because of the weather, the assault finally began before daylight on 10 May, with extensive air attacks on the Dutch and Belgian airfields and the seizure of vital river crossings by paratroops at Moerdijk and Rotterdam. At dawn Küchler's Eighteenth Army, on the northern flank of Bock's group and including the 9th Panzer Division, drove into Holland. In the van were *Der Führer* and the *recce* battalion; the latter with an Army battalion and artillery unit formed the 'Grave group', and attacked in five detachments the bridges over the Waal at Nijmegen, and at Neersbosch, Hatert, Malden and Heuman. Of these two were taken, at Heuman and Hatert, albeit for heavy loss. With a vital bridgehead secured by the end of the first day, the *recce* battalion rejoined the division. *Der Führer*, also in the first wave, assaulted across the River IJssel and captured Westervoort and Arnhem by mid-afternoon. Bivouacking at Renkum, on the next day the regiment attacked the second line of Dutch defences (the Grebbe line) and broke through at Rhenen on the 12th. With the Dutch Army now forced back to the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht, and with the Dutch air force reduced to just a single bomber, the *Deutschland* Regiment spearheaded the drive to Amsterdam, and finally halted at Zandvoort on the North Sea.

The remainder of the division had by contrast seen little fighting thus far, having spent the opening two days moving west as part of the vast column of men and matériel pouring across the Rhine. The Maas was crossed and, meeting only light opposition, the SS units advanced toward Hilvarenbeek to the north of Antwerp. Their task was to protect the left flank of the Eighteenth Army to guard against a predicted strike by Gort's British Expeditionary Force, Blanchard's First Army, and the Belgian Army in northern Belgium, but when this failed to materialise, the division was instead ordered to intercept the French Seventh Army, which General Giraud had marched north to Breda, to threaten the extended German left flank. Running headlong into the 9th Panzer, the French column was at first stymied, and then pushed back onto the Dyle–Breda line.

Moving on the choked road network proved no simple feat, and only with some difficulty was the division regrouped at the objective. No sooner was this achieved than orders came to move west again, this time past Antwerp. The details of this operation required the SS division to take Walcheren and Beveland to the north-west of Antwerp. Both are approached across a narrow neck of land, which then opens out into south Beveland. In May 1940 the Dutch had inundated much of this area; at the western end a bottleneck traversed by a strongly defended dam guarded the entrance to Walcheren, and now this formed a formidable barricade to the island behind the flood waters.

By 13 May the advance column of German forces striking toward Rotterdam had brought the bulk of the Dutch Army to its knees and was halted at the outskirts of the city. Refusing to countenance delays Hitler issued an ultimatum to the Dutch – capitulate or Rotterdam would be destroyed. Negotiations began, but at 14.00 on 14 May the Luftwaffe attacked, killing over 900 and destroying much of the old city.

However, south of Rotterdam, the Allies were determined to resist the German advance into the network of islands and waterways of the Scheldt. Attacking in two main battle groups on 16 May, led by the 1st Battalion (Witt) and 3rd Battalion (Kleinheisterkamp) of the *Deutschland* Regiment, the division advanced through the first

bottleneck along a narrow thrust-line under heavy Allied artillery and naval gunfire, fanning out west of Kapelle and across flooded, heavily mined ground onto the Walcheren Dam. Here the resistance was predictably tough, and when it finally pulled out on 17 May the division had paid a heavy cost for victory.

In the centre of the German attack, Rundstedt's Army Group A advanced with such speed as to cause discord bordering on panic among the Allied armies. His main tank force, under Kleist, went through the Ardennes, over the Meuse and swept around behind the French First Army. By the evening of 17 May, the French were back on the Oise, and a large salient was forming between the Allied forces in northern France and Flanders and those that were being driven back onto the Somme River line. To strengthen the walls of the salient, the SS-V Division, reassigned to XLI Corps command with 6th and 8th Panzer Divisions, was ordered to drive to Calais without halt, leaving only a token force of the Eighteenth Army to hold positions in the Netherlands.

On the night of the 22nd the division was halted in dispersed positions between Divion and Aire on the corps' right flank, as part of a holding action to prevent a possible British breakout to the south across the La Bassée canal. Against these positions the French launched powerful armoured and infantry thrusts, seeking to find weak spots in the line through which to escape the encirclement. In a night of confused fighting, the French assaults drove the *Der Führer* Regiment back to St. Hilaire, threatening a breakthrough in that sector. With daylight some semblance of order was regained; the regimental anti-tank guns were turned on the enemy armour and a potential crisis narrowly averted. Having flung the enemy back, the division then launched powerful counter-attacks that carried it across the La Bassée canal and secured vital bridgeheads, which it had to fight hard to protect from British 2nd Infantry Division.

On the 26th the SS-V was handed the difficult task of clearing well-constructed positions in the Forest of Nieppe north-east of Aire of British troops, among them the men of the first-rate Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment. The grenadiers of the *Germania* and *Der Führer* Regiments, with the *recce* battalion, began to sweep through the forest at 08.30 on the 27th. On the right *Germania* soon ran into the Queen's Own, which delayed it with excellent marksmanship until overwhelmed and forced into retreat by the material superiority of the attackers. By nightfall *Germania* was drawn up against Haverskerque, while on the left flank elements of *Der Führer* had reached the banks of the Nieppe Canal.

The *Deutschland* Regiment had been seconded to the 3rd Panzer Division for an attack on British units on the Lys Canal near

Below: The Western Campaign, 1940. A cheerful Waffen-SS soldier takes a break during an action. This close-up shows to advantage the camouflage patterning on his steel helmet cover and jacket.



SS-Division Verfügungstruppe

Der Führer Regiment
Deutschland Regiment
Germania Regiment
 Artillery Regiment
 Reconnaissance Battalion
 Tank Hunter Battalion
 Anti-aircraft Battalion
 Pioneer Battalion
 Intelligence Battalion
 Anti-tank Battalion
 Reserve Battalion

Merville. Having forced a bridgehead over the waterway, the regiment was struck by a British armoured counter-attack and, lacking heavy weapons, the grenadiers were checked and then driven back. But excepting such local reverses in fortune, the BEF was now in a precarious position – trapped in a pocket surrounding Dunkirk, its only remaining port, pressed by Army Group A from the south along the fragile canal line and from the east by Army Group B through Belgium, where the Belgians appeared on the brink of collapse.

Aware of the need to conclude operations in the forest of Nieppe, the corps command ordered further attacks for the 28th. But with the announcement of the general surrender of Belgian forces the British flank was suddenly exposed, and this hastened their retreat from a now indefensible position into the cordon around Dunkirk, from where an evacuation had been under way since the 27th.

At this juncture the corps HQ, acknowledging that the strain of two weeks fighting was beginning to gnaw, ordered the division to rest. It was soon on the march again, though, pursuing the British as they fought in retreat from the shrinking Dunkirk perimeter to the beachhead. At hilltop vantage points at Cassel men of the *Der Führer* Regiment watched the drama unfold.

On 1 June, with the bulk of the British Expeditionary Force returned to England, 2,000 fresh troops were brought in to replace those lost from the division, and at full strength it moved on Bapaume, where a tenacious Allied garrison was still holding out. Three days later the last ship left Dunkirk, laden with French soldiers but stranding 30,000 more on the beaches.

With this the division, by then resting as part of the Army Group Reserve, was free to take its role in the next stage of the offensive, the conquest of France, starting on 28 May. Code-named Fall Rot, this was to be an attack on a scale hitherto unseen in warfare. Two army groups were ranged along a 360km line stretching from the Channel to Montmédy on the Franco-German frontier, with a third poised over the Rhine. In the west Army Group B was to open the attack on a front extending east to Reims, and force a breakthrough across the Seine. The main body of troops, in Army Group A, would then attack from the Aisne to the frontier, and while holding them the French Army of the East would then face the strike of Army Group C on the Maginot Line from the east. In matériel terms, the French could still field 60 divisions south of the Somme River line, deployed in tight clusters around existing obstacles – an arrangement known as quadrillage, or chequerboard – in an attempt to establish a defence in depth and prevent the rapid breakthroughs achieved in May. Together these formed the Weygand Line, a static line of defence on the Somme and Aisne Rivers in which the French placed great faith. Hitler had some 140 divisions at his disposal, and in the air, fast establishing itself the decisive battleground in this modern form of warfare, the Luftwaffe had by now achieved almost total dominance.

The attack, scheduled for 5 June, placed the SS-V Division with the *Leibstandarte* and the 9th and 10th Panzer under XIV Corps, Panzer Group Kleist, which was to march on Paris at the spearhead of Army Group B. By the second day the division was across the Somme River, meeting only light opposition. On the 7th the lead units were pinned down by a concerted artillery barrage from French units around the River Aire and, although the division was able to force several bridgeheads across the river, resistance quickly stiffened. In the ensuing actions Kleist lost 30 per cent of his armour and was ordered to withdraw before redeploying to the east to the Aisne, where a breakthrough had been made. After this, on the 9th, the SS-V Division was pulled back to positions behind the Somme.

On 14 June Paris fell, signalling to all effects the end of France. With the French Third, Fifth and Eighth Armies trapped to the east in the Maginot Line, facing imminent

Right: Forward! Somewhere on the Eastern Front. The face of the German soldier – a Waffen-SS soldier pauses next to a pontoon carrier.



collapse, and such other pockets as remained in dire threat of encirclement, little hope was left of resisting the German forces sweeping south. SS-V rejoined Panzer Group Kleist, which had been strengthened by the secondment of both *Totenkopf* and *Leibstandarte*, and marched towards Dijon to cut off French troops trying to escape to the south-west, netting some 30,000 prisoners on 17 June before redeploying to Bordeaux on the Atlantic coast. It was here on 22 June that the troops heard news of the French cease-fire, followed two days later by the formal surrender.

For his part in the stunning success of the Western Offensive, Paul Hausser was summoned to Berlin by a jubilant Hitler, and was among three SS commanders (Sepp Dietrich and Georg Keppler were the others) to receive the Knight's Cross at the Führer's victory celebration in the Reichstag.

Until the Yugoslavian campaign, the division was detailed for occupation duties in conquered territories. After a brief interlude in southern France SS-V travelled to Holland, to assist in the disarmament of the Dutch Army, and then from September to November 1940 was engaged on occupation duty at Visoul in France. In August, as the Battle of Britain reached its height, the division was stationed near the Bay of Biscay, refitting and training in the amphibious assault techniques that would be required for Operation Seelöwe – Hitler's proposed seaborne invasion of England. However, by early December, with the renamed SS Division *Deutschland* at Visoul, this operation had been postponed indefinitely.

During this period major reorganisation and expansion of the SS was undertaken, under which on 15 August Himmler ordered all reserve SS-V units into the Waffen-SS. SS-V Division lost some members of its NCO cadre, who were posted to the *Leibstandarte* to assist in its expansion. Others from the *Germania* Regiment, and the respected commander of the *Deutschland* Regiment, Felix Steiner, went to raise the new SS Division *Wiking*. Within the SS-V Division itself, the infantry units were restructured, and additional artillery battalions, a self-propelled battery, a motorcycle battalion and men of 11th SS Infantry Regiment *Totenkopf* were brought in to fill gaps. In December Himmler ordered a name change to SS Division *Deutschland*, which at the end of the following month became SS Division *Reich* (mot.), with its own tactical sign.

OPERATION MARITA – YUGOSLAVIA

In the early spring of 1941, events in the Balkans conspired to bring about the invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece by German forces. During February, the diplomatic crisis prompted by Hitler's demands upon the Yugoslav government deepened, and speculation over a German campaign in the Balkans grew. The Soviet Union, still Germany's ally at the time, tore up its non-aggression and friendship pacts with those two countries on 5 April and the next day German forces invaded.

SS Division *Reich* was engaged on manoeuvres in southern France when it was ordered to make the long road journey to Temesvar in Romania, where it joined XLI Corps of List's Twelfth Army in preparation for the invasion of Greece and Yugoslavia.

The Attack on Belgrade – Operation Punishment

In the early morning hours of 6 April the Luftwaffe opened its assault on Belgrade with a saturation bombing raid, directing the main effort against the centre of the city, where the principal government buildings were located. The weak Yugoslav Air Force and the

Below: Map of the area around Belgrade.



inadequate flak defences were wiped out, and virtually all means of communication between the Yugoslav high command and the forces in the field were destroyed.

Belgrade then became the focus for three separate German thrusts (Operation Punishment), which converged on the capital from points south and east. Early in the morning of 8 April, First Panzer Group jumped off from its assembly area north-west of Sofia. Crossing the frontier near Pirot, the XIV Panzer Corps advanced in a north-westerly direction toward Nis, and broke through the enemy lines on the first day of the attack. On 9 April the lead tanks rumbled into Nis and immediately continued their drive toward Belgrade. From Nis north-westward the terrain became more favourable, allowing the armoured columns to follow the Morava valley all the way to the Yugoslav capital. By 10 April XIV Panzer Corps' forces were swiftly advancing through the Morava Valley in close pursuit of enemy units retreating toward their capital and, on the evening of 12 April, First Panzer Group tanks stood less than 65km south-east of Belgrade.

Timed to coincide with the armoured thrust of the XIV Panzer Corps from the south-east, the XLI Panzer Corps drive led across the south-eastern part of the Banat and toward the Yugoslav capital. Spearheading the attack were the Infantry Regiment *Gross Deutschland* closely followed by SS Division *Reich*. Their primary objective was the bridges over the Danube, but to reach these the corps first had to gain the highway leading from Alibunar west to the banks of the river. All efforts were thus directed at reaching this objective, as the first unit on the road had been promised priority of movement. Hausser was determined that his SS division would be the first into Belgrade but, faced with the difficulties of an advance across difficult ground the chances of achieving this appeared slim. After the division crossed the frontier north of Vrsac on 11 April, these fears were soon confirmed as vehicles became mired in the swampy ground. By determination and guile advance elements of the motorcycle battalion were able to force a way along railway embankments and dykes, entering Pancevo that same day. The remainder of the division reached Alibunar by 17.30, thus ensuring right of passage on the highway. Having meanwhile advanced to within about 70km north of Belgrade, the main body of XLI Panzer Corps met with only isolated resistance as it rolled toward the enemy capital.

As the three separate attack forces converged on Belgrade simultaneously, the advance to Belgrade developed into a headlong race. Despite advancing over the most difficult terrain, on the evening of 12 April Second Army and OKH were briefed that, of the three converging armoured forces, XLI Panzer Corps was reported closest to the capital, having reached Pancevo on the east bank of the Danube about 15km east of the city. South of Belgrade resistance had stiffened as the 11th Panzer Division, spearheading the First Panzer Group forces, closed in.

The Fall of Belgrade

Toward early evening of 12 April began one of the most celebrated of *Das Reich* actions, one that made a national hero of Hauptsturmführer Klingenberg, commander of No.2 Company of the Motorcycle Battalion. That morning Klingenberg and members of his motorcycle assault company had approached Belgrade from Pancevo along the bank of the Danube. Klingenberg was anxious to enter the city but the swollen river and lack of any usable bridges prevented a direct assault, and the motorcycle assault company had no bridging equipment or

Below: On 14 May 1941 Fritz Klingenberg received the Knight's Cross for his role in the Yugoslavian campaign (see over page). At the time he was an SS-Hauptsturmführer (as shown here) and commanding officer of the 2nd Company, SS Motorcycle Battalion, (SS-Kradschützen-Btl.) from SS Division *Das Reich*, part of XXXXIst Army Corps of the Twelfth Army operating in the Balkans.



rafts. After commandeering a motor launch discovered on the north bank of the river, Klingenberg crossed over with one of his platoon leaders, two sergeants and five privates. On reaching the other side, Klingenberg sent two men back for reinforcements and proceeded with the remaining six men into Belgrade. Soon after Klingenberg encountered a group of 20 Yugoslavian soldiers and without firing a shot took them captive. Further on, a group of military vehicles approached Klingenberg's men, and after a short battle, the Germans captured those, too. The assault group, now fully mobile, headed towards the Yugoslavian War Ministry, but arrived to find the building abandoned. Since there was no military command left in Belgrade, Klingenberg and his men proceeded to the German embassy, which remained open, and at 17.00 they unfurled a large swastika and raised it atop the legation to declare the capture of the city. The mayor of the city was then summoned and, persuaded that Klingenberg was in fact the commander of a large force and that failure to surrender would bring down another Luftwaffe attack, at about 19.00 he surrendered the city to Klingenberg and a representative of the German Foreign Minister, previously interned by the Yugoslavs. It was not until the next day that a sizeable German force arrived to secure the city. For this feat SS Hauptsturmführer Fritz Klingenberg was awarded the Knight's Cross, and henceforth was known as the 'man who captured Belgrade'.

The Final Drive on Sarajevo

After the collapse of their border defence system and the fall of Belgrade the Yugoslav Army leaders hoped to withdraw to a mountain redoubt in the interior of Serbia, where they intended to offer prolonged resistance. Fully aware of the Yugoslav intentions, General Weichs, the Second Army commander, launched a vigorous pursuit of the enemy forces withdrawing in the general direction of Sarajevo. Speed was of the essence since the OKH intended to pull out and redeploy the motorised and armoured divisions as soon as practicable as these had to be refitted for the coming Russian campaign.

Below: Otto Weidinger, SS-Sturmbannführer and Commanding Officer of the Reconnaissance Battalion (SS-Aufklärungs-Abteilung) from 2.SS Panzer Division *Das Reich* seen here (in field-grey uniform) standing on his command vehicle.



Armistice Negotiations

Recognising the hopelessness of the situation, the Yugoslav command requested an armistice. During the afternoon of 15 April General Weichs and his staff arrived in Belgrade and drew up conditions for an armistice based on the unconditional surrender of all Yugoslav forces. The armistice was concluded and signed on 17 April. Ten days later, the surrender of the last British troops in Greece signalled the end of the Balkan campaign. Its mission complete, the division returned to Temesvar and then to rest and refit in Austria.

OPERATION BARBAROSSA

The actions in the Western and Balkans campaigns laid the foundations for the military reputation of the 2nd SS Division, but it was on the Eastern Front, over nearly four years of bitter fighting, that this reputation was cemented. Thus far the division had been on the sidelines, used piecemeal by Army commanders to bolster up the flanks or guard the rear of its own divisions, yet in the east, within a short time, its true capabilities were thrown into relief by the unstinting severity of the fighting. Such were the early triumphs that Hitler began to develop a wildly exaggerated confidence in the *Waffen-SS* and, seeking to emulate the qualities of its premier formations, he authorised a ten-fold expansion in the number of divisions by the end of the war. Such qualities were not so easily duplicated.

As the ideological and political background to the Eastern campaign is widely understood and documented, I have foresworn a detailed description of the general events of the offensive, preferring instead to focus on the actions of *Das Reich*. It should be emphasised at the start, however, that the war in the east was vastly different in kind from any of the campaigns involving the Western Allies. The scale of the territory over which *Das Reich* operated, the extremes in climate the soldiers endured, the spartan yet vital transport infrastructure on which the fighting necessarily focused, and the sheer volume and tenacity of forces that faced them, all these were in marked contrast to the situation in any of the campaigns in the west.

Aufbau Ost

Stemming from Order 21 issued by Hitler on 18 December 1940, *Aufbau Ost* – the military build up of the infrastructure in the occupied part of Poland – began in January 1941. Preparations for *Barbarossa* finally concluded by 15 May. In advance of the planned start date of 22 June, *Reich* moved by train from Salzburg, where it was resting, to Lublin and then positions on the bank of the River Bug, where it joined XXIV (Motorised) Corps in Guderian's Second Panzer Group, on the central sector of Bock's Army Group Centre. From here the troops watched the Red Army opposite preparing their defences.

At 12.05 on the 21st came the order for the attack to commence, and the division formed up on its start lines. At 04.15, just before dawn, on 22 June a mighty artillery barrage commenced, and the first German troops began crossing the river. For *Das Reich*, this was the start of a year of almost continuous combat in the east.

For the initial attack the Second Panzer Group advanced on a line that took it east from around Brest-Litovsk, and in the opening days XXIV Motorised Corps had the task of regulating the vast transport column moving along this line. When the division was finally called up to the front, vehicular access on the one useable highway was denied, and so the grenadiers were forced to march instead. Arriving in the battle zone, they were given the objective of forcing a river crossing between Citva and Dukora, while a detached battle group was to move along the No.1 Highway at Sluck. The latter force,



Above: The battle for Taganrog has ended. A captured Red Army soldier unstraps his equipment and weapons while his *Waffen-SS* captor carefully checks the prisoner's jacket lapel.

Right: *Das Reich* operational area on Eastern Front.

Below right: Eastern Front, May 1944. "Done! The hotly fought-over height is finally in our hands. The Soviets were taken completely by surprise by the well-planned and pre-pared German offensive and they could not hold out against the assault of the Waffen-SS grenadiers. The photograph shows one of the victorious Waffen-SS grenadiers enjoying his pipe while keeping his eyes on the enemy. A destroyed Soviet T-34/76 tank is visible in the background."

SS Division Reich (1941–42)

Division strength: 19,000

SS Infantry Regiment *Deutschland*

1st Battalion

1st–4th Companies

2nd Battalion

5th–8th Companies

3rd Battalion

9th–16th Companies

Light Infantry Detachment

SS Infantry Regiment *Der Führer*

as *Deutschland*

11th SS Infantry Regiment *Totenkopf*

as *Deutschland*

Artillery Regiment

1st Battalion

1st–3rd Batteries

2nd Battalion

4th–6th Batteries

3rd Battalion

7th–9th Batteries

4th Battalion

13th–15th Batteries

Assault Gun Battery

Ranging Battery

Motorcycle Battalion

1st–5th Companies

Reconnaissance Battalion

1st–3rd Companies

Light Reconnaissance Detachment

Tank Hunter Battalion

1st–3rd Companies

Pioneer Battalion

1st–3rd Companies

Bridging Section

Light Pioneer Detachment

Intelligence Battalion

1st & 2nd Companies

Light Intelligence Detachment

Economics Unit

Ration Supply Depot

Bakery Company

Butchery Company

Supply Services

15 x Motorised columns

Supply Company

Repair Services

3 x Workshop companies

Spare column

Medical Units

Field Hospital

2 x Medical companies

3 x Motorised ambulance platoons

comprising the motorcycle battalion, the recce battalion, flak and pioneer detachments, soon ran into trouble at Starzyca and had to be saved from encirclement by the mobile artillery and the 3rd Battalion.

From here the division began the advance through the great Pripet Marshes, and by 2 July had reached Beresivo. Moving on to Moghilev, and all along the way hampered by poor roads and harassed by forces that struck and then melted ghost-like into the vast forests, the division was ordered to protect the northern flank of the advance along the Minsk–Smolensk highway to Yelnya. Smolensk was only captured after dogged resistance.

Yelnya

On 14 July, after three weeks in Russia, the division was at Gorki. A week after began the first of its major actions on the Eastern Front – a month of heavy fighting at Yelnya on the Desna River. Yelnya would appear to be of no greater significance than any of the other countless small towns in Western Russia, but was accorded great strategic value by the fact that it straddled a crossroads of the Moscow highway. Furthermore, to the east lies high ground which dominates the surrounding steppe and the highway. Hitler thus focused much attention on Yelnya. So, too, did Konev's West Front of the Red Army, which had constructed an elaborate and well-sited trench system in front of the high ground there.

The attack on these lines opened on 22 July, *Deutschland* Regiment advancing with support from 10th Panzer, and *Der Führer* on the right. Since the attackers lacked adequate supplies of shells, no effective artillery support could be given; the grenadiers nevertheless carried the advance swiftly up the slope through a fusillade of fire and by nightfall were on the crest of the first ridge. On the right *Der Führer* crossed its start lines somewhat later, advanced determinedly through a ferocious hail of shot and shell, and had breached the main defensive line by the late evening.

Exhausted by a day of fighting uphill in the pitiless summer heat, the division was hit the next morning by a Soviet counter-attack, spearheaded by fresh troops brought into the line during the night. Fighting in the trenches and across the coverless, parched upland east of Yelnya continued throughout the day. In the thick of the heaviest action, *Das Reich's* anti-tank gunners held off repeated tank attacks that threatened to overrun the divisional artillery positions. Some detachments, including part of the motorcycle battalion, were virtually destroyed and the remnants had to be taken out of the line. The reward for their sacrifices during another day of intense fighting was a temporary victory; by evening the Russians were in retreat off the slopes.

Soviet attacks now followed with monotonous regularity, as Konev threw more and more of his reserve units into the battle. These were not the poorly-led, sparsely equipped conscripts that German troops often faced, but elite troops imbued with seemingly suicidal bravery. On the battlefield, criss-crossed with static defences, the fighting took on the characteristics of the Western Front in World War I, neither German nor Russian able to make a decisive breakthrough.

Thus, with the SS division held at Yelnya, the farthest point east to which any German Army unit had penetrated, the drive to Moscow, still some 300km distant, was halted. The cost to the Red Army was enormous, and also to Army Group Centre, but the manpower reserves of the latter were far more finite, and already stretched. A particularly heavy toll was exacted on *Reich*, which fought at Yelnya until 8 August, by which point losses had become so severe that the division was withdrawn to the area of Smolensk and given three weeks for rest and refitting.

The Kiev Encirclement

Hitler then paused to consider his next move. He deliberated and, temporarily abandoning the drive on Moscow, favoured the tactical advantages offered by an attack on the great salient centred at its western point on Kiev, which had been formed between Army Group Centre and South by the great Pripet Marshes during the advance east. Within this the bulk of five Soviet armies was concentrated.

The Kiev encirclement was planned as a classic pincer movement, with two vast forces attacking from points north and south to close the mouth of the salient while another held the enemy at the western end. *Reich* was attached to the XXIV Panzer Corps of Guderian's Second Panzer Army which, with the Second Army on its inner flank, was to strike south to meet the drive of the Seventeenth Army and First Panzer Group coming up from the south-east of Kiev. *Reich's* specific orders were to move south-west, penetrate the Russian line, and move round to the rear and thus encircle the Russian forces to the front of the left wing of the Second Army.

The attack was launched on 6 September; at first progress was rapid, but at Sosnitsa on the River Desna Guderian was halted for want of a crossing point. The capture of a railway bridge discovered as yet intact at Makoshim appeared to be the only chance to retain the momentum, and Guderian called on the *Reich* divisional motorcycle battalion to storm it. They did so in spectacular fashion, driving at headlong pace along the length of the bridge, while the sidecar machine gunners raked the Russians on the south bank with fire. Crashing through the barriers, the SS troops quickly set up a perimeter. At this point the promised close support from the Luftwaffe, which had failed to materialise at the given time, appeared overhead to rain bombs on the positions now held by the motorcycle battalion, killing ten and injuring many more. But the positions were held and, after the engineers had secured the demolition charges, the rest of the division was able to cross. Guderian had his bridgehead, out of which the *Reich* Division struck south in the second week of the battle along the railway line towards the River Uday, first to the junction at Bakhmach, and on to the northern river bank. Throughout the advance to the river the troops were hindered by the pitiful state of the roads and the minefields sown in their path, yet crossed on the 16th under heavy fire to the south bank at Priluki (*Der Führer*) and east at Brosna (11th SS Regiment).

With the establishment of a secure bridgehead at Priluki by the 18th the immediate objectives of the division were met. Already the Kiev encirclement had almost been completed, and Bock's HQ was moved to issue a letter praising the 'achievements of the commanders and men of SS Division *Reich*'. Pockets of resistance within the tightening noose fought on; at Putivl the motorcycle battalion faced a suicidal charge by cadets of the Kharkov military academy, all of whom were killed, but on the 24th, assured of victory, the division was taken out of the line for rest.

With the collapse of the last resistance in Kiev and the formal surrender there on 26 September, huge numbers of Soviet troops passed into captivity. Including those killed or wounded, Soviet losses are estimated at 660,000 men. It was a huge defeat for the Red Army – five armies were completely destroyed and two nearly so, half of its current active strength. But although it was undeniably one of the greatest German





Above: A half-naked, and still shocked, Soviet armoured car crewman, who was lucky to escape with his life, looking helplessly up at a Waffen-SS soldier, while his BA-10 three-axled armoured car is burning close by. The hapless Russian's chances of further survival were slim: the percentage of PoWs who died through starvation, fatigue and maltreatment at the hands of their captors was significant.

victories of the war, a country with the manpower resources of the Soviet Union was able to absorb such losses. The cost was to prove greater for the Germans, who had fatally delayed their attack on Moscow, and to which they could only now return, ominously, as the winter set in.

Typhoon

The Führer handed the task of implementing his plans, given the code-name Typhoon, to Bock's Army Group Centre. Strengthened by Höpner's Panzer Group, which had been sent from Leningrad, it was to drive east toward Moscow on three axes of advance; this accomplished, the northern and southern arms were then to turn inward to close the jaws of the pincer. The concept, though admirably simple, was short-sighted in its failure to provide for the Russian winter.

It did stress the need for a quick victory. On the day that Kiev fell 4th Army and 4th Panzer Group, to which *Reich* was attached, was ordered to return with all haste to the north for their role in the attack on Moscow, and although Guderian tried to win much-needed time for repairs to his tanks, Hitler refused. Thus, only the minimum could be achieved. For its part, *Reich* Division had a brief period of rest to count the cost of three months in Russia. Of the men who had marched east, 1,500 of each of the *Deutschland* and *Der Führer* Regiments had been killed, while other units had suffered comparable losses, though prior to the opening of Typhoon, these deficiencies at least were made good with men from the reserve battalions.

Bock began his three-pronged advance on 2 October. On the northern spearhead, Guderian placed the Army's elite *Grossdeutschland* Division, a motorised division, three panzer divisions and the reinforced *Reich* Division, which positioned for an attack east of Roslavl on Krichev and Ladishino with 10th Panzer Division.

Initially there was spectacular progress. Both objectives were taken and the division was ordered to move north-west to Yukhnov, gain the area between Gzhatsk (later called Gagarin) and Vyazma, despite the threat of an open right flank that this presented, and widen the fractures that the rapid advance had rent in the Soviet lines. Prime among the objectives was Gzhatsk, which held a commanding position on the Smolensk–Moscow highway. Its importance was not lost on the Red Army, ensuring that for three weeks the area was the focus of heavy fighting.

Komyenka was taken by 1st Battalion *Deutschland* on 7 October, and the Smolensk–Moscow highway cut by the 3rd Battalion in the early hours of the 8th. The following day these same two *Deutschland* battalions battled through mud on foot up the



highway. In the woods on the right flank, fierce fighting held up the progress of the 1st Battalion, but late in the day Gzhatsk was taken.

Zhukov, who had recently assumed command of the Moscow defence, was not about to give up this most important town lightly. Reinforcements were rushed in and counter-attacks soon began to fall on the division. To try and disrupt these attacks, *Der Führer* was sent to the east, where it seized the high ground near Slovoda, and then succeeded in pushing through the Soviet lines and on to the highway beyond. The division now had a clear route up the road to Moscow, and victory seemed within its grasp. On the 13th, *Der Führer's* 2nd and 3rd Battalions moved up the highway again, battling through the outer ring of defences manned by fanatical Siberian troops to the famous town of Borodino, scene of Napoleon's great battle, which was captured by *Der Führer* after fierce combat with 32nd Siberian Division on 15 October.

On the southern sector, Guderian had taken Orel in the first week. With Bryansk and Vyazma also encircled, 650,000 Soviet troops were trapped. The Soviet 3rd Army surrendered at Vyazma on 14 October and the 32nd at Bryansk six days later. But as yet more Soviet prisoners passed into captivity, the advance slowed to crawl as the autumn rains set in and the few roads became hopelessly clogged with traffic. Hitler's advantage was already running out. The temperature began to drop and around Moscow a citizen army marshalled by Soviet commissars was labouring to construct elaborate defensive works devised by Zhukov, who ordered a state of siege declared within the city. Furthermore, reinforcements were expected from the Far East, and most of the surviving Soviet warplanes were being concentrated around the city.

On 19 October *Der Führer* pushed up the highway from Istra to beyond the road junction at Mozhaysk, within 100km of the Russian capital. *Deutschland* troops moved north of the highway under a screeching Soviet rocket and shell bombardment at Mikhailovkoya and Pushkin; at Otyakova the troops fought hand-to-hand with tough Siberian and Mongolian troops manning the outer ring of defences.

Above: Paul Hausser receiving his Knight's Cross on 8 August 1941, while still commander of SS Division *Das Reich*. It was part of the XXXXVIth Panzer Corps from the Fourth Panzer Army operating with Army Group 'Centre'. Hausser would hand over command of *Das Reich* to Willi Bittrich in October 1941.



Above: A Waffen-SS SdKfz 250/12 light survey/range plotting armoured half-track entering a burning Russian village.

The flanking attacks launched to the north and south of the capital by Guderian and Hoth had pierced the Soviet lines, but lack of ammunition and supplies, and worsening weather conditions, now brought a temporary stay to the advance. Most of the troops had reached the limit of their endurance; rations had been reduced to a pitiful level; vehicles and weapons were almost inoperative in the severe weather conditions and losses had been such that, on 22 October, 11th SS Infantry Regiment *Totenkopf* was broken up and its members sent as replacements to the *Der Führer* and *Deutschland* Regiments. Cumulatively the division had suffered 7,000 casualties – 60 per cent of its combat strength – since the start of campaign. Elsewhere within Army Group Centre losses were equally severe.

In November the weakened components 4th Panzer Group was attached to XXXX Corps. In mid-month the roads froze and the firmer ground allowed the offensive to be taken up again. XXXX Corps was ordered to attack on the 18th with a drive on Istra, and then a move to encircle the capital from the north. The advance crossed the River Istra on the 25th, and in the next two days Istra, and then Vyssovka were captured. A week later the most advanced group of the division, its motorcycle battalion, reached the terminus of the Moscow tramway system at Lenino.

The Soviet Counter-Attack

Bock's forces were by now exhausted and most commanders were calling for a halt in the offensive. Night-time temperatures had by now plummeted as low as -32 degrees, and everywhere men began to drop from frostbite. With other casualties, this meant that

for the final attack planned for Moscow itself, both the *Deutschland* and *Der Führer* Regiments were reduced to two battalions, and supported by the seven tanks that were the full strength of 10th Panzer Division.

Sensing the weakness in his enemy as the offensive faltered, Zhukov chose 6 December to launch a major counter-attack on a 100km front with a million and a half men in 18 full strength divisions. Wave upon wave of attacking infantry were sent against the German lines, and under the sheer weight of the Soviet offensive, the German spearheads north and south of Moscow quickly crumbled. Soon, Soviet breakthroughs in the north and south threatened the encirclement of the entire Army Group Centre. On the 8th Hitler issued the momentous Directive 39 which, citing problems with the weather and logistics, ordered his troops to go on the defensive: 'thus to establish conditions suitable for a resumption of full-scale offensive operations in 1942.'

This order was met with little enthusiasm by the SS troops. Recrossing the River Istra, the division fell back in good order to the River Rusa as XXXX Corps' flanks threatened to give way. Hitler blankly refused to allow further retreat and demanded instead a solid defence. And so, although unprepared and poorly equipped to fight through a Russian winter, the troops moved into positions behind the Rusa, which they were to hold into the early new year.

THE CAMPAIGN OF 1942

A second wave of Russian attacks came crashing through the German line between Lake Ilmen and Lake Seliga on 7 January. The Sixteenth Army was threatened with encirclement and, despite the rapid despatch of *Totenkopf* reinforcements to the area, very soon a crisis developed, further compounded by Hitler's refusal to allow a withdrawal. By 20 January the Sixteenth Army was encircled in a pocket around Demyansk. Here it remained trapped for 73 days.

On 16 January the *Reich* Division was ordered to make a fighting withdrawal to the positions west of Gzhatsk that it had contested so bitterly the previous summer, and now fought to save from repeated Russian assaults. At Rzhev the Russians broke through and *Reich* was ordered to mount a counter-attack that succeeded, despite bitter cold and mounting losses, in sealing off the Russian penetration and trapping the 29th and 39th Soviet Armies. At the end of January, in an attempt to link-up with the encircled armies, the Soviets launched another mighty armoured attack. Their troops continued to batter the divisional lines throughout the first two weeks of February, achieving a breakthrough on the 17th that could only be stemmed by bringing the cooks, clerks and mechanics into the line.

A brief pause in the fighting ensued, allowing the widely scattered units to regroup. Counting the losses in the defensive fighting at Istra, Rusa, and Rzhev the *Reich* Division had suffered 4,000 casualties. Of the once 2,000-strong *Der Führer* Regiment, only 129 men remained, and as there were no longer any self-propelled guns, the unit was disbanded and the men re-allocated.

Placed on the reserve of Ninth Army, the shattered division (now in reality a battle group) was rebuilt to some level. *Der Führer* was reorganised as a panzer-grenadier regiment around the men who had survived the winter, a number of rehabilitated troops, and 3,000 new recruits. In March, the *Reich* battle group, still deficient in a host of areas, was shifted into positions in the bend of the Volga to meet an expected Russian assault over the great river. Preparatory attacks began on the 17th, and on the 25th the Soviets began a concerted effort on the 10km stretch of line held by *Reich*. Soviet tactics were again reliant on driving closely spaced waves of infantry one after the other headlong at the German lines. Cut down in droves by the German guns, their bodies lay strewn across the frozen battlefield. Following behind came more, and more. At some points troops began to experience ammunition shortages but the line was held and, by the middle of

Below: This young Volksdeutscher from Hungary, a volunteer serving in the Waffen-SS, has just received his mail from home.



SS Panzergrenadier Division Das Reich (1942–43)

Division HQ & HQ Company

3. SS Panzergrenadier-Regiment *Deutschland*

1st Battalion

1st–4th Companies

2nd Battalion

5th–8th Companies

3rd Battalion

9th–13th Companies

4. SS Panzergrenadier Regiment *Der Führer as Deutschland*

Artillery Regiment

1st Battalion

1st–3rd Batteries

2nd Battalion

4th–6th Batteries

3rd Battalion

7th–9th Batteries

4th Battalion

10th–12th Batteries

Motorcycle Battalion *Langemarck*

1st–5th Companies

Panzer Regiment

1st Battalion

1st–3rd Companies

2nd Battalion

4th–6th Companies

Heavy Tank Company

Tank Pioneer Company

Tank Workshop Company

1st & 2nd Light Tank Detachments

Assault Gun Battalion

1st–3rd Batteries

Reconnaissance Battalion

1st–3rd Companies

Light Reconnaissance Detachment

Tank Hunter Battalion

1st–3rd Companies

Anti-aircraft Battalion

1st–5th Batteries

Light Artillery Detachment

Pioneer Battalion

1st–3rd Companies

Bridging Section

Light Pioneer Detachment

Intelligence Battalion

1st & 2nd Companies

Light Intelligence Detachment

Economics Unit

Ration Supply Depot

Bakery Company

Butchery Company

Supply Services

15 x Motorised columns

Supply Company

Repair Services

3 x Workshop companies

Spares column

Medical Units

Field Hospital

2 x Medical companies

3 x Motorised ambulance platoons

Military Police Company

Field Post Section

War reporting Company

April, the attacks had petered out as the spring thaw set in. May saw further defensive actions on the central sector.

Leaving behind two battalions of the division – Kampfgruppe *Ostendorff* – on 1 June the division left the Eastern Front for Germany, to rest and refit, and to be rebuilt as a panzer-grenadier division. It arrived on 10 June and was subsequently rejoined by Kampfgruppe *Ostendorff*. Renamed SS Division *Das Reich*, and then, at the Führer's behest, SS Panzergrenadier Division *Das Reich* (this title became active from November), under this reorganisation a battalion of Panzer III and IV tanks was added, and the 3rd Battalion of *Der Führer* and the recce unit were equipped with SPW. The latter was expanded to battalion strength and given the honour title *Langemarck*, but was disbanded in November. Late in the year, a final act of reorganisation was the raising of a self-propelled gun battalion.

VICHY FRANCE – OPERATION ANTON

This process was well under way by July when the *Der Führer* Regiment moved into France, followed later by the remainder of the division, where it undertook occupation duties, initially at Le Mans. In the aftermath of the Allied landings in North-West Africa, Hitler ordered the occupation of Vichy France – Operation Anton – and from 27 November the division was at Toulon to guard against an Allied invasion of southern France, should one have been planned. These duties, a world away from the horrors witnessed the previous winter, carried over into the new year of 1943.

That winter and the following spring saw a reversal in Germany's fortunes. In Africa, Rommel's Afrika Korps was decisively beaten and swept out of the continent forever. On the Eastern Front, the German offensives in the Caucasus (Operations *Blücher* and *Braunschweig*) failed, Army Group B's attack (*Fischreier*) was halted in front of Stalingrad, and on 27 November the Soviet counter-attacks succeeded in encircling the entire German Sixth Army around the city. With the Sixth Army bottled up in Stalingrad, the Soviet South and Southwestern Fronts struck west toward the Dnieper in an effort to isolate Army Group A in the Caucasus, while the Bryansk and Voronezh Fronts drove into the German centre. Great breaches were made in the sectors held by Hungarian and Italian armies, and quickly exploited.

To avert the catastrophe unfolding on the Don Front, the newly organised SS Panzer Corps, which included the re-equipped 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Division *Das Reich*, and the *Leibstandarte* and *Totenkopf* Divisions, was sent back to Russia on 9 January 1943, with orders to rejoin Army Group South, halt the Soviet offensive, and then launch a counter-attack that would send them back east. The first units to arrive were immediately despatched as a battle group to Voroshilovgrad on the River Donets, to counter the Soviet effort in that sector against 6th Panzer Division.

In the last week of January the German Army reeled under another blow, as news of the surrender of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad was received. SS Panzer Corps was currently concentrating in the Kharkov area, which during the spring became the focus of intense fighting. To the west the Germans were holding on to a bridgehead over the River Oskol, through which the Italian Eighth Army was retreating, but to the north the Soviets had captured the transport hub of Kursk and everywhere breached the Army Group South line. In the final days of the month the division, still without the battle group fighting at Voroshilovgrad, moved into defensive positions on the River Oskol, battling against overwhelming odds to keep open the bridgehead there. On 1 February it was forced to withdraw back across the Oskol, and under concerted pressure fell back to the next natural barrier, the River Donets. The division's armour strength on 1 February was 66 Panzer IIIs, 60 Panzer IVs, and 4 Tigers.

It was now three months since the launch of the Soviet winter offensive. Lengthening lines were already creating supply problems and, as fatigue began to set in, the Soviet attacks began to lose impetus. Stalin was nonetheless determined to retain the initiative, despite the growing evidence that the momentum could not be sustained, and now grasped for the next prize, Kharkov.

With other centres like Novgorod, Rzhev, Vyazma, Bryansk, Orel, Kharkov and Taganrog, the city of Kharkov had proved crucial to the Germans in the winter defence of 1941/42, forming part of the system of fortified bastion towns known as the 'hedgehogs', which served as communications and logistics bases. Soviet forces, though able to regain territory around these bastions, had thus far been unable to capture them.

An offensive launched at Kharkov by Timoshenko in May 1942 had penetrated to the west of the city, but Paulus' Sixth Army counter-attack succeeded on 19 May in cutting off the Russian advance, and left the route down the Donets corridor to Stalingrad open. Nine months later, after the defeat of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad, Army Group South was again on the defensive, and Kharkov had assumed strategic importance once more. So the premier formation – SS Panzer Corps under the command of Paul Hausser – was ordered to hold it.

Forced to relinquish their positions on the Donets by early February, the troops retreated into a perimeter east of the ruined city. Already the Soviets had thrust between gaps on the corps' northern and southern flank, and by the middle of the month the three divisions had almost been enveloped in the arms of the Soviet movement. On Hausser's right, troops forming the southern arm of the pincer were flooding through a 40km gap between *Leibstandarte* and the 320th Infantry Division. Seizing the opportunity to cut them off, and thus stabilise his line, Hausser created a temporary battle group with the *Der Führer* Regiment, a regiment of the *Leibstandarte* and the motorcycle battalions from each.

On 10 February the battle group moved into positions at Merefa for the attack. The following day, cloaked in a blinding snowstorm, it moved off, and within 48 hours had penetrated 50km to the Soviet rear. Enduring temperatures that dropped to -40 degrees at night, the SS troops made contact with the 320th Division on 16 February, cutting the southern pincer and destroying the elite 7th Guards Cavalry Corps. With this bold stroke Hausser stabilised his southern flank. However, in front of Kharkov the remainder of the corps was gradually withdrawing, though reinforced by the return of the battle group. Soviet forces now abandoned the attack on the southern flank and concentrated on delivering hammer blows from the north and east which, by the middle of the month, had taken Smiyev and Belgorod. Hausser requested permission for a tactical withdrawal, but this provoked a rebuke and the terse order from Hitler to 'hold at all costs!' In open defiance of the Führer's orders Hausser nonetheless withdrew the corps through a narrow corridor from Kharkov on 15 February, back into positions on the River Uday.

Here it was temporarily rested and reorganised to offset the enormous losses endured, while preparing for a planned counter-attack by Army Group South. Before that could be contemplated, Manstein moved to halt the drive of the South-West Front at Dnepropetrovsk. Then, on 19 February, the attack to retake Kharkov began.

One notable action took place on the southern flank. Just after 09.15 on the 22nd, 150km south of Kharkov, Hauptscharführer Karl Kloskowski in PzKpfw III 431 seized a bridge across the Woltschia River on the western outskirts of Pavlograd, in the process destroying three T-34s and a number of anti-tank guns. Soon, assisted by Unterscharführer Paul Egger's Tiger, the two panzers held the bridge until reinforcements arrived, allowing Das Reich panzergrenadiers to secure the town less than two hours later. Kloskowski was awarded the Knight's Cross in July 1943 for this action. Within five



Above: February 1943. Zenta, a message-carrying dog, stands calmly while its handler removes the message container from her collar.

Below: Another February 1943 photograph, this shows a foot patrol checking field telephone lines. Well-protected from the cold and armed with an MP40 sub-machine gun, this soldier examines a telephone wire that lay hidden beneath the deep snow.







Above: A German assault boat patrol on a wide river, somewhere in Russia. The Waffen-SS gunner responds to enemy fire directed at his vessel from the far bank with a MG34 mounted behind a forward-sloping armour plate. Note the 75-round saddle magazine fitted when this machine gun was used in a light portable mode.



Opposite, Above: A group of *Das Reich* soldiers pushing try to move an open-top staff car stuck in deep mud. The car is towing a 7.5cm leIG 18 light infantry gun. In the autumn and spring it was often more difficult to drive on Russian country roads than the fields next to them.

Opposite, Below: February 1943. Waffen-SS troops fire their 15cm sIG 33 heavy infantry gun into Soviet assembly positions spotted by a Luftwaffe tactical reconnaissance aircraft.

Left: A member of a Waffen-SS assault group in action with the 1941 model of the standard German flamethrower. This weapon incorporated a flash cartridge ignition system.



Above: April 1943. Two Waffen-SS *Essenträger* (meal carriers) take a pause to light their cigarettes behind the cover of a destroyed building.

days the division was at Pavlograd, where with 4th Panzer Division it halted the Soviet drive to the Dnieper. Wheeling around to the north-east, *Das Reich* and *Totenkopf* aimed next at Lozovaya, a railway junction of considerable importance held by the 1st Guards Tank Army, and after three days of bitter fighting had seized control.

The Soviet command, unaware of the strength of the counter-attacking forces, continued to commit divisions. Advancing on Yefremovka through pouring rain and mud in the early days of March, *Das Reich* unwittingly outflanked the 3rd Tank Army moving in the opposite direction. With *Leibstandarte* positioned on the opposite flank, Hausser seized the chance to envelop this mighty force, which included much of the Voronezh Front's strength, and closed the jaws west of Berefka. Turning inward on the pocket, in three days *Das Reich* had crushed the desperate Soviet attempts to escape, and helped to force a final halt in the Soviet winter offensive.

Kharkov

South of the River Donets, Popov's Bryansk Front had been all but annihilated, losing 100,000 men killed or captured. With this threat removed, SS Panzer Corps was free to begin the attack on Kharkov itself, although now only 11 Panzer IIIs remained combat fit, and began to move north on 5 March. By 10 March the division's two battle groups were in positions to the west and south-east of the city – Kampfgruppe *Deutschland*, on the western boundary of the corps' positions, and Kampfgruppe *Der Führer* to the south-east protecting the corps' right flank. At 08.00 the following morning, the troops moved across their start lines. On the northern flank, having started well, *Deutschland* was pinned down by strong anti-tank fire for most of the day. In the centre, Salyutine railway station was captured in mid-afternoon, and Kampfgruppe *Der Führer* succeeded in cutting the road to Merefa.

Das Reich then received fresh instructions to move through Kharkov and then south against the forces concentrated in the industrial quarter, a task much complicated by a yawning anti-tank ditch that had been dug at the city perimeter, and the presence of a strong Soviet garrison. Beginning in the early hours of 12 March, a pioneer detachment crossed under heavy fire, and quickly established itself on the far bank. Grenadiers of 3rd Battalion *Der Führer* followed, and self-propelled artillery was then brought up to provide cover as the perimeter was widened. By dawn the anti-tank ditch had been breached and the first panzers were across. At 14.00 on 14 March Hauptscharführer Karl-Heinz Worthmann in PzKpfw IV 631 raced ahead of Kampfgruppe *Harmel* to storm a hill near Vosychevo, 13km south-east of Kharkov. He destroyed 27 heavy anti-tank guns, 2 artillery pieces, and numerous MG nests, driving the Russians from a strong-point that was preventing the encirclement of the city.

Resistance in the city crumbled, and on 15 March, exactly four weeks after the SS Corps had retreated out of Kharkov, it was back in German hands. With Soviet forces retreating in disarray, Manstein determined to retain the initiative and carry the advance further east. With *Das Reich* at the spearhead, SS Panzer Corps retook Belgorod on 18 March. Thus, in spectacular style, the operation to stabilise Army Group South's front was concluded, and territory previously lost to the Soviet forces regained. During the campaign the division knocked out an estimated total of 292 tanks and assault guns, and itself lost only 77 tanks and assault guns.

In late March the spring thaw once again halted operations. From 22 April *Das Reich* moved into billets around Kharkov and during the relatively quiet period that preceded the summer campaign there was time for rest and relaxation. As the unit began training for the summer offensive, some necessary restructuring took place. The motorcycle battalion was reformed as a reconnaissance battalion, and officers were transferred to become the nucleus of the III SS Panzer Corps (Germanisches). In May Motorcycle Bataillon *Langemarck* transferred to SS Volunteer Brigade *Langemarck*, and in June SS Infantry Regiment *Langemarck* was removed. At corps level the SS Panzer Corps became II SS Panzer Corps on the formation of I SS Panzer Corps (from cadres drawn from *Leibstandarte*, and *Hitler Jugend*), under Sepp Dietrich.

For his leadership of the 2nd Battalion during this period, Sturmbannführer Tychsen received the Knight's Cross on 31 April, as did Karl-Heinz Worthmann. In April Obersturmbannführer Karl-Heinz Lorenz, winner of the German Cross in Gold as commander of 2nd Panzer Company, joined the 2nd Panzer Battalion staff, while Hauptsturmführer Herbert Zimmermann took over the Tiger company.

During this period also the majority of the 1st Battalion personnel travelled west to train on the new Panther tanks, and did not return to Russia until after Operation Citadel. Thus to bolster *Das Reich's* lone remaining panzer battalion for Kursk, captured T-34 tanks were formed into a company (9th Company, 2nd Battalion). The 5th and 6th Companies had Panzer IVs for the upcoming battle, but the former's strength had to be filled out by a platoon of Panzer IIIs, mostly left over from the Kharkov battles.

ZITADELLE (CITADEL)

Among the officers of the OKH, and throughout the embattled Reich, there was considerable elation over the Kharkov triumph. Fuelled by this new optimism, an ambitious, but ultimately misconceived plan to regain the initiative on the Eastern Front was now hatched to eliminate the salient extending between Kharkov and Orel, which effectively extended the German front by some 400km. An Allied attack in the west appeared imminent, and the troops needed to defend this salient were much needed elsewhere. Further incentive was drawn from the fact that from the northern base, anchored on Maloarkangelsk, to the southern lip at Belgorod, the neck of the salient was only 110km wide.

Preparations for the proposed attack began at once, and over the ensuing three months some 900,000 men, supported by 2,700 tanks and 2,000 aircraft were brought up. OKH envisaged a double envelopment of the salient, with converging strikes on the northern flank by Ninth Army under General Kluge's Army Group Centre, and from the south by Group *Kempf*, comprising XI Corps, XLII Corps and III Panzer Corps, and the Fourth Panzer Army, comprising XLVIII Panzer Corps, LII Corps and II SS Panzer Corps, under the overall command of Manstein's Army Group South. Manstein planned a concerted attack in the centre toward Kursk by II SS Panzer Corps, supported by dual drives on its right flank by *Kempf's* III Panzer Corps (6th, 7th and 19th Panzer Divisions), and on the left by XLVIII Panzer Corps, which would then turn inward to meet Hausser's spearhead and trap a mass of Soviet forces.

The attack was originally scheduled for May, but there were many postponements as Hitler fretted over the minutiae of the operation, which he dreamed would 'shine like a beacon to the world' and avenge the crushing defeat at Stalingrad earlier in the year. But as he later privately revealed, he had considerable misgivings about the whole affair.

Those fears were well-founded. Pre-warned of the German intentions by intelligence sources, Zhukov used the delay to fortify the salient with eight concentric circles of defence, on a scale never seen before. Troops and 300,000 of the local civilian population worked on laying a massive array of tank traps, minefields, anti-tank guns and other defensive positions

Below: May 1943. The original caption to this photograph reads like something out of *Enemy at the Gates*: 'A duel between snipers! The moment when a Waffen-SS Unterscharführer silenced a Soviet sniper. The duel was witnessed by his platoon commander observing through his stereo-telescope.'





Above: A group of Waffen-SS grenadiers rush out of their dugout for the camera. Note the bayonet.

Above right: July 1943. The original caption says, "Captured in his own trench! Completely flabbergasted by this unexpected turn of events, and still wearing his helmet, this Soviet prisoner is immediately interrogated."

Below right: July 1943. The original caption says, "Thorough preparations save losses. Well camouflaged, heavy machine guns have been brought into position at all the important sectors on the front. Their fire will protect the Waffen-SS infantry advancing towards the Soviets holding the higher ground." This MG34 is being used as a heavy machine gun mounted on a tripod and equipped with a telescopic sight for long-range fire.

in anticipation of the German attack. The extensive minefields were specially designed to channel the armoured formations into killing grounds, where it was hoped that the German attack would founder. Armour and troop concentrations were also built up, and by the time the attack was launched the Soviets, with 1,300,000 men, 3,600 tanks, 20,000 artillery pieces and 2,400 aircraft, had a clear numerical superiority over the Germans.

The attack was in fact successively postponed from 4 May to 12 June by delays in the delivery of the new Panther and Elefant tanks, then for a further period by the collapse of the African front in Tunisia. Finally, on 29 June, the troops moved into their concentration areas. During 3 July *Das Reich* received orders to form-up for the attack in positions just to the south of the Belgorod–Tomarovka rail link. That night sappers began clearing paths through the minefields, and during the following day Stukas bombed the defences. As the dive bombers turned for home German artillery and Nebelwerfers opened up. To the east, Kempf's III Panzer Corps began to advance on Savidovka, Alekseyevka and Luchanino while on its sector II SS Panzer Corps launched preliminary attacks early on the 5th to secure observation posts on a 20km front between Beresov and Sadelnoye.

Das Reich had 48 Panzer IIIs, 30 Panzer IVs, 12 Tigers, 8 Panzer III command tanks, 18 T-34s, 33 StuGs, and 10 Marders combat ready, and was positioned on the right of the corps. During the night 3rd Battalion assault troops equipped with flamethrowers penetrated behind the outpost line and at 02.45 took the initial objective – Yakontov. At 03.00 *Deutschland*, occupying the inner wing, led off the attack, as the infiltrating 3rd Battalion assault troops began clearing bunkers. Ten minutes before the offensive proper was to begin the Soviet Central Front launched a pre-emptive artillery bombardment on the German positions, with 600 guns, mortars and Katyusha rocket launchers. German artillery responded and by 04.45 the artillery duel had grown in intensity, but as most of the German armour and infantry was still under cover, the barrage failed to disrupt the advance. Finally at 06.00 on the 5th, the main body of the division moved off, using a tactic known as *Panzerkeil*, a spearhead formation led by heavy Tiger I tanks with Panther, PzKpfw IV and PzKpfw III tanks in support. Russian positions in front of Beresov were quickly overrun and by 08.15 the division was in positions to the north, from where it assaulted the town. Late in the afternoon a second, successful attempt to secure Hill 233.3, 6km north of Beresov, was made by 3rd Battalion *Deutschland*, but heavy minefields prevented further progress.

On the 6th, *Der Führer* took up the attack, aiming at Prokhorovka, and the road towards Luchki, which would allow corps armour to exploit the breach and carry the fight to the high ground north of Prokhorovka and the Belenikhino railway line to the east. At 08.00 the division began an attack on Hill 243. Within an hour *Der Führer* had been halted, but with the weight of the divisional artillery brought to bear, by noon it was on the hill. By now the division had penetrated 32km, against increasingly heavy resistance and, despite suffering great losses, had torn a hole in the sector held by 6th Guards Army.

Early the next morning the Panzer Regiment formed up with the tanks of *Leibstandarte*, and started out from Teterevino to Prokhorovka. From positions north and north-west Russian armour moved to intercept, and for nearly five hours battled to drive off the attacks. Although rain now began to slow movement to a crawl, the speed of the opening attack had been such that on the corps' left, Kempf's 6th, 7th and 19th Panzer Divisions, which had been stalled by 7th Guards Army after crossing the River Donets, were now far behind and exposing Hausser to attack. As a temporary measure *Totenkopf* was moved to cover this flank while *Das Reich* and *Leibstandarte* continued north, engaging concentrations of the 6th Guards Army. Early on the 8th *Das Reich* and *Leibstandarte* moved out to attack north-west, and during the morning ran into a strong concentration of Russian armour south-east of Vesselyi, and at Teterevino, and at Kalinin.



By midday, the grenadiers had regrouped and were fighting in concert with *Leibstandarte* to capture Vesselyi and Hills 239.6/227.4 and, with these secured, they moved into defensive positions as heavy rain continued to fall. Here they came under massed assault by the forces sent from the north and north-east to halt the SS advance. Warned of a position made precarious by the rapid German advance and the collapsing 6th Guards Army, the Soviet high command ordered reinforcements from Konev's Steppe Front – 4th Guards, 4th Guards Tank, and 3rd Guards Mobile Army – to the Kursk area to block any German breakthrough. Soviet commanders realised that they would soon face the combined weight of the German armoured corps and, seeking a decisive encounter, had already sent the 5th Guards Tank Army with orders to concentrate east of Prokhorovka.

On the 9th, with *Das Reich* guarding his eastern flank, Hausser began a push toward Beregovoy, with orders from Fourth Panzer Army HQ to destroy the enemy to the north-east of that town and reach the eastern bank of the River Salotnika. Under concerted attack by 1st Tank Army, II SS Panzer Corps fought with XLVIII Corps through a sea of mud to reach the banks of the River Psel (the last natural obstacle before Kursk) west of Prokhorovka. On the eastern flank *Das Reich* blunted sustained assaults, and by late afternoon on 10 July was in position on the plain north of Prokhorovka to attack the 5th Guards Tank Army now gathering there.

Early on 12 July the II SS Panzer Corps divisions formed up for what was widely realised would be the decisive clash of Operation Citadel. Although some 700 of their tanks remained operational, Fourth Panzer Army troops were astonished to see the masses of Soviet armour ranged before them. Soviet commanders had concluded that their relatively under-gunned and under-armoured tanks would fare better at close range, where superiority in main armament and armour counted for little. They therefore concentrated the entire strength of 5th Guards Tank Army, some 850 tanks, into an area

Below: August 1943. "More than one hundred Soviet T-34 tanks are rolling towards the German lines and the tank destroyers have their hands full." The crew of this Waffen-SS 7.5cm PaK mounted on a PzKpfw 38 (t) chassis have just registered another 'kill'. With a sudden jet of flame and thick black smoke – there goes another T-34.





Left: Two Waffen-SS grenadiers interrogate a small party of newly captured Red Army soldiers. The first two men wearing dark uniforms would appear to be officers. Rank and file soldiers of the Red Army had their heads shaved on joining.

Below: SS-Hauptsturmführer Wolfgang Gast, photographed on 4 June 1944, just after he had received the Knight's Cross. At that time he was the Commanding Officer of the 1st Battalion, 2nd SS Artillery Regiment from *Das Reich*, part of Army Group 'D' operating on the Russian Front.

of only a few square miles. In this tiny area, through the heat and dust of the day and into the evening, one of the biggest tank battles of the war was fought.

At midday, south of Vinogradovka, the division repulsed a heavy attack by 40-plus tanks of the 2nd Tank Army. Another assault by more than 70 tanks was launched at a little after 14.00, this time from the east through Vinogradovka towards Yasnaya Polyana. Engagements were fought over short distances, and in many instances Soviet crews engaged German tanks by simply driving headlong into them. Fierce fighting raged through the day. When it was concluded a thick pall of smoke hung over the battlefield, now littered with the wreckage of hundreds of burning tanks. By 21.00 both sides were pulling back into defensive positions.

Hausser remained grimly determined to break through, and his staff issued orders for *Leibstandarte* and *Totenkopf* to destroy the enemy on the east and western flank of the River Psel, as well as those south of Petrovka. During the course of the following day, the attack switched to *Das Reich's* right flank, where Hausser hoped to force a breach at Pravorot and, reinforced by III Panzer Corps, which had by now linked up with Fourth Panzer Army, drive north.

Early on the 14th, the 1st and 3rd Battalions of *Der Führer* attacked across minefields towards the high ground south west of Pravorot. Belenikhino was taken by nightfall and, during the night, with the advance slowed to a crawl in heavy rain, the panzer regiment succeeded in linking up with III Corps and trapped significant forces in a pocket around Gostischevo-Leski. This was to be the last success of the operation, for although II SS Panzer Corps had pushed upwards of 60km into the southern sector of the bulge, the loss of a 10,000 troops and 300 tanks (half of his armour) meant that Manstein now lacked the strength to continue the offensive. In the north, the Ninth Army had been able to penetrate a mere 10km and had lost 25,000 killed, 200 tanks, and 200 aircraft in so doing, and was still a long way north of Fourth Panzer Army.

Events elsewhere had already conspired to force Hitler's hand. On 10 July the first Allied troops had come ashore on Sicily and, however badly they were needed on the Eastern Front, he knew that units would have to be transferred to bolster the defences in Italy. Furthermore, the Soviet forces had already launched counter-attacks to the north



and south of the Kursk salient. Kluge and Manstein were duly summoned to his headquarters. Manstein's argument that one final effort would be decisive persuaded the Führer to allow operations to continue in that sector, but since Hitler also withdrew II SS Panzer Corps from the battle he effectively brought the offensive to an end.

German losses for the period 5–13 July are put at 100,000 men killed or wounded, and overall casualties between 5 July and 22 August may have been as high as 500,000 men. The Soviet casualty figures were not released until the fall of the communist regime in the USSR and were recorded at 250,000 killed and 600,000 wounded for operations between the start of Zitadelle in July 1943 up to the final reconquest of Kharkov by the Red Army in August. They also lost 50 per cent of their tank strength during the Kursk offensive. From 5 to 16 July *Das Reich* accounted for 448 Russian tanks and assault guns, losing a total of 46 panzers and assault guns destroyed.

In the aftermath of the titanic battle the Germans withdrew to the partly prepared Hagen line at the base of the salient. On 13 July the counter-offensive by Rokossovsky's Central Front was launched against Orel and had in two weeks driven the Eleventh Army back to its start lines. To the south of Kursk the Russians re-grouped and on 3 August another offensive opened on both flanks of the Kursk salient. A 64km gap was torn between Fourth Panzer Army and Army Detachment *Kempf*, and on 5 August Orel and Belgorod were liberated.

On 28 July *Das Reich* was bolstered by the transfer of *Leibstandarte* armour before the men of that unit departed for Italy. Nine Tigers, 39 Panzer IVs and 4 Panzer IIIs, were added to the 33 Panzer IIIs, 17 Panzer IVs, 2 T-34s, and 2 Tigers that remained combat ready. The departure of *Leibstandarte* led to the dissolution of II SS Panzer Corps, and creation of another corps, III SS Panzer Corps, from *Das Reich*, *Totenkopf* and the Army's 3rd Panzer Division, which from 30 July transferred south to oppose another Russian counter-attack, this time across the Mius River. *Das Reich* grenadiers were in action at Stepanovka, and helped to recapture positions there, but with the fighting for the river lines still raging a new threat to Kharkov brought them back north.

At Kharkov, Soviet forces were attempting an encirclement, presaging the fourth and last battle for the city. On 18–19 August the division was in the city outskirts, battling grimly to hold the city won at such cost in the spring. A fresh crisis now arose to the west where on the 22nd around Starya-Lyubotin and Kommuna, the Panther battalion (see note at left) destroyed 53 Soviet tanks. On the next day, 12km west of Kharkov, it broke up a Russian tank assault.

In the mid-August Malinovsky's forces crossed the Donets, and soon the German front was penetrated in three places. With the advance of Tolbukhin's Southern Front threatening an envelopment of Army Group South, Manstein concluded that the Red Army could no longer be contained at Kharkov and abandoned the city, ordering his divisions to withdraw to the Dnieper. From here on the Germans would be fighting defensive battles all the way back to the frontiers of the Reich and into the Reich itself.

Pulled out of Kharkov, on 28 August the division was ordered to the south-west, toward the Dnieper. Fighting as it withdrew, by 13 September the division was in positions around Valki, some 60km west. Twenty kilometres west of the town a large detachment of T-34s attacked *Das Reich's* reconnaissance battalion. From his position in the reserve, Hauptsturmführer Holzer led his company to the rescue, and in 40 minutes destroyed 28 Soviet tanks.

On the 15th came a fresh order to retreat to the west bank of the Dnieper. After crossing the only bridge over the Vorskla at Poltava on the 20th, in the last days of the month *Das Reich* was back on the great river, struggling to contain the Soviet forces at Michurin-Rog, near Kremenchug, where they had gained a bridgehead over the Dnieper in the sector held by First and Eighth Panzer Armies.

Note: I. Abteilung/SS Panzer Regiment 2 had not been operating with the division since 1 May 1943. It was at Mailly-le-Camp, France, converting to the PzKpfw V Panther. Returning to the front in the aftermath of Kursk, this battalion first saw combat on 22 August, around Starya-Lyubotin and Kommuna, knocking out 53 Soviet tanks. Panthers were first used in action on 5 July 1943, with Panther Abteilungen 51 and 52 of Panzer Regiment 39 (subordinated to Army Group South). The former was attached to *Grossdeutschland* for the Kursk battle, and Panzer Abteilung 52 to the 11th Panzer Division, and they had between them a total of 192 factory fresh and untested Panthers Ausf. D. By the evening of the first day of operations only 40 were still combat ready.

Below: July 1943. The end of the line for a Lend-Lease tank. Waffen-SS troops have made themselves comfortable in front of a disabled 39-ton British Churchill III infantry tank.



Throughout the withdrawal *Das Reich* Tigers continued to score heavily against Russian armour. On 23 September Untersturmführer Alois Kalls received the German Cross in Gold for his adept leadership of his Tiger platoon during the late summer. His assistant platoon leader, Hauptscharführer Johann Reinhardt was posthumously awarded the German Cross in Gold on the 25th. On the 24th, 6th Panzer Company, newly supplied with side-skirted Panzer IVs, battled 60 T-34s between Udy-Bogens and Orkan, just south-west of Kharkov. Twenty-nine of the 60 were destroyed. Both Untersturmführer Karl Meileck and Hauptsturmführer Kesten, 6th Panzer Company commander, were later awarded the Knight's Cross for these actions. In all, from 30 July to 21 August *Das Reich* destroyed a total of 391 tanks and assault guns. By 27 August it had 4 Panzer IIIs, 31 Panzer IVs, 6 Tigers, and 6 command tanks combat fit, plus one Panther company, as the others had been parcelled out to other divisions.



Above: August 1943. The task has been successfully completed. Despite the obstacles they had to overcome, the soldiers of the Waffen-SS are in a cheerful mood.

Defence on the Dnieper

By the end of September Army Group South was in a tenuous defensive position behind the Dnieper River, the strongest natural defensive line in western European Russia, but over which the Russians already had five bridgeheads. In two and a half months Army Groups Centre and South had been forced back for an average of 240km on a front over 1,000km long and in so doing lost the most valuable territory taken in past advances. The *Das Reich* Division was fighting in the Dnieper bend to recapture high ground lost to the enemy, so as to reduce his bridgehead. As part of the containment, on 30 September, *Der Führer* was sent to Grebeni, where the struggle continued to 5 October.

This first week of October was relatively quiet as the Russians regrouped and brought up new forces. Their numerical superiority allowed them to rest and refit their units in shifts, and they had accordingly reached the Dnieper with their offensive capability largely intact. On 15 October the full weight of the Second and Third Ukrainian Fronts was thrown against Army Group South, and soon a 320km wide bridgehead was forced between Cherkassy and Zaporozhe, while to the south the Third Ukrainian Front threatened important iron and manganese mining areas near Krivoi Rog and Nikopol. The German front line was pushed progressively westward.

Just after 05.00 on 29 October, just outside of Khodorov on the western bank of the Dnieper, some 75km south-east of Kiev, Soviet armour pierced *Das Reich's* defence line. Quickly advancing to this dangerous breakthrough, a platoon of 5th Panzer Company knocked out 17 T-34s. On 1 November, as the Russians continued to consolidate their bridgehead over the Dnieper, 2nd Panzer Battalion, on the right flank of *Das Reich's* position, drove off enemy tanks and infantry attempting to outflank them. That same day 8./Panzer Regiment *Das Reich* scored the 2,000th armour kill for the division in 1943. The Panzer Regiment, which had accounted for some 1,100 of these, had accumulated losses of over 250 tanks.



Above: The main line of resistance at Kharkov – a Waffen-SS Sturmman, his face still marked with the strain of combat, uses a break after two days' continuous action, to change his position.

Right: A group of regimental officers from *Das Reich*, photographed in December 1943. Nearest the camera from left to right: SS-Gruppenführer und Generalleutnant Walter Krüger, Divisional Commander; Sorg, Commander of *Das Reich* Signals detachment; Sylvester Stadler, known by his nickname 'Vestel' seen as SS-Sturmbannführer and Commander of SS Panzergrenadier Regiment *Der Fühler*. Walter Kruger had taken over command of *Das Reich* in March 1943 and had received the Oakleaves to his Knight's Cross five months later on 31 August 1943.

Opposite, Above: September 1943. A successful tank crew sits astride the barrel of their hard-hitting gun. The tank is a PzKpfw IV Ausf.G (SdKfz 161/1).

Opposite, Below: A 7.5cm PaK 40 in action against Soviet tanks.





In the first week of November, the division fought near to Kiev but could not prevent it from being retaken by the First Ukrainian Front on the 7th. Subsequently, Fourth Panzer Army was pushed back to the west and south of the city, a setback which threatened to destroy the entire left flank of Army Group South. Until the end of the year *Das Reich* fought on in retreat, first with *Leibstandarte* under XLVIII Panzer Corps, and then XXIV Panzer Corps. During this time the division was refitted once again, and the name was changed to SS Panzer Division *Das Reich*.

Stories of stoicism in the face of adversity characterise the retreat from the Dnieper. One of them concerns Obersturmführer Karl-Heinz Boska, 2nd Panzer Battalion adjutant. On the morning of 13 November, near Bolshaya Grab, Soviet infantry assaulted the battalion headquarters. Although heavily outnumbered, Boska led five panzers in a counter-attack, and drove them off. That same day, the Panzer Regiment's commander Obersturmbannführer von Reitzenstein received the Knight's Cross for the efforts of his unit during the summer and autumn. Soon afterward, charged with the murder of a *Hiwi* (Russian mess volunteer), he committed suicide.

On 25 November *Das Reich* was ordered to an area east of Zhitomir, to counter a Soviet offensive in the area Korosten–Berdichev–Radomyshl. As it went on the attack just nine Panzer IVs, two Tigers, seven Panthers and two command tanks remained operational, and these were soon halted. Reduced to a pitiful level and seriously lacking in motorised transport for its infantry regiments, in mid-December the division was ordered to France to re-supply and re-train. What remained was reorganised into a battle group of 5,000 men, officially known as Kampfgruppe *Lammerding*, with a depleted panzer battalion of two companies. This remained behind to continue the fight against the revitalised Soviet winter offensive, initially in the area Radomyshl–Guta–Sabelozkaya under XLII Corps, and then back on the Tetrev River, east of Zhitomir.

After a failed counter-attack at Krasnopol, in mid-January the battle group occupied positions north of Mal–Bralov–Grinovshky. In defensive fighting around Zhitomir, from 25 December through 18 January 1944, the panzer battalion destroyed 12 tanks, 14 assault guns, and 12 anti-tank guns, but the battle group lost more than 20 per cent of its soldiers. It was briefly pulled out of the line, then transferred to Isyaslavl, which was invested and captured in the face of a renewed Soviet offensive launched on 3 March. Three of the precious Tigers were knocked out on 4 March east of Semyalintzy, leaving only a handful of tanks to fight on. The fighting at Isyaslavl raged until mid-month, by which time the battle group had been surrounded and battered, but not broken. Withdrawn west, the 800 survivors reached the Fourth Panzer Army lines at Buszacz on 8 April.

PREPARING IN FRANCE

From there the battle group rejoined the division, which as part of LVIII Corps, Seventh Army, Army Group G, had moved to Montauban, 25 miles (40km) north from Toulouse, a location personally chosen by the Führer. He reasoned that here the division would be available to intervene on either the northern or southern coasts of France, when an Allied invasion occurred, and furthermore could also guarantee the lines of communication between Army Groups G and B, which were constantly threatened by French Resistance attacks.

With a core of seasoned troops to form the backbone, the ranks of the depleted division were filled out by 9,000 replacements, most of them boys of 17 and 18 years of age with no combat experience. Throughout April and May they trained in the countryside surrounding Montauban, although partisan actions caused considerable disruption, and considerable time and resources were lost in pursuing them. During May 20 soldiers were killed and in retaliation 41 civilians were executed at Figeac.

Below: December 1943. A group of Waffen-SS motorcycle riflemen enjoying the hot food waiting for them after action. The man nearest the camera has a signal torch attached to a button of his winter parka. The torch's adjustable two-coloured mica shields gave red or green light when they were depressed. It was a standard item of military equipment issued to all German troops who had to operate at night.



**SS Panzer Division Das Reich
(October 1943–May 1945)**

- 2. SS Panzer Regiment
 - 1st Battalion
 - 1st–3rd Companies
 - 2nd Battalion
 - 4th–6th Companies
 - 8. schwere Panzer-Abteilung "Tiger"*
 - 1st–3rd Companies
- Panzergrenadier Regiment *Deutschland*
 - 1st Battalion
 - 1st–4th Companies
 - 2nd Battalion
 - 5th–8th Companies
 - 3rd Battalion
 - 9th–13th Companies
- SS Panzergrenadier Regiment *Der Führer*
as *Deutschland*
 - 2. SS Panzer Artillery Regiment
 - 1st Battalion
 - 1st–3rd Batteries
 - 2nd Battalion
 - 4th–6th Batteries
 - 3rd Battalion
 - 7th–9th Batteries
 - 4th Battalion
 - 10th–12th Batteries
 - 2. SS Motorcycle Battalion
 - 1st–5th Companies
 - 2. SS Assault Gun Battalion
 - 1st–3rd Batteries
 - 2. SS Reconnaissance Battalion
 - 1st–3rd Companies
 - Light Reconnaissance Detachment

- 2. SS Tank Hunter Battalion
 - 1st–3rd Companies
- 2. SS Anti-aircraft Battalion
 - 1st–5th Batteries
- Light Artillery Detachment
- 2. SS Panzer Pioneer Battalion
 - 1st–3rd Companies
- Bridging Section
- Light Pioneer Detachment
- 2. SS Intelligence Battalion
 - 1st & 2nd Companies
- Light Intelligence Detachment
- 2. SS Economics Battalion
- Ration Supply Depot
- Bakery Company
- Butchery Company
- 2. SS Supply Services
 - 15 x Motorised columns
 - Supply Company
 - Weapons Workshop Company
- 2. SS Repair Services
 - 3 x Workshop companies
 - Spares column
- 2. SS Medical Unit
 - Field Hospital
 - 2 x Medical companies
 - 3 x Motorised ambulance platoons
- Military Police troop
- Field Post section
- 2. SS War reporting Platoon

* Established 15 November 1942, At Kursk it was led by Hauptsturmführer Grader

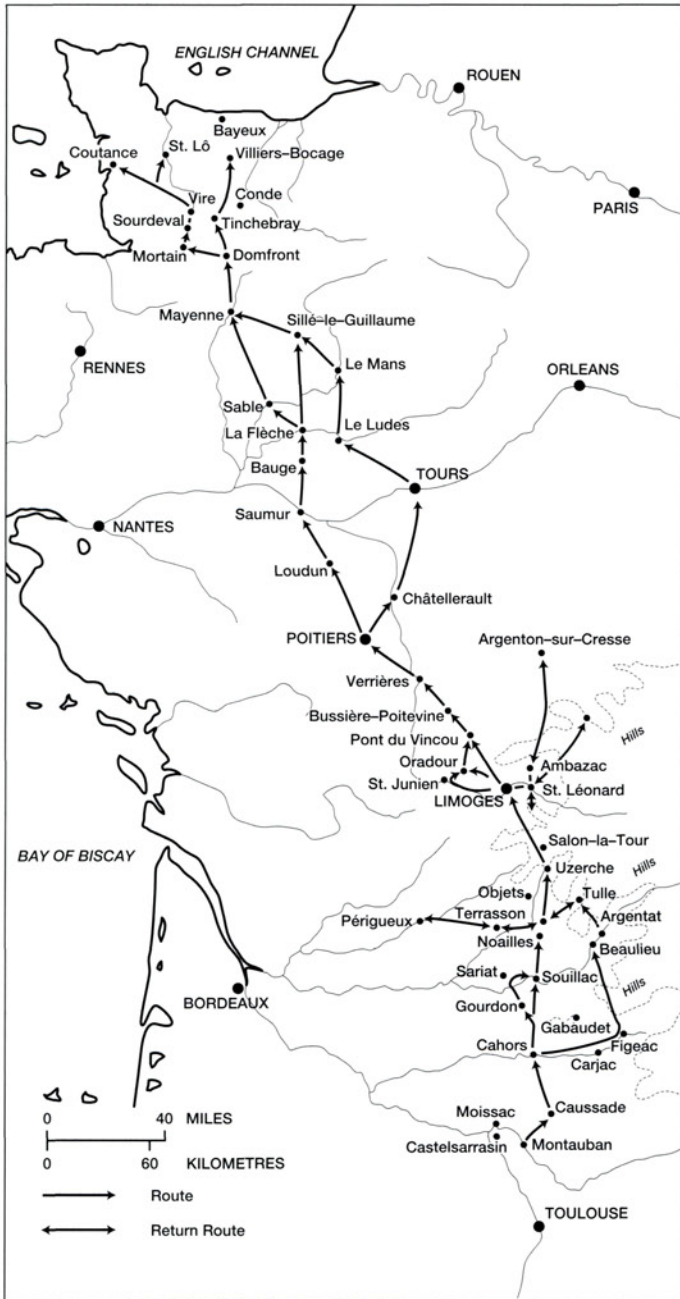
Left: Organisation of *Das Reich* in the last years of the war.

Below: July 1943. Another defensive battle in the East. German Waffen-SS grenadiers take a rest in their trench after days of heavy fighting. They are in constant radio contact with their comrades.



In mid-May *Das Reich* received orders to begin a reconnaissance of the local railway and road systems in anticipation of a move northward. At this time new Panther tanks and Panzer IVs to bolster the tank regiment were delivered. In addition, the division had a full complement of assault guns and both panzergrenadier regiments were at full strength. These 209 tanks and assault guns formed fully one tenth of the German armoured forces in France, and would be relied upon to strike swiftly when the Allies landed on French soil. Most agreed the Allied invasion would target the northern French coastline, but with *Das Reich* now some 700km from there, Rommel and many leading staff officers feared the dispositions had been badly misjudged.

Below: The bloody march of *Das Reich* from southern France to Normandy.



On the day that landings began in Normandy, *Das Reich* began its march, now steeped in infamy, from the Toulouse area in south-west France on a line of advance through the French Massif Central to the battleground. Because of the pressure on the transport network, and the constant dangers of attack by roving Allied aircraft, the division did not move as one, and individual units were committed piecemeal to the battle as and when they arrived.

Although a shorter and safer route to Normandy, along the coast road, was available, *Das Reich* had orders en route to suppress an uprising of French maquis undertaken in conjunction with the Allied invasion. These are Rundstedt's words: 'Limited success in such operations is useless... the most energetic measures must be taken in order to frighten the inhabitants of this infested region.'

Moving to Limoges, on the 8th, I./*Der Führer* skirmished with resistance fighters at Groslejac and Cressenac. The following day, a battle broke out near Bretenoux, leaving 23 Resistance fighters and seven Germans dead, and upon arrival at Tulle, there were nine *Das Reich* dead and 31 wounded. At Tulle, the German garrison was under siege by resistance fighters, and was promptly relieved by the reconnaissance troop. It then began rounding up civilians. Ninety-nine were hanged, and another 149 deported to Dachau, where 100 were subsequently murdered.

Oradour-sur-Glane

Meanwhile north of Limoges, III./*Der Führer* had shot several residents in Argenton-sur-Creuse, and executed 29 resistance fighters near Gueret. While pulling back to Limoges early on 10 June, III./*Der Führer* CO Sturmabführer Kampfe and Obersturmführer Gerlach were captured by maquis. At this time 1st Battalion *Der Führer*, under Sturmabführer Dickmann, was at St. Junien, a town to the west of Limoges. Dickmann, a close friend of Kampfe, was informed by two residents that a German officer was being held in a town called Oradour-sur-Glane, a short distance from St. Junien.

In the afternoon of 10 June 3rd Company of Dickmann's battalion surrounded the village. At the sound of the village drum the inhabitants gathered on the village green, and

any stragglers were rounded up, and were informed by the soldiers that they were conducting a search for weapons.

The women and children were separated from the men and led off to the church, after which Dickmann demanded hostages before making a search of the village. This completed, the men were divided into several smaller groups, and led into three barns, two garages, a warehouse and a hangar. Around 16.00 from inside the locked church, the women heard the rattle of machine guns and other small arms fire as the men were massacred almost simultaneously in their places of confinement. Survivors reported that *Das Reich* troops fired first at the men's legs, and continued to fire until nothing moved. Then, according to the few men who survived, the soldiers covered the bodies with straw, hay, wood and anything else that could be used for fuel to burn the corpses.

A small number of men managed to escape the bullets. According to their accounts, when the first volleys of machine-gun and rifle fire began they threw themselves to the ground and feigned death. Then, extricating themselves from the piles of bodies above them, they made their way to a corner of the barn and waited while the inferno that had been set by the Germans raged around them. When they could no longer stand the flames and smoke, they made a break for the countryside where they hid until nightfall. Meanwhile, at the church, troops tossed grenades among the 400 people packed inside, before barricading the doors and setting the building ablaze. Other residents who had not complied with the order to gather at the square were shot, and their houses and buildings burnt. Some 642 civilians, including 207 children, were massacred. Before they left the following morning, troops looted the village.

In the aftermath more senior German commanders considered instigating an enquiry into the events but Dickmann was killed in action before any proceedings could begin and the matter was allowed to drop. In 1953 a French military court sentenced a number of the surviving members of the SS detachment to death. None of the executions was carried out. The gutted, abandoned village has been left unreconstructed; its ruins are still a memorial to the victims. A new village, with a strikingly modern church, was built nearby.

The Normandy Battle

The first *Das Reich* units arrived at the concentration area near Domfront, as part of Army Group Reserve. Here they came under attack by Allied fighter-bombers. Other units arrived over the next week, but with concentration still incomplete (some units were still in Toulouse in mid-July), on 26 June orders came for a panzer and artillery battalion to move to the area north of Torigny-sur-Virein to support II.Fallschirmjäger Corps (see note at right), and for a battle group of the 1st Battalions of *Der Führer* and *Deutschland* to join 2nd Panzer Division at Caen. British VIII Corps intended to strike between Caen and Villers-Bocage, and then cross the River Orne as a preliminary to breaking out of the beachhead. To counter this II SS Panzer Corps, to which the battle group was subordinated, was to attack into the enemy flank along the Villers-Bocage–Caen road.

Beginning on the 29th, the advance through the treacherous *bocage* was met by a storm of fire which cost *Der Führer* fully 60 per cent of its front-line troops, but succeeded by nightfall on 30 June in halting the British offensive and preventing a breakthrough to the River Orne. The battle group was then pulled back and on 2 July reverted to *Das Reich* control.



Above: The Atlantic Wall, April 1944. Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt (far left) inspects reserve formations stationed along the Atlantic Wall. The details of a tank exercise are explained to him by SS-Gruppenführer Sepp Dietrich (gesturing).

Note: The actions of II.Fallschirmjäger Corps (General der Fallschirmjäger Eugen Meindl) are well-documented. The corps comprised 3.Fallschirmjäger Division (Genlt Richard Schimpf) and 5.Fallschirmjäger Division (Genlt Gustav Wilke). II.Fallschirmjäger Corps was part of the Seventh Army entrusted with the defence of the Cotentin Peninsula. In January 1944, 3.Fallschirmjäger Division was moved from Reims to Mont d'Arrée, 30km east of Brest. On 7 June, D-Day+1, the division moved to Avranches, with only a spearhead made up of Kampfgruppe *Alpers*, the rest of the division had to follow on foot. Between 17–18 June the division took up positions to the north of St Lô. 5.Fallschirmjäger Division was in Reims from March 1944, and at the end of May moved to Rennes in Brittany. In early June 1944, the division moved to Mont Saint Michel to prevent any Allied landings. Its neighbouring units were 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division *Götz von Berlichingen* on the left and the Panzer Lehr Division on the right. Divisional HQ was 4km SE of Dinan near Tressaint.

Right: September 1943. Romanian army officers visit the Atlantic Wall. Amongst a number of military demonstrations they witnessed a live firing exercise by a Waffen-SS panzer division. The picture shows Romanian officers inspecting an assault gun detachment equipped with 7.5cm StuG 40 Ausf.G (SdKfz 312/1) assault guns.

Below right: A young Waffen-SS grenadier photographed during the Normandy campaign.

There were other actions before the division could concentrate as a single unit. On 4 July, now under LXXXIV Corps, such units as were available were formed into three battle groups, one under 353rd Division at La Haye-du-Puits, the second – including the 5th and 7th Panzer Companies of the 2nd Panzer Battalion – were attached to the 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division *Götz von Berlichingen* and positioned near to Sainteny, north-west of St. Lô, for a planned counter-attack. The 6th Panzer Company was attached to I./*Deutschland*, also under 17th SS, to form the third and moved to positions south of Sainteny.

On 7 July the US 9th and 30th Divisions began pushing across the Vire River at Le Dezert. The 5th and 7th Panzer Companies, which had formed a defensive line running from Les Landes to Lemonderie, were attacked by the US 83rd Infantry Division. On the next day, along a road near Le Dezert, a company of the US 743rd Tank Battalion in pursuit of two Panzer IVs was ambushed from the flank by Obersturmbannführer Kloskowski's 7th Panzer Company, and in 15 minutes, nine Shermans were destroyed, and three so damaged that they had to be abandoned.

While the 5th Panzer Company engaged near Bois Grimot, trying to contain the breakthrough over the Rivers Vire and Taute, Seventh Army moved 3rd and 4th Panzer Companies north-east toward Sainteny. West of Château d'Auxais, they ran into the US 3rd Armored Division. The counter-attack broke down and was then brought to a complete halt by a massive artillery bombardment, and by the 9th the Germans were back on the defensive. Although ultimately a failure, this operation played a crucial role in delaying the 14 divisions of Bradley's First Army now positioned in the Périers–St. Lô sector.

Into the second month of the Allied offensive, the *Das Reich* battle groups fought in a series of desperate local counter-attacks and defensive actions to plug breaches in the line. On 15 July, near St. Denis, Fritz Langanke single-handedly destroyed five Shermans. A month later, for this and other actions, Langanke was awarded the Knight's Cross.

The previous day, under tremendous pressure, the Germans had been forced to give up St. Lô. The ruined town was key to the operation which Bradley now envisaged – Operation Cobra – a strike by VII Corps to take St. Lô and smash the German positions between the Rivers Vire and Louzon. Patton's Third Army would then drive south to the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. Preceded by a devastating artillery and aerial barrage Cobra began on 25 July. The sector held by *Das Reich* battle groups west of St. Lô was the focus of the heaviest attacks; during the day no less than 13 separate infantry and armoured assaults were repulsed, before LXXXIV Corps command issued a series of vaguely-worded orders to pull back.

In the confusion that followed the US 1st Infantry Division (see *Spearhead 6*) and the 3rd Armored Division struck at Marigny, against the badly-battered *Das Reich* units and the 353rd Infantry Division. To counter them *Das Reich's* Panzer Regiment had but eight command tanks, 35 Panzer IVs and 35 Panthers combat ready. Of these one was commanded by Unterscharführer Ernst Barkmann. On the morning of the 27th, north-east of Coutances, Barkmann's now famous action took place. Driving his Panther straight from the workshop along the road to St. Lô in order to intercept a force of Shermans, he parked in the shade of an oak tree near a crossroads at Le Leroy. As the first tank came into view Barkmann's gunner opened fire and in the mêlée that followed, though under attack by fighter-bombers, Barkmann and his men knocked out nine of them, and stalled the advance of an entire armoured column, before withdrawing in the badly damaged Panther.

After two days of heavy fighting the division was holding a line north of the St. Gilles–Coutances road and Coutances was still in German hands. But on *Das Reich's* right flank, the First Army made significant inroads, and almost encircled the entire LXXXIV Corps. US aircraft and artillery poured bombs and shells into the pocket and,



under a withering rain of fire, a battle group comprising *Das Reich* and 17th SS Division withdrew from Coutances on the 28th, and broke out to the south-east to Percy. During this withdrawal each unit experienced losses of between 30 and 90 per cent.

Operation Liege – Avranches

The US First Army under Hodges now struck down the coast, peeling the German line away from Avranches, at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. Avranches fell on the 30th, and in a fatally miscalculated attempt to form a cohesive line, Dollman's Seventh Army command ordered LXXXIV Corps to withdraw south-east, thus widening the breach and compromising the German southern flank. The Allied command was quick to exploit the situation, and Patton turned part of his force east from his drive into Brittany to advance inland from the base of the Cotentin Peninsula.

At this point Hitler finally allowed the divisions being held in reserve in the Pas De Calais area to be released for an attack towards Avranches on the deep but narrow Allied spearhead, believing that if the city could be taken, the entire US Third Army under Patton would be cut off from Bradley's command. He then envisaged a drive up the peninsula to smash the American lodgement on the Normandy beaches.

Briefly rested and re-equipped, and formed into three battle groups, *Das Reich* was transferred to the command of XLVII Corps. The main effort was to be made by the 1st and 2nd SS Panzer with 116th Panzer and a 17th SS Panzer Division battle group – Kampfgruppe *Fick*. Of the three *Das Reich* battle groups, *Der Führer* on the right was to take heights to the north-west of Mortain; on the central sector Kampfgruppe *Fick* aimed at Point 317; and to the south *Deutschland* with SS Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion 2 was tasked with recapturing Mortain itself, and defeating US units to the south of the town. The panzer regiment was ordered to follow behind *Deutschland* and exploit any

breakthroughs in the American defences, with Avranches some 35km to the west as the ultimate objective.

Just after midnight on 7 August, the Avranches counter-attack began. On the right heavy traffic on the roads soon bogged down *Der Führer's* advance, and although the grenadiers quickly overcame several roadblocks and scattered units of 2/120th Infantry Regiment, 30th US Infantry Division, it was dawn before the regiment was able to fan out into its battle formations. There was another surprise, for although intelligence had predicted only light resistance, on approaching the crossroads of L'Abbaye Blanche just to the north of Mortain in heavy fog 3rd Battalion came under heavy fire. Allied air strikes were called in, and until the afternoon the regiment was pinned down. Taking up the advance, 9th Company engaged 1st Platoon of Company A/823rd Tank Destroyer Battalion and took heavy losses. Nine vehicles, including six of the precious SdKfz 251s, were destroyed.

On the left by mid-morning 3./*Deutschland* was able to report that it had taken Mortain after a fierce fight with C/120th Infantry, although scattered resistance continued in the town for the remainder of the afternoon. The panzers now struck west, and

Below: Normandy, 1944. In American hands. An assorted group of captured Waffen-SS and Fallschirmjäger officers await their interrogation.





south-west toward St. Hilaire. The 2nd Battalion *Deutschland* soon gained its initial objectives near Romagny, just south-west of Mortain, but further attacks on C/197th Field Artillery positions were beaten off for several hours.

Allied commanders now began to come alive to the surprise attack, and heavy fire began falling on the *Der Führer* positions north of Mortain. A brief lull in the shelling allowed the *Der Führer* and *Deutschland* Regiments to link up on the hills immediately to the west of the town, but *Der Führer* had as yet been unable to establish contact with *Leibstandarte* to the north. In the centre of the *Das Reich* sector, Kampfgruppe *Fick* had surrounded the 2/120th Infantry atop Hill 314 just east of Mortain, but proved unable to reduce that position despite a heavy artillery preparation.

At 08.15 on the 8th, Kampfgruppe *Ullrich*, consisting of an infantry battalion from 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division and a troop of Panzer IVs from Panzer Regiment *Das Reich*, launched an abortive assault on the positions of B/120th Infantry on Hill 285 located just to the north-west of Mortain. A dismounted attack by the battle group further to the north was more successful and forced A/120th Infantry to pull back. *Der Führer*, arrayed north of Mortain, had by now linked up with *Leibstandarte* above the US roadblock at L'Abbaye Blanche, held by elements of Coys. A/823rd TD and F/120th Infantry, but an attack against these positions during the night had been repulsed.

With the two *Deutschland* battalions defending Mortain and to the south Romagny, and the Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion screening the southern flank, in mid-morning Seventh Army commander Hausser visited the division command post with the news that the attack would continue after the XLVII Panzer Corps received additional tanks.

During the night of 8/9 August, however, *Das Reich* received orders to go on the defensive. At sun-up Allied fighter bombers once more became active, and artillery observers were able to direct heavy fire on the division's front. In the late morning, US troops began an attack from the direction of Juvigny against the *Der Führer* positions. Several other American attacks, supported by tanks, came in from the north and north-west and, although they were brought to a halt, casualties were heavy, the right flank of *Der Führer* was threatened, and the link with *Leibstandarte* severed. Hill 285, north-west of Mortain, was briefly re-occupied by the Americans, but recaptured in a swift counter-attack.

Above: Normandy, June 1944. A Waffen-SS Hauptscharführer points out the two direct hits that disabled this American M4 Sherman tank.

Right: Normandy, 1944. American troops examine wrecked German tanks and equipment from *Das Reich* strewn along the roadside near the Normandy village of Roncey captured by the Americans on 30 July 1944. The armoured fighting vehicle on the left of the photograph has a 15cm Schw. Panzerhaubitze mounted on a PzKpfw III/IV tank chassis (SdKfz 165).

Below right: Normandy, 1944. A mixed batch of recently captured young Waffen-SS soldier stands inside an improvised PoW cage. It is interesting to note the mix of different styles of camouflage clothing being worn by these four prisoners.

Below: Normandy, July 1944. British soldiers, captured during a Waffen-SS reconnaissance sortie, are brought back on a ground-to-air communications vehicle, a modification of the SdKfz 250 light armoured troop carrier complete with a frame aerial.



In the evening another armoured thrust came against Romagny, but was abandoned in the face of a counter-attack by 2nd Battalion *Deutschland*. Then, to counter the advance of the US 35th Infantry Division, the battalion hurriedly took up defensive positions along the Mortain–La Houberte–Bion line. These positions and those of 1st Battalion were assaulted without success the following afternoon. Meanwhile, in the sector held by *Der Führer*, tanks of the US 3rd Armored Division were repulsed, although casualties were again very heavy.

It was clear that the attack had lost all hope of success. Allied movements on the south of Mortain toward Falaise and on the north toward the Seine now threatened an encirclement of both the Fifth and Seventh German Armies. At 18.00 on 10 August, transferred from XLVII Panzer Corps to LVIII Reserve Panzer Corps, the scattered *Das Reich* units were ordered to pull back to a line to just east of Mortain. Despite the terrain and heavy artillery fire, by nightfall the last stragglers were back.

FALAISE

Meanwhile, Patton's drive to the Seine and a co-ordinated thrust from the coast was threatening another encirclement, this time of the entire Fifth and Seventh Armies. During the second week of August the division pulled ever backward toward Falaise, around which the noose was tightening, countering aggressive and well-led armoured thrusts and all the time harassed from the air. On 16 August the division was ordered to join II SS Panzer Corps at Vimoutiers, 20 miles east of Falaise. Should the Allies succeed in closing the pocket OKH intended to use II SS Panzer Corps to crack it open. On 18 August the Polish Armoured Division began to move on Chambois, aiming to link with Canadian forces approaching Trun and cut off the escape route to Vimoutiers. The next day Trun fell, sealing the pocket, and Field Marshal Model at once ordered attacks by II SS Panzer Corps to break gaps in the ring.

The Polish Armoured Division was now positioned on Mont Ormel ridge, straddling the Chambois–Vimoutiers road, from where it aimed to block any escape. On 20 August *Das Reich* began a three-pronged advance through Champosoult and across Mont Ormel at the Falaise pocket, assaulting up the steep-sided ridge under a hail of fire from the Polish tanks on the crest. By mid-morning, 3rd Battalion *Der Führer* was in contact with forces inside the ring, and these now began to stream east through the breach. At mid-day having driven the Polish tanks off the vital high ground and widened the escape route, the battalion was ordered to continue the advance to Coudehard and Chambois. But with Allied forces now alive to the attack, and launching powerful counter-strikes on all sides, this was an unrealistic hope.

On the left *Deutschland* moved on St. Pierre-la-Rivière, through heavy woodland that slowed the advance to a crawl. Polish armour that turned to block them was brushed aside, nonetheless, and by mid-afternoon the regiment had also forced a way into the pocket. During the remaining hours of the 20th and through much of the 21st the battle groups fought off dozens of determined attacks on the narrow corridor. Through this passed 20,000 German troops, among them the former commander, Hausser, snatched from the jaws of defeat by the men of *Das Reich*.

Retreat

From Falaise began an inexorable retreat toward the German border. On 25 August the division was back at Vimoutiers, as Paris was liberated. During seven weeks of combat in France, the regiment destroyed over 200 Allied tanks, but the cost had been enormous. On 1 September, *Der Führer* Regiment was down to 120 men and the division as a whole could muster only 450 men and 15 tanks.



Right: Normandy, August 1944. Waffen-SS Panzergrenadiers carefully unload their wounded comrades at a casualty clearing station.

Below right: Captured during September 1944, the Battle of the Bulge lost the Germans at least 100,000 men killed, wounded and captured.

Below: Otto Kumm (saluting) photographed at the funeral at Sarajevo of Michael Reiser, July 1944. At this time Otto Kumm was commanding the 4th SS Panzergrenadier Regiment *Der Führer* from *Das Reich* operating on the Eastern Front.

On 23 August Sturmbannführer Enseling received the Knight's Cross for his leadership of the panzer group during the Normandy battles. Untersturmführer Adolf Reeb, 7th Company's leading ace, was another recipient, and Obersturmführer Karl Kloskowski became the third of only six company commanders in the whole Panzertruppe to be awarded the Oakleaves to his Knight's Cross.

In late August the division moved back over the Seine at Elbeuf, and over the Maas on 7 September. Halting temporarily at Rousen and St.Vith, and in the dense woodlands of the Schnee Eifel, on 11 September the division pulled back behind the German border into positions on the Siegfried Line between Brandsheid and Liedenborn in western Germany. Hitler ordered that these defences, though considered inadequate for the task by the field commanders, were to be held to the last man, and strengthened the 63 depleted divisions manning them with such units as could be mustered. Thus the *Das Reich* troops found themselves fighting alongside Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine men for whom this was a wholly new type of fighting, and one for which they were ill-prepared.

Although there was now a significant loss of momentum from the Allied attack, there was little respite for the troops in the line, which was battered by continual assaults as the Allies tried to break through to the Rhine. In mid-October, after enduring nearly a month of these attacks, *Das Reich* was relieved and ordered to the Sauerland, and throughout October and November was rebuilt for the final effort Hitler planned for the winter.

THE ARDENNES BATTLE

During the autumn, although still badly in need of replacement tanks, troops and supplies, Hitler decided on an ambitious counter-attack, code-named Wacht am Rhein (Watch on the Rhine), involving a westward drive by four armies through the Ardennes region of Belgium, with the ultimate objective of splitting the British and American forces and capturing their main supply port of Antwerp. Correctly assessing that the Allies had outrun their supply lines, Hitler believed that the panic and confusion caused by a rapid thrust would allow him to transfer some of his troops to the Eastern Front and deliver a similar strike on the Soviets. Rundstedt and Model, both horrified at the patently unrealistic plans, argued without success for more restricted objectives.

For the offensive an entire new army was created under the command of the highly experienced Oberführer Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich. This Sixth Panzer Army consisted of: I SS Panzer Corps, incorporating the *Leibstandarte* and *Hitler Jugend* Divisions as well as the Army's 12th and 277th Volksgrenadier Divisions and the Luftwaffe's 3rd Paratroop Division; II SS Panzer Corps under Obergruppenführer Wilhelm Bittrich, comprising the *Das Reich* and *Hohenstaufen* divisions; and LXVII Corps under Generalleutnant Otto Hitzfeld, comprising 272nd and 326th Volksgrenadier Divisions, as well as a number of independent assault gun, Tiger, Jagdpanther, combat engineer, artillery and other units. These formations were split up into several different battle groups. Also available for the attack were General Hasso von Manteuffel's Fifth Panzer Army and two other Armies, the Seventh and Fifteenth. In reserve there were one Panzergrenadier division and two Volksgrenadier divisions.

The area earmarked for the advance was defended by only four divisions of inexperienced American troops, covering a front of 135km. On the northern flank, with I SS Panzer Corps spearheading the advance, the main thrust was to be made by Sixth Panzer Army on a narrow front between Monschau and Losheim and then on to the Meuse River between Liège and Huy. All this was to be accomplished in a matter of four days. II SS Panzer Corps was to be held in reserve and used to exploit any significant breakthroughs.



Early on 16 December the offensive began with a massed artillery barrage that hit American positions all along the front. But after crossing its start lines I SS Panzer Corps was quickly stalled by spirited defence, and by the delays caused by traffic jams as the SS Corps, 12th Volksgrenadier Division and 3rd Paratroop Division moved on towards Losheim. The US troops did not fold as predicted, disrupting the tight schedule to which I SS Panzer Corps had to adhere, and at the end of the first day it had still to make a decisive breakthrough. At the spearhead of the corps, Battle Group *Peiper's* advance began to stutter, and Field Marshal Model decided to shift responsibility for the main thrust of the attack to Fifth Panzer Army, with Sixth SS Panzer Army supporting the northern flank.

On 18 December II SS Panzer Corps was ordered to move from its assembly area east of Schliede to support the southern flank of I SS Panzer Corps' drive, west of Amblève. But with the roads hopelessly clogged with traffic, and lacking sufficient reserves of fuel, the movement was badly delayed. On the 20th Bittrich ordered *Das Reich* to capture the vital Baraque de Fraiture crossroads, then move north-west at Manhay and on to the River Ourthe, but again they were forced to wait for fuel. Finally on 23 December, 7th Panzer Company was attached to II. *Der Führer* and an assault gun company to III. *Der Führer*, and given the task of seizing the crossroads. A platoon of Shermans from the US 3rd Armored Division held the position, but just after 16.20 a detachment under Obersturmführer Gresiak attacked and had overrun the junction by 18.00. Gresiak's company claimed a total of 17 armour kills for the day. Seriously wounded the next morning, he received the Knight's Cross a month later. By around 22.00, 7th Armored Division was retreating north-west of Baraque de Fraiture to Malempre. After slipping unnoticed into the American column, just south of town Hauptscharführer Frauscher and another Panther of his platoon swung out of line and opened fire, scattering the American armour in confusion. Nine Shermans were destroyed.

By nightfall on the 23rd *Deutschland* had captured the village of Odeigne and was preparing to advance on the road from Manhay at Grandmenil. On Christmas Day, in freezing conditions and under attack by fighter-bombers that had previously been grounded by fog, 3rd Battalion wrested Manhay and Grandmenil from US troops. The next day *Das Reich* attempted to renew the advance from Grandmenil, but the two-pronged attack was met head on by US troops. The first thrust was eventually halted on the Grandmenil–Erezee road; the other, though advancing through heavily wooded terrain along narrow winding roads, made good progress – until the route was blocked by felled trees. Halting to clear the obstacle, the armoured column came under a heavy artillery bombardment and was forced to retire.

That same day the Americans stepped up their efforts to recapture both Manhay and Grandmenil, launching air-strikes and artillery bombardments on both towns. Under the sheer intensity of American firepower *Das Reich* was forced onto the back foot. At Grandmenil *Deutschland* was surrounded and only by a skillful withdrawal was it extricated. By 27 December both towns were back in American hands, and the division in retreat back to the crossroads at Fraiture.

In the last days of the month 3rd Battalion *Der Führer* was detached to serve with 9th SS Panzer Division *Hohenstaufen*. Advancing towards St Vith, *Hohenstaufen* was stalled by the US 82nd Airborne Division at Villettes and Bra, and then turned south towards Bastogne to support *Leibstandarte* and *Hitler Jugend* in their battle to take that town from the US 101st Airborne. Many of the *Hitler Jugend* units, including the artillery, had been left stranded en route due to lack of fuel, and *Das Reich's* Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion, an artillery battalion and two infantry companies were sent to help the attack. But despite these reinforcements, and the unflagging morale within the ranks, in their weakened state the defences of Bastogne proved too strong for the SS, and attempts to take the town came to nothing.





In early January 1945 the other of *Der Führer's* battalions were in woodland north of Magoster, while on their left 9./*Deutschland* grenadiers held the northern end of the village. Resisting stubbornly until ammunition was all but exhausted, those few that survived the battles to hold Magoster were forced back to Beffe. Appraised of the now woefully weakened state of the division, on 4 January Bittrich put the units of the division into reserve, and ordered them to withdraw from their dispersed positions along the front.

It was already apparent that the offensive had been a failure. With a major Soviet offensive opening in the East, Hitler ordered his SS panzer divisions to be transferred back to that front. By 10 February all of the German units committed to the offensive were back on the east bank of the Rhine. The Allies had lost 75,000 men dead, captured or wounded, the Germans slightly fewer. The Germans had lost 600 tanks destroyed or abandoned by their crews when they ran out of fuel, the Allies around 800. In retrospect, the only achievement of the offensive was to waste precious German reserves of manpower and equipment, and thereby bring the war to a quicker conclusion.

LAST BATTLES IN THE EAST

In the east, following the conquest of Romania in 1944, Soviet forces under Malinovsky entered Hungary via Arad in late September. Advancing north to the outskirts of the capital, Budapest, a co-ordinated thrust by Tolbukhin's Third Ukrainian Front to Lake Balaton surrounded the city by 4 December. The embattled garrison in Budapest was ordered to defend the capital and the Balaton oil fields at all costs, but the desperate situation inside the city and the annihilation of 16,000 troops who tried to retreat to German lines resulted in the surrender of the city on the following day.

In mid-February with the Third Ukrainian Front threatening the Balaton oil fields, and Hitler desperate to retain them, Sixth Panzer Army began transferring in from the Ardennes to secure them. *Leibstandarte* and *Hitler Jugend* were quickly thrown in to the battle, and smashed 7th Guards Army's bridgehead over the Danube at Gran. With Gran relieved and a threat on Vienna averted, Hitler gave orders for a larger operation to destroy the Red Army between the Danube, Lake Balaton and the Drava, and establish a line east of the oil fields.

Immense secrecy surrounded the operation, code-named *Frühlingserwachen* (Spring Awakening). *Sturmbannführer* Otto Günsche, Hitler's adjutant, briefed Sixth Panzer Army commander Dietrich orally, and no reconnaissance was permitted. However, the secrecy was to no avail as, appraised of the plan by British intelligence, Tolbukhin, commander of Third Ukrainian Front, had ordered extensive defences to be laid where the main thrust would come between Lakes Balaton and Velencei.

Dietrich's Sixth SS Panzer Army, including the I and II SS Panzer Corps, two cavalry divisions and IV SS Panzer Corps (*Wiking* and *Totenkopf*), was ordered to attack south, on either bank of the Sarviz Canal. For the thrust Dietrich placed *Leibstandarte* at the spearhead, with II SS Panzer Corps (*Das Reich* and *Hohenstaufen*) to the left and I Cavalry Corps to the right. To retain the element of surprise, troops were held 20km from their assembly areas until the last minute and the long, tiring march to their start lines through clinging mud left them exhausted and in need of rest before the battle even began. They quickly learnt that Hitler's plan had not taken into account the appalling conditions created by an early thaw, in which normally frozen ground became heavily waterlogged. Not even tracked vehicles could operate off the paved roads, and these inevitably became badly clogged with traffic. Furthermore, there were shortages of ammunition.

In these miserable conditions *Das Reich* advanced on a line to the north-east of Lake Balaton on 5 March and on the following day engaged in combat south-west of

Left: Transylvania, October 1944. Guided by a fire-controller, Waffen-SS infantry guns prepare to deliver supporting fire for their comrades. The gunners are all wearing full camouflage suits complete with camouflage service caps. Their weapon is a standard 7.5cm leIG 18 light infantry gun.

Below left: Somewhere on the Western Front. Trophy time! American soldiers search another batch of captured Waffen-SS grenadiers.

Below: SS-*Sturmbannführer* Hans Hauser photographed before he was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. This was bestowed upon him on 6 May 1945 just two days before the end of the war in Europe. He received the Knight's Cross when commander of 1st Battalion in Regiment *Der Führer* from *Das Reich*. It was an immediate award authorised by 'Sepp' Dietrich, commander of the Sixth Panzer Army.





Above: Vincenz Kaiser, seen here as an SS-Obersturmbannführer, photographed sometime late 1942. He had been awarded four Tank Destruction badges (shown here worn on the right upper arm) each for his single-handed destruction of an enemy tank without the aid of an anti-tank weapon. On 19 April 1945 he received the Oakleaves to his Knight's Cross (awarded on 6 April 1943) when he was commanding a battle group of the 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division *Götz von Berlichingen*. During the 1945 retreat from Southern Germany he was reported missing somewhere in the vicinity of Nuremberg. His body has never been found.

Budapest at Stuhlweissenburg. By 9 March *Totenkopf* had advanced 20 miles, and *Das Reich* panzers, reinforced by III./*Der Führer* overran Hill 159. Throughout the next three days fierce combat raged in the Kulso, Puskop and Myr areas, and *Der Führer* advanced with what remained of the division's panzers to Heinrich Major. On 13 March the advance ground to a halt in the face of overwhelming Soviet resistance, and within three days the Soviet counter-attack began, trapping the over-extended Sixth SS Panzer Army. *Das Reich* fought and held open a narrowing pocket through which the trapped divisions escaped, but with Hungarian formations deserting en masse, the full weight of the Russian Second and Third Ukrainian Fronts was brought to bear on the SS formations. Little more than a week after they had launched the attack, the two Ukrainian Fronts had broken through on either side of Lake Balaton and by the end of the month had crossed the border into Austria.

With the spectre of defeat looming ominously, a fighting retreat back to Austria began, where General Lothar Rendulic, recently appointed as commander of Army Group South, was told to hold Vienna and the Alpine passes. During the third week of March *Das Reich* was driven back south of Komorn, and then to positions in Austria.

Vienna

In Vienna an operation to evacuate the city was already in full swing. Sixth SS Panzer Army did what it could with what little it had to defend the approaches but, as their strength diminished, Hitler's demands to hold the city became wishful in the extreme. On the 28th, as it retreated north-west toward the Austrian capital, *Das Reich's* Panzer Regiment had just 5 Panzer IVs, 2 Panthers, and 5 Jagdpanthers combat fit. On 6 April the Red Army was on the outskirts of the city and by the middle of the month was approaching the centre, while to the north and south of the city the Soviets were closing in.

On 11 and 12 April, *Das Reich* battled to keep open the small, but vital bridgehead at the Florisdorf Bridge, one of only two bridges across the Danube that had not been blown. On 13 April, *Das Reich* fought its last significant tank action in Vienna. As Soviet forces edged in on the southern end of the bridge, the CO, Obersturmführer Karl-Heinz Boska, rounded up three Panthers and tried to lead them over the bridge toward the dwindling bridgehead. Halfway across the bridge Boska's machine was hit, and the others were pulled back. That night the bridgehead was evacuated, and Vienna fell to the Russians the next day.

Already, on 1 April the Red Army had launched its last great offensive of the war and, with the Ruhr already encircled and Silesia gone, tank, artillery and ammunition production at a mere ebb, and fuel in hopelessly short supply, the fate of the Third Reich was sealed. On 16 April on the Oder-Niesse line the First Belorussian and First Ukrainian Fronts broke through toward Berlin. On 21 April Zhukov's First Belorussian Front reached Berlin, and with Konev's First Ukrainian Front moving up from the south-east, by 24 April the city was encircled.

The widely dispersed and tattered units of *Das Reich* were pulled back from the Danube across the Bisamberg River to concentration areas around Melk and St. Pölten. From here the bulk of division was ordered back to Dresden, and *Deutschland* to Passau where during the final days of the war it fought to contain the advance of American troops. Moving by rail and on foot, via Krems, Zwettl, Budweis and Prague, there were

minor but inconsequential skirmishes with American units before, on 8 May, orders were received to lay down arms. *Deutschland* held a final parade where decorations were presented to the men. This done, they crossed over the Enns bridge to surrender to the American Army, and into uncertain captivity.

Der Führer's final act of the war was a somewhat unlikely mercy mission. On 30 April Obersturmbannführer Otto Weidinger, CO of the *Der Führer* Regiment, led the regiment into Prague, where he organised the evacuation by a convoy of 1,000 vehicles of wounded German soldiers and civilians. On 6 May, in the face of Soviet attacks and Czech civilian reprisals, this column reached the American lines at Rokizany.



Above: Surrender at the Elbe. A Waffen-SS general, possibly Jürgen Wagner, listens intently to his interpreter while being interrogated by an American colonel. SS-Gruppenführer und Generalleutnant der Waffen-SS Wagner joined *Leibstandarte* in 1933 and transferred to *Deutschland* in 1939. He commanded the Regiment *Germania*, and then the *Wiking* and *Nederland* divisions. It was while fighting Tito's partisans with *Nederland* that he was awarded the Oakleaves to the Knight's Cross. He surrendered to US forces on 1 May 1945 and was extradited to Yugoslavia for trial. Found guilty, he was executed in 1947.

Left: *Das Reich's* war at a glance.

DETAILS OF THE LOCATION AND ASSIGNMENT OF *Das Reich* 1941–45

Date	Corps	Army	Army Group	Area
1–3.41	XXXXI	First Army	D	France
4.41	XXXXI	Twelfth Army	-	Yugoslavia
5–6.41	Refreshing	BdE – Wehrkreis XVII		
7–9.41	XXXXVI	Second Panzer Group	Centre	Smolensk, Kiev
10.41	LXVII	Fourth Panzer Group	Centre	Vyazma
11–12.41	XXXX	Fourth Panzer Group	Centre	Moscow
1.42	XXXXVI	Fourth Panzer Army	Centre	Mozhaisk
2.42	VI	Ninth Army	Centre	Rzhev
3–4.42	XXXXVI	Ninth Army	Centre	Rzhev
5.42	XXVII	Ninth Army	Centre	Rzhev
6–8.42	Reserve	Ninth Army	Centre	Rzhev
9–11.42	SS Panzer Corps	Fifteenth Army	D	Rennes
12.42–1.43	Reserve	-	D	Rennes
2.43	Reserve	OKH	B	South Russia
3.43	SS Panzer Corps	Fourth Panzer Army	South	Kharkov
4.43	Reserve	Kempf	South	Kharkov
5–6.43	Refitting	-	South	Kharkov
7.43	II SS	Kharkov	South	Belgorod
8.43 Reserve	Fourth Panzer Army	South	Stalino	
9.43	III	Eighth Army	South	Poltava
10.43	XXIV	Eighth Army	South	Dnieper
11.43	XXXXVIII	Fourth Panzer Army	South	Kiev
12.43	XXXXII	Fourth Panzer Army	South	Zhitomir
1.44*	XXXXVIII	Fourth Panzer Army	South	Vinniza
2–3.44*	LXXXVI	First Army	D	Toulouse
4.44	I SS	refreshing	D	Toulouse
5–6.44	Reserve	Seventh Army	D	Toulouse
7.44	LXXXIV	Fifth Panzer Army	B	Normandy
8.44	II SS	Seventh Army	B	Normandy
9.44	I SS	Seventh Army	B	Eifel
10.44	LXVI	Sixth Panzer Army	B	Eifel
11.44	Refitting BdE	Sixth Panzer Army	-	Paderborn
12.44	Reserve	Sixth Panzer Army	B	West Ardennes
1.45	II SS	Fourth Panzer Army	B	Ardennes
2–3.45	Reserve	BdE	South	Hungary
4.45	II SS	-	South	Hungary
5.45	-	-	Centre	Bohemia

* When the division was transferred to France a battle group (*Kampfgruppe*) remained in Russia in February and March. Its assignments were:

2.44	XXXXVIII	Fourth Panzer Army	South	Vinniza
3.44	LIX	First Panzer Army	South	Hube pocket

INSIGNIA, CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT

Right: Captain Tom Carothers (right) tries on the tunic of an officer from *Das Reich* during the September 1944 offensive in Normandy. Note the cuff title (see page 72).

Below: From top to bottom – white gnome as used by Tiger company; symbol found on Sturmgeschütz Abteilung equipment in 1943; symbol seen on Das Reich vehicles around Operation Citadel (some months before and after).



UNIFORMS

The divisional emblem (used on its standard, vehicles and some personal insignia) was based on the 'wolf's hook' or 'wolf's angel', a Nordic rune said to possess the power to ward off wolves. It was adopted in the 15th century by peasants in their revolt against the mercenaries employed by the German princes, and henceforth became a symbol of liberty and independence. During the Thirty Years' War, it was known as the *Zeichen der Willkür* or 'badge of wanton tyranny' and subsequently became a heraldic symbol representing a wolf trap. As such it appeared, and still features, on the coat-of-arms of the city of Wolfstein.

SS INSIGNIA

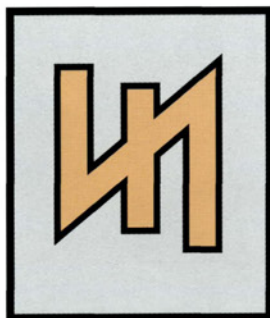
The SS in general wore the national emblem (*Hoheitszeichen*), an eagle clutching a *Hakenkreuz* (swastika), mounted either on the top front of an officer's cap, above the cap band, on the front or left side of soft crush caps, or more unusually on the upper left arm of the combat, service and walking-out dress; also the *Totenkopf* (Death's Head) symbol, whose origins lay in the Prussian and Imperial German Army, worn on the front of an officer's cap, in the centre of the headband, or on the top front of soft crush caps. SS men also wore *Siegrunen* (SS Runes), representative of a double lightning bolt, which were adapted for the SS for their right collar insignia from an ancient Norse symbol for Thor, the god of thunder.

Rank Insignia

The Waffen-SS used a system of rank insignia that differed from that of the Army, and with the development of the camouflage uniform, some difficulties arose with identifying rank in the field. Therefore in May 1940 a ranking system was devised that incorporated a system of lace or cloth strips to identify the wearer's rank. Although collar patches with rank insignia were worn in some cases, on many types of uniform sleeve insignia were worn. These were embroidered in artificial silk on a rectangular black cloth background and worn on the left sleeve, to the following colour scheme.

Generals of the Waffen-SS	Golden Yellow
Officers up to the rank of Oberführer	Bright Green
NCOs	Bright Green

Other ranks wore a series of either mouse grey chevrons or a pip (for an Oberschütze). The badge for the rank of Oberstgruppenführer was three mouse grey embroidered pips on a yellow stripe. Panzerbergrenadiers wore a black wool or felt circle containing a white or silver embroidered diamond on the left sleeve.



Above: Three versions of the 'wolf's hook' – the Nordic rune used as a divisional symbol. Note its use on vehicles as illustrated on pages 77 and 80.

Left: Three collar patches, from left to right – SS-*Standarte Deutschland* (1934–40); *Germania* Regiment (1938–41); *Der Führer* (1939–41). After these dates the usual SS collar patches were used.



Waffen-SS Collar Tresse

SS collar *Tresse* were of the diamond Wehrmacht pattern and were required to be worn on all tunics (with the exception of camouflage tunics) and optionally also on overcoats. Before the war SS collar patches in many cases denoted the rank, branch of service and formation of the wearer. With the introduction within the system of cyphers, numbers and letters on the shoulder strap and the introduction of cuff titles, the SS collar patch was redesigned. A certain amount of confusion arose and an order dated 10 May 1940 rendered all SS-VT collar patches with numerals obsolete for security reasons. From then on collar patches with runes or death's head became standard insignia for the Waffen-SS. Ranks from Schütze to Obersturmbannführer had the SS-runes on the right collar-patch and the rank insignia on the left. Standartenführer to Oberstgruppenführer had rank insignia on both sides. Some Waffen-SS units had the unit emblem on the right collar patch instead of the SS-runes.

Left: Probably a family photograph. A young, blond-haired German woman is posing between two officers – the Army officer on the left is probably her father or father-in-law and the Waffen-SS Sturmbannführer from Regiment *Das Reich* her fiancé or husband. Both men are wearing walking-out uniforms.

Right and Below: The re-enactment photos in this section show men from a New England-based group that portrays the 9th Company of the 3rd Battalion of *Das Reich*'s 3rd Regiment – *Deutschland*. At right, in greatcoat and woollen toque this man carries a Mauser 98k and typical field equipment: note water bottle and gas mask container. In the lower photograph, set at a roadblock, note the *mittlere Schützenpanzerwagen* SdKfz251/9 (7.5cm) in the background.





Left: Gunther Müller stands next to the 'Blood Banner' in barracks. He's wearing the *Dienstmütze* or *Schirmmütze* (service dress cap). Note the Totenkopf badge and the aluminium officer's cords.

Right: Two men from the unit take a cigarette break. In the foreground the man is wearing a *Feldmütze* (also nicknamed the *Schiffchen* – little ship) cap. His camouflage smock is of the second, later, machine-printed oakleaf-pattern type (note the loops at the shoulder for camouflage foliage) with the green (summer) side out. Behind him, his colleague carries a belt of machine gun ammunition. Note, too, the camouflaged cover to his helmet.

Below right: Cuff title of the *Deutschland* Regiment. This honour title was awarded its in 1935.

Below: MP40 gunner. Note the SS runes on his M35/40 helmet and the brown (autumn side) to his later-type smock.



Deutschland



Right: The original propaganda caption identifies: 'Talking Light! The most modern technology is available to the German Wehrmacht. The information just brought by a Waffen-SS messenger is read by the operator into a microphone. The modulated light-ray communication set (*Lichtsprechgerät*) converts his spoken words into light beams that are reconverted into sound by the distant receiver device. In this way, urgent messages can be quickly sent over long distances without the risk of being overheard by the enemy.'

Below right: February 1943 and a member of a Waffen-SS signals unit would give a lot for a working *Lichtsprechgerät* as he carries a heavy roll of telephone cable on his back. He's checking the wire for damage – one of the most dangerous tasks carried out behind the lines. The movement of the signalmen was hampered by having to carry heavy reels of field telephone line and essential equipment plus their personal weapon. With their attention focused on carrying out their job they became an easy target for lurking Soviet sharpshooters or partisans.

Below: Honour cuff titles were awarded to the *Das Reich* regiments during the pre-war years. Note the variations in lettering and the use of old Gothic script. *Das Reich* was awarded its cuff title in 1942.



The *Tresse* were made of a piece of buckram (or metal in some cases) covered in black badge cloth or felt for all ranks up to and including the rank of Obersturmbannführer. From the rank of Standartenführer to Oberstgruppenführer black velvet was used. In most cases it was sewn to the collar of the tunic, greatcoat or shirt. In some cases metal insignia was used and was screwed to the collar patch.

Before the war patches were often piped around the edges with aluminium twist cord but during the war this was often omitted from the patches on the field uniform. Officer's collar *Tresse* were outlined with a thin white or aluminium border. All ranks up to the rank of Obersturmbannführer were identified by 12mm silver pips and intermediate ranks had additional stripes of 6mm wide aluminium lace. Ranks above Obersturmbannführer had oakleaves and pips of hand-embroidered aluminium wire. Metal pips were never worn by general officers.

Shoulder Insignia

Until July 1935 members of the SS-VT wore the standard Allgemeine-SS shoulder cord, at which time Army style shoulder straps were adopted for the earth-grey field uniform. At first manufactured in earth grey cloth, then later from black cloth with rounded ends and black and white aluminium twisted cord, they did not identify the wearer's rank.

From March 1938 NCOs wore aluminium lace and white metal stars on two patterns of shoulder strap, which were secured to the shoulder by a loop at the shoulder seam and a button near the uniform collar. The first pattern was made from black wool material was rounded at the button end and had black and aluminium twisted cord piping. The second was made of coarser quality black cloth with pointed ends and no piping. In December 1939 black rounded shoulder straps with Army style *Waffenfarben* were made standard issue for soldiers of the Waffen-SS and remained in use until the end of the war.

Officers wore shoulder straps corresponding to their rank with appropriate pips and metal monograms. Non-commissioned officer's shoulder straps were trimmed with *Tresse* and also displayed the appropriate pips. Depending on the unit, shoulder boards were trimmed with various colours – white for infantry, yellow for reconnaissance, pink for panzer troops and so on.

Camouflaged rank insignia were worn on camouflage tunics and smocks.



Honour Title Cuff Bands

Cuff bands bearing unit 'honour titles' were worn by at least 50 elite German Army and Luftwaffe formations during the war. The actual cuff title was a strip of woven black tape 28mm wide and 490mm in length and was worn on the left-hand sleeve of the greatcoat or tunic. The lettering and precise design of the *Das Reich* cuff band were frequently changed during the war. Regimental as well as divisional titles were issued and worn but there were strict criteria for the award of these titles. *Deutschland* was awarded its honour title in 1935, *Germania* in 1936, *Der Führer* in 1938, and *Das Reich* in 1942.





Above: Squad drill re-enactment. The majority of the squad are wearing camouflage uniforms, the officer with his back to the camera pairing camouflage trousers with a field grey uniform jacket. The distinctive Waffen-SS camouflage uniforms led to friendly fire problems for the US Army when it introduced its M1942 two-piece camouflage suit to 2nd Armored Division in June 1944. While in close-up the uniforms are very different, in the bocage of Normandy they were too similar and the US troops quickly stopped wearing their camouflage uniforms. (See *Spearhead 9: 2nd Armored Division 'Hell on Wheels'*.)

Right: The most interesting item of clothing shown in this re-enactment photograph is the *Kradmantel* – the waterproof motorcyclist's coat that was made from rubber-coated twill. While it was certainly sought-after for its waterproof qualities, it was not sufficiently hard-wearing for infantry use.

Left: This photograph provides a good example of the first type camouflage smock being worn autumn side out, showing off the plane-tree pattern. Note the SS enlisted man's belt buckle: Waffen-SS officers had a distinctive, if not very efficient, round belt buckle which was often swapped for an army open-style buckle (see photograph on page 78).







VEHICLE INSIGNIA

All *Das Reich* vehicles were identified by the 'wolf's hook' or 'wolf's angel', and some by tactical designations. The divisional symbol – sometimes enclosed in a shield – was usually small, and painted in yellow or white on the hull of AFVs usually on or near the driver's plate (see page 67). Prior to Operation Citadel (the Kursk offensive) *Das Reich* adopted a temporary divisional symbol to confuse Allied intelligence. This symbol (a horizontal bar with two vertical bars) was seen on *Das Reich* vehicles several months before and after the Kursk offensive.

A tactical marking was also usually carried on most *Das Reich* AFVs although more often omitted on armoured cars and half-tracks. The number was usually in black, outlined in white, or sometimes in white or white outline only. The system of allocating these numbers was usually according to normal German Army markings, although there were exceptions to the general rule:

- R 11 – Regimental Commander
- R 12 – Regimental Adjutant
- R 13 – Ordnance or Signals Officer
- R 14, etc. – Regimental staff
- A 11 – Commander of 1st battalion
- A 12 – Adjutant of 1st battalion
- A 13 – Ordnance officer of 1st battalion
- A 14, etc. – Staff of 1st battalion

Left: A section of Waffen-SS grenadiers march in column along a Russian village street. The leading NCO is carrying an MP40 slung on his right shoulder with three spare ammunition magazines carried in a holder on his chest.

Below: An advance party from the *Das Reich* reconnaissance detachment has encountered another Soviet defensive position. The men dismount from their vehicles to move forward in open formation. Note the tactical signs on the rear left of the truck – a unit sign and the 'wolf's hook' divisional symbol.







Above and left: Excellently preserved BMW R71 sidecar combo with machine gun. Note the carrying panniers on the sidecar body, SS numberplate, and 7.92mm MG34 machine gun. 3,458 R71s were built by BMW between 1938 and 1941, until it was superseded by the R75. The R71 had a 750cc side-valve engine that developed 22hp for a top speed of 125 km/h, a four-speed gearbox and weighed 187kg. It was an impressive machine, particularly when teamed up with the standard military sidecar – so much so that it was imitated all over the world. In the United States, the U.S. Army asked Harley-Davidson to produce a motorcycle as good as the R71. Harley copied it, converting metric measurements to inches, and produced the shaft-drive 750cc 1942 Harley-Davidson XA (experimental army). The Russians, too, produced an identical copy named the M72 (with an identical copy of the Wehrmacht sidecar). The official history says that this was reverse-engineered from five copies smuggled out of Sweden, but it seems more likely that BMW supplied the necessary information as part of the transfer of technology between the two countries fostered by the Molotov-von Ribbentrop Pact.

Far left: SS-Untersturmführer Gunther Müller. Note *Deutschland* cuff title and his war badges (*Kriegsabzeichen*) – the infantry assault breast badge (for having taken part in three or more infantry assaults) and the close combat clasp in bronze that was issued for 15 days' hand-to-hand fighting.

Right: The division's Pioneer company ferries a despatch rider and his sidecar companion across the River Beresina in July 1941 on a standard service pontoon float. Note the 'wolf's hook' symbol on the rear mudguard.

Below: July 1944. A Waffen-SS assault detachment discusses an attack. An Obersturmführer familiarises the commander of the detachment, a Waffen-SS Hauptscharführer, with the details.

Opposite, Below left: A Waffen-SS grenadier with two Panzerfaust 30 single-shot anti-tank missiles – the hollow-charge warheads could penetrate up to 200mm of solid armour plate at a 30° angle of impact. The main drawbacks were short range (in this case just 30m) and the long backblast of flame.

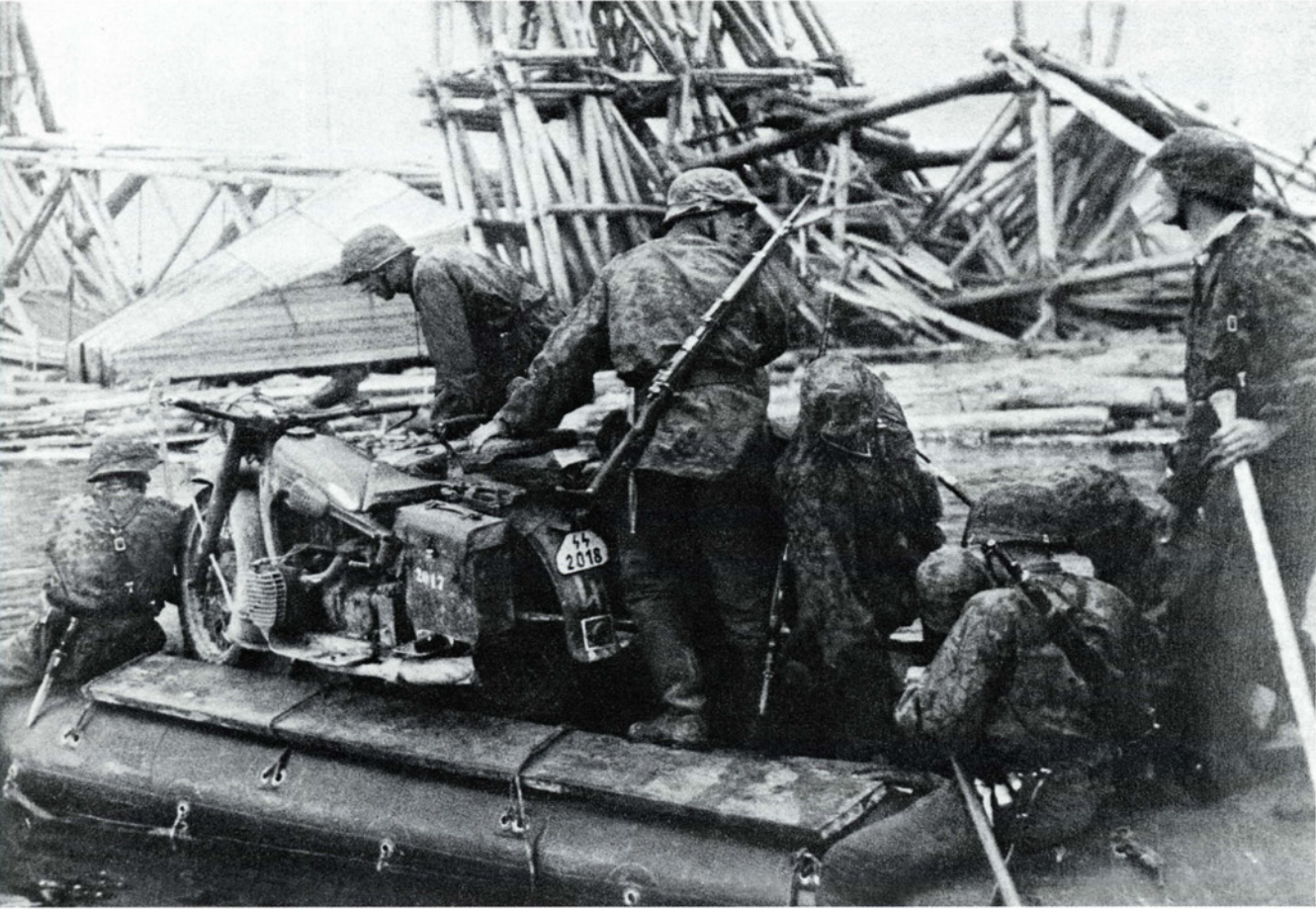
Opposite, Below right: Otto Kumm in summer 1943 when he was CO of the Regiment *Der Führer*. He received the Oakleaves to his Knight's Cross on 8 April 1943.

- 101 – Officer commanding 1st company, 1st battalion
- 102 – 2nd-in-command, 1st company, 1st battalion
- 111 – Leader, 1st platoon, 1st company, 1st battalion
- 112 – 2nd vehicle, 1st platoon, 1st company, 1st battalion
- 133 – 3rd vehicle, 3rd platoon, 1st company, 1st battalion
- 201 – Officer commanding 2nd company, 1st battalion
- 301 – Officer commanding 3rd company, 1st battalion
- B 11 – Commander of 2nd battalion
- 401 – Officer commanding 4th company (2nd battalion)

Tiger Company

The Tiger company used a sequential series of numbers from 801 until 1943, when it changed the first digit from an 8 to an S for *schwere* (heavy), followed by a two digit tank number denoting platoon and vehicle. The 'gnome' emblem (see page 66) often seen was actually known as the *Springender Teufel* (springing demon). Reportedly this was based on a figure found by a panzer crewman in the streets of Kharkov. He was transferred to the Tiger Company in April 1943, at which time the emblem was adopted by that unit.



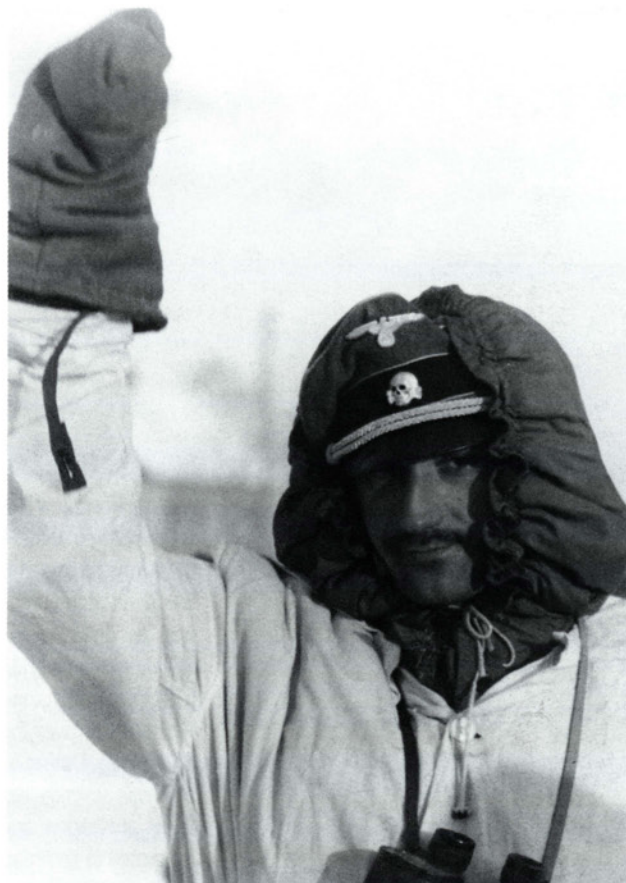




Above: "That's what comrades are for!" says the original caption as a wounded man is carried to safety on a makeshift stretcher, accompanied by a medical orderly. The photograph gives a good snapshot of personal equipment including entrenching tool, gasmask container, etc. Note the forage cap tucked into the central man's shoulder strap.

Right: A Waffen-SS soldier crouches in his icy foxhole. The armband worn around his left sleeve and held in position by a single button was worn as a recognition mark to distinguish German troops from Soviet forces. When troops of both sides wore white snow camouflage it was difficult to identify who was who. The Germans adopted a simple system of red or green coloured arm bands to distinguish their troops. The colour of their bands was randomly altered in the same way as passwords were issued and used. Note the helmet cover.





Above left: December 1943, between Zhitomir and Kiev. The photograph shows part of the battlefield, with several burning Soviet T-34 tanks outside a recaptured village. A young Waffen-SS NCO signals his men to close up.

Above: The battle for Kharkov. The commander of a Waffen-SS motorcycle platoon gives the order to move out. Note the parka worn under his snow camouflage and the SS officer's cap with the death's head device.



Left: Belgium, December 1944. Members of the Waffen-SS, captured during the battle of the Bulge, are transported to the rear in an American truck. The lad on the left of this photographs appears to be very young.

PEOPLE



THE COMMANDERS

Obergruppenführer Paul Hausser (1880–1972)

Hausser served in the First World War, was decorated for action, and in 1920–32 served with various Army units, eventually reaching the rank of Generalleutnant. After retiring from the Army, he joined the Stahlhelm, which was later absorbed into the SA and served as an SA-Standartenführer. In November 1934 Hausser transferred to the SS-Verfügungstruppe and was assigned to SS-Junkerschule Braunschweig. In 1935 he became inspector of the SS-Junkerschule and was promoted to Brigadeführer in 1936. In Poland he was an observer with Panzer Division *Kempf* and, when SS-VT was formed as a division in October 1939, Hausser was given the command. He led the division through the battles in the west and during Barbarossa. During his command of *Reich* in Russia, Hausser was awarded the Knight's Cross and was severely wounded, losing an eye. After convalescing he commanded II SS Panzer Corps at Kharkov and led *Das Reich*, *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* and *Totenkopf* during Kursk. Promoted to command Seventh Army during the Falaise encirclement, Hausser risked capture to ensure the escape of as many men as possible. He ended the war on Feldmarschall Albert Kesselring's staff.



Brigadeführer Wilhelm Bittrich (1894–1979)

Wilhelm Bittrich began his military career as a fighter pilot in the First World War. He joined the SS in 1932 with SS Fliegerstaffel 'Ost' (SS Flying Echelon 'East') and later took command of 74. Standarte before leaving the Allgemeine-SS in August 1934. When Himmler re-established the Politische Bereitschaft in 1934, Bittrich was made commander. When this unit was expanded, and renamed Regiment *Germania*, Bittrich became 2nd Company Commander. In October 1936 he transferred to Regiment *Deutschland* as CO of 2nd Battalion and remained there until the spring of 1938. When the Austria-based Regiment *Der Führer* was created, Bittrich led I./*Der Führer*. He moved to the *Leibstandarte* on 1 June 1939, serving as Sepp Dietrich's HQ adjutant throughout the Polish campaign, before transfer to the replacement section of the SS-VT in early February 1940. He returned to the 2nd SS as commander of the *Deutschland* Regiment on 14 December 1940, and while in this post was awarded the Knight's Cross. As senior regimental commander, Bittrich replaced Hausser when the latter was wounded, serving until the end of December 1941, when he fell ill and had to step down. After he had recovered, Bittrich was assigned as CO of the SS Cavalry Brigade on 1 May 1942. Bittrich oversaw the expansion of that unit until it reached division strength, and then on 15 February took command of the 9th SS Panzer Division *Hohenstaufen*. When Hausser took command of Seventh Army, Bittrich was tasked as his replacement as II SS Panzer Corps commander and he retained this command till the end of the war.

Brigadeführer Matthias Kleinheisterkamp (1893–1945)

Matthias Kleinheisterkamp served in various units in World War I, during which time he was awarded both classes of the Iron Cross. After the war he served in both the infantry and the cavalry until 1934 when he joined the SS. He transferred to the SS-VT in 1938, taught at the SS-Führerschule Braunschweig as an infantry instructor and joined Hausser's Inspectorate as a senior staff officer. On 1 December 1938 he became commander of III./*Deutschland*, where he remained until the summer of 1940, when he was appointed CO of 11.SS Infantry Regiment *Totenkopf*. After this posting Kleinheisterkamp was transferred to take Bittrich's place as *Das Reich* commander, and was later awarded the Knight's Cross. After *Das Reich* he held various senior postings, ending the war as XI SS Army Corps commander.



Above: Walter Krüger awarding Knight's Crosses and other decorations after the Battle of Kharkov. The recipients are from left to right: SS-Obersturmbannführer Otto Kumm, SS-Sturmbannführer Christian Tychsen, SS-Untersturmführer Karl Heinz Worthmann, SS-Sturmbannführer Sylvester Stadler, SS-Sturmbannführer Vincenz Kaiser and SS-Sturmbannführer Hans Weiss. This photo is believed to have been taken on 6 April 1943.

Standartenführer Kurt Brasack (1892–1978)

Kurt Brasack was commissioned with the Allgemeine-SS in October 1931 with 21. Standarte. He commanded 91. Standarte from May 1934 to January 1937. He was promoted to Oberführer on 30 January 1938, and led SS-Abschnitte (Sections) XI and XXX. He served with the *Totenkopf* Division as CO of the 1st Artillery Battalion from October 1939 to March 1941, and was then reassigned to *Wiking*. He became CO of the *Wiking* Regiment in January 1942, and was acting divisional CO of *Das Reich* in March and April. He remained with *Das Reich* until June 1943. Brasack ended the war as the Arko (Artilleriekommandeur) of IV SS Panzer Corps when it absorbed VII SS Panzer Corps.

Gruppenführer Walter Krüger (1890–1945)

Walter Krüger was wounded twice in the First World War and awarded the Iron Cross, First and Second Class. Afterwards Krüger served with various units and joined the Austrian SA. He transferred to the SS in 1935 and served as an instructor at Bad Tölz in 1937. In October, he took command of IV./*Deutschland* and from November was regimental commander of the Regiment z.b.v. *Ellwangen*. Krüger was assigned to the Polizei Division as a staff officer in January–October 1940, after which he was on the main SS staff as Inspector of Infantry. The following August he rejoined the Polizei Division and won the Knight's Cross for his leadership during the battles around Leningrad. After a brief return to the SS general staff, Krüger became commander of *Das Reich*, won his Oakleaves at Kursk, and left command of the division in October 1943. After holding a number of posts, he took command of VI SS Army Corps (Latvian), and was awarded the Swords for his actions during the battles in Kurland. Krüger committed suicide to avoid capture by the Russians.

Above left: Paul Hausser (saluting) seen as an SS-Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Waffen-SS on the occasion of a parade held to award the Knight's Cross to SS-Sturmbannführer Fritz Vogt, 4 September 1940.

Left: Wilhelm 'Willi' Bittrich. As this photo does not show him wearing his Oakleaves (awarded 23 August 1944) it is safe to assume it was taken sometime during the first half of 1944 when he held the rank of SS-Gruppenführer und Generalleutnant der Waffen-SS and before 22 August 1944. He had previously been awarded the Knight's Cross on 14 December 1941.

Brigadeführer Heinz Lammerding (1905–71)

An early Nazi supporter, Lammerding joined the SA as director of the engineering school, and worked in various capacities until 1935 when he joined the SS, and soon achieved the rank of Hauptsturmführer. On the staff of various pioneer battalions in the SS-VT Division from November 1940 to August 1942, he then commanded an infantry regiment, was on an armoured corps staff, and became chief of staff to General Erich von der Bach-Zelewski. At the



Above: Werner Ostendorff received his Knight's Cross on 13 September 1941 as an SS-Obersturmbannführer and 1st Staff Officer from *Das Reich*, then operating as part of Army Group Centre, on the Russian Front. He is shown here as an SS-Oberführer.

end of 1943 he assumed command of *Das Reich* units operating against Soviet partisans, and was division commander from 23 October 1944 to 20 January 1945. In 1945 he was chief of staff of Himmler's Army Group Vistula. Other appointments included service as chief of staff to Eicke in the *Totenkopf* Division. After the war he and other higher ranking officers escaped prosecution for actions in France, though various junior personnel from the division were convicted and served minor sentences. He survived the war, prospering as an engineer in Düsseldorf until his death.

Standartenführer Christian Tychsen (1910–44)

Tychsen joined the SS in December 1931 with 50. SS-Standarte, transferred to 1. Sturm (*Germania*) in October 1934, and was a platoon leader in Bataillon 'N' from October 1936 until his appointment in December 1938 as CO of 1st Company. After 'N' was dissolved he led 1. Kradschützen-Ersatz Kompanie, which became 3./Reconnaissance Battalion in April 1940. In January 1942 Tychsen assumed overall command of the Motorcycle Battalion, but was wounded soon after and taught at Brunswick during recovery until May 1942. On his return to duty, he was given command of II./*Langemarck*, which became II./Panzer Regiment in October 1942. He was Panzer Regiment commander from 30 November 1943 until ordered to stand in as temporary CO of *Das Reich*. Wounded at least nine times, he was killed in Normandy while deputy divisional CO.

Standartenführer Otto Baum (1911–98)

Baum graduated with SS-Junkerschule Braunschweig's first class in 1935, and was posted as a platoon commander with 5./*Germania*. In 1938 he transferred to Regiment *Der Führer* as a platoon commander with 12th Company, and later moved to the *Leibstandarte* as 7th Company CO. In March 1941 he transferred to *Totenkopf* Division as a battalion commander and in this post won both the German Cross in Gold and the Knight's Cross. In 1943 he was promoted, and took command of Panzergrenadier-Regiment 5 *Totenkopf*. During battles in February and March he was awarded the Oakleaves. In June 1944 he commanded 17th SS Panzergrenadier-Division *Götz von Berlichingen*. He took command of *Das Reich* during the Normandy battles and led the division until replaced by Lammerding. For his leadership during the Falaise encirclement, Swords to his Knight's Cross were presented. He ended the war as commander of 16th SS Panzergrenadier Division *Reichsführer SS*.

Gruppenführer Werner Ostendorff (1903–45)

Ostendorff began his military career in 1925 with Jäger Regiment 1, remaining with the unit until enlisting in the Luftwaffe in March 1934. He qualified as a pilot and subsequently served in Russia under a technical exchange programme. After entering the SS as a commissioned officer on 1 October 1935, he was posted to Bad Tölz. After graduating Ostendorff took command of 4./*Der Führer* in April 1938, and led the company until appointed CO of the Anti-aircraft Machine Gun Battalion at its formation in June 1939. He remained with this unit until the Polish campaign when he acted as a staff observer with Panzer Group *Kempf*. Ostendorff was later appointed *Das Reich* chief of staff, and served in this capacity until 20 June 1942, during which time he was awarded the German Cross in Gold. In mid-1942, he became the chief of staff to the SS Panzer Corps and served with this unit at Kharkov and Kursk. On 23 November 1943 he was given command of the newly formed 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division *Götz von Berlichingen*. Wounded during the Normandy campaign, he recovered and returned to this command in October 1944, only to be wounded again in November. On 29 January he was appointed to command *Das Reich* and took up his post officially on 10 February. Wounded for a third time in Austria, he died in a field hospital on 1 May 1945.

Standartenführer Rudolf Lehmann (1914–83)

In April 1935 Rudolf Lehmann entered the officers' school in Bad Tölz, and upon graduation was assigned to *Germania*. During his service with *Germania* Lehmann was the commander of the armoured car platoon, and in April 1940 company commander of 14./*Germania*. After transferring to *Leibstandarte* in October 1940, Lehmann served as an ordnance officer until hospitalised in August 1941. A period of convalescence followed, then more training and a return to service in early June 1942 as chief operations' officer to *Leibstandarte*. After another stint in hospital, Lehmann was recommended for the Knight's Cross for his leadership of a battle group in the Zhitomir area during December 1943. In late 1944 Lehmann became chief of staff for I SS Panzer Corps. Here he remained until March 1945, when he assumed command of *Das Reich*, and subsequently won his Oakleaves. Also wounded during the fighting in Austria, Lehmann spent the remainder of the war recovering from his injuries.

OTHER NOTABLES

Oberscharführer Ernst Barkmann (1919–)

Barkmann joined the SS-VT in April 1939 with 9./*Germania* and served there until joining the Panzer Battalion. Wounded in Russia on 23 July 1941 near Dniepropetrovsk, he recovered with the replacement unit of *Wiking* (5th SS Panzer Division) then transferred to 2nd Company of the Panzer Regiment in 1942 and in January 1943 to 4th Company, where he remained until war's end. Promoted Oberscharführer on 1 August 1944, he was wounded in action five times and awarded the Gold Wound Badge and the '50' Tank Combat Badge.

Oberführer Fritz Klingenberg (1912–45)

Fritz Klingenberg joined SS-VT in 1934 and after graduating from the new SS-Junkerschule at Bad Tolz was promoted to Untersturmführer. He was first assigned to SS-Standarte *Germania*, then became one of the inspectors of the SS-VT. After the campaigns in the Low Countries, Klingenberg commanded a motorcycle company and it was during this command that he gained fame for the capture of Belgrade. Klingenberg lead the 2nd Company, Motorcycle Battalion, until 1942 when he transferred to the staff at Bad Tolz. In January 1945 Klingenberg assumed command of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division *Götz von Berlichingen*. He was killed near Herxheim while leading it.

Obersturmführer Karl Kloskowski (1917–45)

Kloskowski joined SS-VT with 3./*Germania* in December 1936. Later he served with 4./11. SS-Standarte until transferred back to the division in 1941 with 3./Reconnaissance Battalion. That unit became 3./Motorcycle Battalion and he stayed there until wounded on 16 November 1941. He was promoted to Hauptscharführer on 10 January 1943, and was later a platoon leader with 4./Panzer Regiment, and then regimental ordnance officer. He won the Knight's Cross for single-handedly preventing the destruction of an important bridge.

Obersturmführer Horst Gresiak (1920–)

Horst Gresiak joined the *Totenkopf* Standarte in September 1940 as a grenadier. After attending SS-Junkerschule Braunschweig (November 41 to April 42) he joined the *Das Reich* Panzer Battalion as a tank commander and later a platoon leader with 3rd Company. Later Gresiak moved to 7th Company as commander, and in this post was recommended for the Knight's Cross for actions around Baraque de Fraiture during the Battle of the Bulge.

DAS REICH SENIOR PERSONNEL

Commanding Officers

Oberstgruppenführer Paul Hausser (19 October 1939–14 October 1941)
 Obergruppenführer Wilhelm Bittrich (14 October–31 December 1941)
 Obergruppenführer Matthias Kleinheisterkamp (31 December 1941–19 April 1942)
 Obergruppenführer Georg Keppler (19 April 1942–10 February 1943)
 Brigadeführer Hebert-Ernst Vahl (10 February–18 March 1943)
 Oberführer Kurt Brasack (18 March–3 April 1943)
 Obergruppenführer Walter Krüger (3 April 1943–23 October 1943)
 Gruppenführer Heinz Lammerding (23 October 1943–24 July 1944)
 Standartenführer Christian Tychsen (24 July 1944–28 July 1944)
 Brigadeführer Otto Baum (28 July 1944–23 October 1944)
 Gruppenführer Heinz Lammerding (23 October 1944–20 January 1945)
 Standartenführer Karl Kreutz (20 January 1945–29 January 1945)
 Gruppenführer Werner Ostendorff (29 January 1945–9 March 1945)
 Standartenführer Rudolf Lehmann (9 March 1945–13 April 1945)
 Standartenführer Karl Kreutz (13 April 1945–8 May 1945)

Chiefs of Staff

Standartenführer Werner Ostendorff (1 April 1940–31 May 1942)
 Obersturmbannführer Max Schultz (31 May 1942–22 May 1943)
 Obersturmbannführer Georg Maier (23 May–? June 1943)
 Obersturmbannführer Peter Sommer (20 June 1943–17 January 1944)
 Obersturmbannführer Albert Stücker (18 January 1944–? Feb 1945)
 Sturmbannführer Reinhardt Wörner (1 March–? March 1945)
 Sturmbannführer Ralf Riemann (? March–30 April 1945)
 Major Joachim Schiller (1–8 May 1945)

Quartermasters

Sturmbannführer Günther Ecke (1 April–30 November 1940)
 Hauptsturmführer Eugen Kunstmann (1 December–21 December 1940)
 Standartenführer Heinz Fansau (21 December 1940–? January 1941)
 Hauptsturmführer Eugen Kunstmann (? January 1941–? 1942)
 Sturmbannführer Alfred Jantseh (1 March–10 August 1942)
 Hauptsturmführer Fritz Steinbeck (9 November 1942–? 1943)
 Sturmbannführer Heino von Goldacker (31 July 1943–1 March 1945)



Emil Seibold (1907–90)

Emil Seibold entered the SS in April 1940 as an infantryman with the *Totenkopf* Standarte. In November 1940 he was transferred to *Das Reich* and joined the 3./Tank Destroyer Battalion, serving the company first as a motorcycle driver and later as a gun commander. In March 1943 the remnants of the battalion were given T-34s, with which Seibold scored many kills and went on to become one of the division's most successful tank aces. He was awarded one of the last Knight's Crosses of *Das Reich* after scoring his 65th kill.

Obersturmführer Fritz Langanke (1919–)

Fritz Langanke served *Germania* from 1937, first as an infantryman with 10th Company, in 1938 as a radio operator with the armoured reconnaissance platoon, and later a vehicle commander. In 1942 he moved to the Panzer Battalion and was a tank commander in the reconnaissance platoon. When the division was reformed in late 1943 Langanke was assigned to the 1st Battalion as an ordnance officer. He took command of 2nd Company on 25 December 1944, and remained at this post till the end of the war.

Hauptsturmführer Karl-Heinz Boska (1920–)

Boska joined *Das Reich* in June 1940, after six months with 1st Company of Kradschützen-Ersatz-Bataillon *Ellwangen*. During the western campaigns he was a motorcycle rider with 3./Reconnaissance Battalion, and gained promotion to Sturmmann on 1 November 1940. He stayed with 3rd Company when it was absorbed by the Motorcycle Battalion in February 1941, and won promotion to Unterscharführer on 1 September of that year. There followed a period of schooling and then assignment first as a platoon commander to 7./*Langemarck*, then in October 1942 to 2nd Battalion *Das Reich* Panzer Regiment of which he subsequently became adjutant. He won the Knight's Cross for combat action during November 1943, and after the death of the commander, Boska was 6th Company commander until promoted in the last weeks of the war to overall command of 2nd Battalion.

Sturmbannführer Ernst August Krag (1915–)

After joining 5./*Germania* in 1935, Krag undertook paratroop training at the Luftwaffe school at Stendal, and following his return to the division was promoted to Unterscharführer. He graduated from Bad Tolz in August 1939, and also attended the Jüterbog Artillery School. Posted as battery officer to 3. Battery, in 1940 he was then made adjutant of the 1st Battalion. During the first Russian campaigns, Krag led the 11. (schwere) Batterie, but was severely wounded in January 1942 and forced to return to Germany. Rejoining the unit, he was posted as artillery regimental adjutant and held that post until October, when he moved to the Assault Gun Battalion as commander of 2nd Battery. In August 1943 he took temporary command of the battalion and the following July he became CO of the Reconnaissance Battalion. In this post, Krag was awarded the Knight's Cross and the only Oakleaves given to a member of the Reconnaissance Battalion.

Sturmbannführer Siegfried Brosow (1918–)

Brosow joined the SS-VT in November 1937 and was assigned to the Pioneer Recruit Battalion. After graduating from Brunswick in 1940, he went to command the Bridging Section. The following February he was wounded, and spent time convalescing as an instructor at Bad Tölz, and from the autumn of 1942 at the Pioneer School. In January 1943 he returned to his battalion as 1st Company CO and held that command until he appointed to the divisional staff in October 1943. Prior to the Normandy Campaign he assumed full command of the Pioneer Battalion and led it until February 1945. Brosow ended the war as a senior officer at the Pioneer School.

Above: Emil Seibold, born in Basel, Switzerland on 26 February 1907, was the highest scoring tank ace in *Das Reich*. He is seen here as an SS-Oberscharführer, platoon leader in the 8th Company of SS Panzer Regiment 2. In June 1944 he received the German Cross in Gold and on 6 May 1945 he was awarded the Knight's Cross to commemorate his 65th tank kill, another very late war award and the last awarded in the Panzer Regiment. Emil Seibold died on 11 September 1990.

Above right: SS-Oberführer Georg Keppler. He was awarded the Knight's Cross for his part during the Western campaign and the fighting in the Netherlands (15.8.1940). At that time he was CO of SS Regiment *Der Führer*, then part of the SS-Verfügungs Division of the Eighteenth Army.

Right: SS-Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Waffen-SS Herbert Ernst Vahl. He received his Knight's Cross on 31 March 1943 when he was an SS-Oberführer and commander of *Das Reich*.

Obersturmbannführer Hans-Albin, Freiherr von Reitzenstein (1911–43)

Reitzenstein joined the Allgemeine-SS in 1931, and served with *Leibstandarte* before moving to *Deutschland*. Wounded in Poland, he convalesced at Bad Tolz. In December 1940 he became CO of the Recce Battalion of the new SS Division *Germania*. In 1942 he was transferred to *Das Reich* and led the Recce Battalion through Russia until March 1943 when he replaced Vahl as Panzer Regiment commander. He won the Knight's Cross for actions at Belgorod, the Mius, Kharkov and Kolomak in which the regiment destroyed 839 tanks, 18 assault guns, 334 anti-tank weapons and 32 other guns. He committed suicide in November 1943.

Brigadeführer Herbert Vahl (1896–1944)

Vahl served as an Army officer with Regiment 29 in 12th Panzer Division, before he was assigned to the SS general staff in 1942. When SS Panzer Battalion 2 was expanded to Panzer Regiment 2, Vahl was made commander. When Keppler fell ill in February 1943, Vahl briefly commanded *Das Reich*, leading the division in the battles of Kharkov and near Belgorod, for which he was awarded the Knight's Cross. Subsequently wounded, he was forced to relinquish command, and was assigned to the SS training staff as Inspector of Armoured Troops. From July 1944 he was CO of 4th SS Polizei-Grenadier Division and was killed in a road accident.

Brigadeführer Georg Keppler (1894–1966)

From 1920–35 Keppler served in police units, before joining the SS-VT. As a *Sturmbannführer*, he took command of 1st Battalion of Standarte 1 *Deutschland* on 10 October 1935, a post he held until early 1938 when tasked with forming *Der Führer*. He led this unit through the pre-war period, and continued as regimental commander after its amalgamation into *Das Reich*. In July 1941, after leading the division in Russia, Keppler became the CO of *Totenkopf* for a brief spell then spent the remainder of 1941 recovering from a brain tumour. After convalescing, he became *Das Reich* divisional commander when it reformed as a panzergrenadier division, and led the division until February 1943, when recurrent illness forced him to relinquish his post. Following a number of admin positions within the Waffen-SS he returned to lead I SS Panzer Corps in Normandy, then from 30 October 1944 to February 1945 was CO of III SS Panzer Corps on the Eastern Front. Keppler ended the war as commander of XVIII SS Army Corps.

Sturmbannführer Dieter Kesten (1914–45)

Kesten entered the Allgemeine-SS in September 1933, serving first with the 79. and 7. Standarten before he commenced officer training at Brunswick in April 1936. Upon commissioning he was assigned to II./*Germania*, and in September 1938 became ordnance officer. Leaving *Germania* in May 1940, he held various staff positions. In May 1942 he joined *Das Reich*, first as a company CO in *Langemarck* and then divisional adjutant. Later that year he moved to the Panzer Regiment and was 6th Company commander until November 1943, at which time he became CO of 2nd Battalion. He was killed fighting for Vienna in April 1945.

Obersturmbannführer Friedrich Holzer (1912–84)

Prior to joining *Germania* in October 1936, Holzer served with SS Standarte 11. He graduated from Brunswick in 1939, was posted to Regiment *Der Führer* as a platoon commander and in May 1939 assumed the same position with 11th Company. Following a stint as an ordnance officer, Holzer was transferred to 7./*Der Führer*, attained the position of 7th Company commander in late 1941 and in January 1942 became regimental adjutant. For actions around Rzhev in February 1942 he was awarded the German Cross in Gold. In early 1943 Holzer moved to the Panzer Regiment, and later became 2nd Company OC where he won the Knight's Cross. Holzer ended the war as CO Panzer Regiment *Holzer* (SS Panzer Brigade *Westfalen*).



ASSESSMENT



Above: A hot summer's day on a Russian country road. A Waffen-SS machine gunner pauses to look at the surrounding fields without unshouldering his M 34. Note that his machine gun is in the belt-fed mode, ready for quick action, with the cartridge belt looped around his left elbow.

If we first take *Das Reich* on its purely military merits one statistic throws its achievements into bold relief. More Knight's Crosses (69) were awarded to its troops than to those of any other Waffen-SS division. But perhaps the best accolade a soldier can ever receive is from another. General Guderian said of *Das Reich*:

'I have encountered the SS Division *Leibstandarte* and the *Das Reich* in battle and later, as General-Inspector of Panzer Troops, have inspected the Waffen-SS divisions many times. They always distinguished themselves through their self-discipline, comradeship and good soldierly behaviour in battle. They fought shoulder-to-shoulder with the Army panzer divisions and became, the more so the longer the war lasted, "one of us".'

If one singles out individual actions, of particular note were the role that *Das Reich* played in the capture of Belgrade, the advance to Moscow, the Kursk action, the rescue at Falaise and the retreat from Vienna. In each of these the division made an inestimable contribution, resulting not always in victory but at least in honourable defeat. Also worthy of mention are the countless acts of selfless sacrifice by *Das Reich* troops for their brothers-in-arms, most graphically demonstrated in the rescue operations at Falaise, and finally Prague.

The darker side of the *Das Reich* history is again best quantified by someone well placed to know, Kurt 'Panzer' Meyer, former commander of 12th SS Panzer Division *Hitler Jugend*:

'In the interests of historical truth nothing must be glossed over. Things happened during the war that are unworthy of the German nation. The former soldiers of the Waffen-SS are men enough to recognise and deplore actual cases of inhuman behaviour. It would be foolish to label all the charges laid at our doorstep as the propaganda of our former enemies. Of course they made propaganda out of it... But crimes were committed. It is useless to argue about the toll of victims – the facts are burdensome enough.'

There are plenty of people who would condemn *Das Reich* soldiers for their beliefs, and actions during the war, without truly understanding or trying to understand the

motivations of this unique band of fighting men. There are also many apologists, who seek to defend the acts of brutality as an inescapable and therefore, it is implied, excusable facet of warfare. The most honest appraisal lies somewhere between the two.

At the Nuremberg Trials the Waffen-SS was indicted as a criminal organisation. The leaders of the Wehrmacht who were put on trial insisted that all the atrocities in combat were committed by the Waffen-SS and not by regular Army units, and although members of the SS countered that the Nuremberg verdict was directed at the SS as a whole and did not establish individual guilt, the stigma attached to the SS because of its involvement in the Holocaust was thereafter applied to every front line soldier of the Waffen-SS

Thus, SS men were often singled out for harsh treatment by their captors, regardless of their personal complicity in acts of brutality. Those who passed into Russian captivity were rarely seen again. Many of those who did return to civilian life in Germany found it difficult to find work. A number found their way to Algeria to join the French Foreign Legion, which at the time asked no questions and offered anonymity to its soldiers, and subsequently fought in French Indo-China (now Vietnam). There they served with distinction against the Communist forces of Ho Chi Minh. It has been said by one ex-SS Foreign Legionnaire that all France's successes in the ultimately unsuccessful campaign in Indo-China were achieved by the French Paras or the German brigade of the Foreign Legion. The German brigade continued to fight as a unit until public pressure forced the French government to disband it. Even to this day, the 'Horst Wessel' marching song is sung by legionnaires, no doubt introduced by the German legionnaires in Indo-China.

Below: A lonely grave in a Russian field for a Waffen-SS machine gunner.



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INTERNET SITES

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In depth look at operational history, unit designations, commanding officers, personnel, order of battle etc.

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Russian-language site with excellent illustrations of the tactical signs of the German Army.

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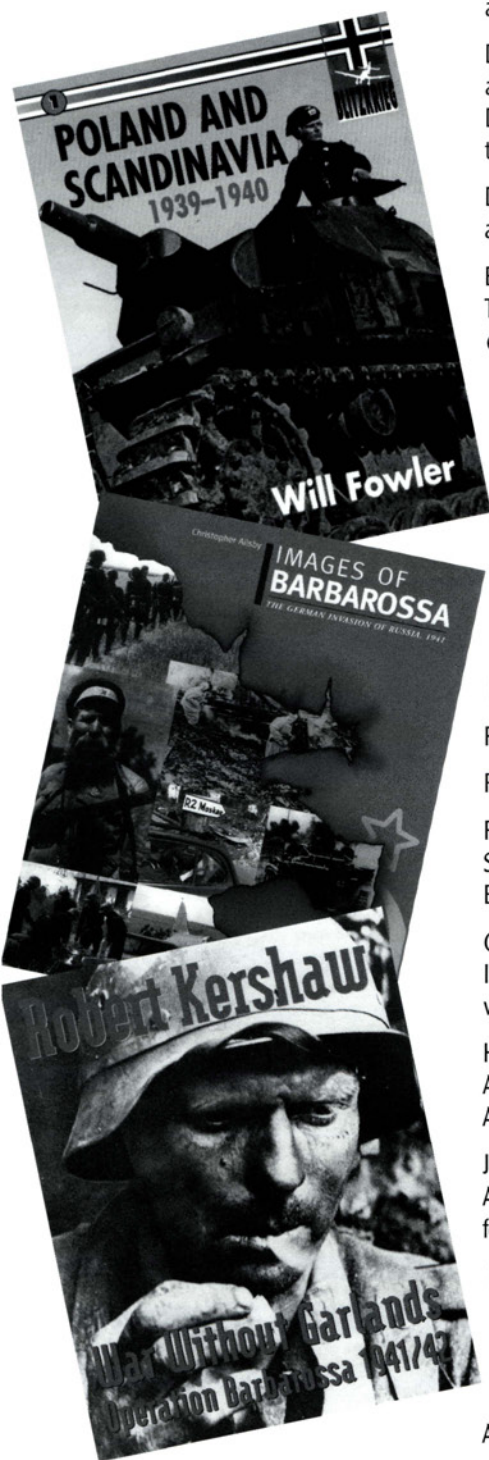
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Below: A 10.5cm LeFH 18, 1940 model with a muzzle brake fitted to the barrel to take a more powerful charge to achieve a longer range. It belongs to the 2nd Company of *Das Reich's* Artillery Regiment.



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About the authors

Michael Sharpe has written and contributed to many aviation and military titles since becoming a freelance writer, including articles for encyclopaedias on the American Civil War and World War I.

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