

The German Army Today

When the German *Panzer* divisions struck out across the Polish frontier at dawn on 1 September 1939, no one could predict the scope, intensity, and duration of the armed conflict which they were precipitating. The German Army then was fresh, vigorous, expansive, and obviously superior to its contemporaries. Its weapons were new and shiny; its tactics and techniques—the old doctrines adapted to the new conditions—were untried; its officers and men were young and full of enthusiasm. A career of easy conquest seemed to open up before it.

After five and a half years of ever growing battle against ever-stronger enemies, the German Army in 1945 looks, at first glance, much the worse for wear. It is beset on all sides and is short of everything. It has suffered appalling casualties and must resort to old men, boys, invalids, and unreliable foreigners for its cannon fodder. Its weapons and tactics seem not to have kept pace with those of the armies opposing it; its supply system in the field frequently breaks down. Its position is obviously hopeless, and it can only be a question of time until the last German soldier is disarmed, and the once proud German Army of the great Frederick and of Scharnhorst, of Ludendorff and of Hitler, exists no more as a factor to be reckoned with.

Yet this shabby, war-weary machine has struggled on in a desperate effort to postpone its inevitable demise. At the end of 1944 it was still able to mount an offensive calculated to delay for months the definitive piercing of the western bulwarks of Germany. Despite the supposed chronic disunity at the top, disaffection among the officer corps, and disloyalty in the rank and file, despite the acute lack of weapons, ammunition, fuel, transport, and human reserves, the German Army seems to function with its old precision and to overcome what appear to be insuperable difficulties with remarkable speed. Only by patient and incessant hammering from all sides can its collapse be brought about.

The cause of this toughness, even in defeat, is not generally appreciated. It goes much deeper than the quality of weapons, the excellence of training and leadership, the soundness of tactical and strategic doctrine, or the efficiency of control at all echelons. It is to be found in the military tradition which is so deeply ingrained in the whole character of the German nation and which alone makes possible the interplay of these various factors of strength to their full effectiveness.

The German Army of 1939 was a model of efficiency, the best product of the concentrated military genius of the most scientifically military of nations. A study of the German Army of 1945, however, older and wiser, hardened and battle-tested, cornered and desperate as it is, will show best how this military science and military genius operate in the practical exigencies of long-drawn-out total war.