

TAC NEWS

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LEICHTE DIVISIONEN The Wehrmacht's Light Divisions: 1938-39

During the diplomatic crisis of September 1938, the Wehrmacht drew up German Orders of Battle for the possible invasion of Czechoslovakia. These were done in preparation for military action should the Munich conference fail to produce the result desired by Hitler. The structure and organization of the three Panzer Divisions slated for this invasion are readily available today, in many different secondary sources. However, references to the four German *Leichte* or "Light" Divisions are not only difficult to find, but sketchy as to both structure and organization. Why are both accredited historians and war game enthusiasts so disinterested in these formations? They represented a fascinating stage in the evolution of German military doctrine in the years leading up to WWII. It's about time that these flawed but interesting formations receive the attention they deserve. Each of the four divisions had a different TOE.

Anyone who digs deep enough into the subject will realize that "Blitzkrieg" wasn't as revolutionary a concept as it first appeared. In fact, its foundations go back to the last part of WWI. Faced with a brutal and costly deadlock in the trenches of the Western Front, both the Germans and the Allies cast about for some way to break the endless cycle of attack and counter-attack over virtually the same ground for nearly four years. The Allied solution was technological. It relied on the airplane to provide reconnaissance information, extend the reach of friendly fire beyond the immediate battle area, and to suppress enemy fire. Tanks were to provide mobility for attacking forces over bullet swept ground, allow infantrymen to advance under their protection, and (again) to suppress enemy fire.

The German solution was philosophical rather than technological. They came up with tactics that overcame the stalemate by taking advantage of the "linear" mentality that had dominated the battlefield since 1914. Artillery preparation was to be short but extremely violent. Before the enemy could recover from the initial shock this caused, German *Stosstruppen* (storm-troops) would advance in small, heavily armed groups, by-passing points of resistance and fortified positions to head deep into the enemy rear. There they spread chaos and confusion among unsuspecting and often unarmed enemy rear-echelon personnel. Follow-on waves of conventional infantry formations would then reduce pockets of resistance and hold the ground taken by the storm-troops. These tactics very nearly

won them the war in the spring of 1918. The Blitzkrieg of WWII therefore, was nothing more than the highly successful *Stosstruppe* tactics of WWI combined with the firepower, speed, and mobility provided by aircraft and tanks.

The Wehrmacht, just like every other military culture of its time, had its own share of traditionalists and Germany's corps of cavalry officers represented a stronghold of this particular mindset. When Hitler (who never really understood tanks and was much more an advocate of airpower)¹ began to build up his new war-machine, Germany's cavalry elite saw the handwriting on the wall. In their opinion, the mounted arm must have a place in the new Wehrmacht. The answer (as they and others of their sort across Europe saw it) was to combine cavalry with tanks in "hybrid" units to provide the mobility of mounted cavalry and the firepower and shock of armor (as in the old days before the advent of the machinegun). The results were disappointing.

In various field-training exercises carried out in the late 1930s, horsed cavalry displayed distinct disadvantages compared to motor transport. In essence, each man in a horsed unit was responsible for the care and maintenance of a half-ton "vehicle," requiring 10-12 gallons of water weighing approximately 100 pounds and 20 or more pounds of hay and other nutrients a day, all of which had to be provided by a supply service using the same sort of "vehicles" (draft horses) for motive power. The average truck, on the other hand (even in 1939), could travel the same distance as a horse (30-40 miles per day) on only about 24 pounds of fuel and could carry ten or more men and at least twice the cargo a two-horse wagon could effectively transport.²

These same maneuvers showed that cavalry and tanks quickly became separated in action, as horsemen could not close with the enemy without dismounting and advancing afoot. Tanks, immune to enemy small-arms and machinegun fire, would continue to advance and would quickly find themselves alone, deep in enemy territory. They would then be unable to hold the ground they had just taken (contrary to popular belief, tankers can't simply live in their vehicles), and unable to deal effectively with dug-in enemy infantry, especially in urban terrain.³

The Wehrmacht therefore, dismounted the cavalry component of the Light Division and replaced the horses with trucks. But this could not make up for weaknesses in the basic structure of the formation. In point of fact, as they were organized, Germany's Light Divisions were little more than reinforced motorized infantry brigades. They lacked sufficient infantry and supporting artillery to take or hold ground, had too few armored vehicles to maneuver effectively under fire, and were too large to be useful as recon formations. The fact that they remained in the German Army Order-of-Battle as long as they did says more about shortages of trained men and equipment in the Wehrmacht than it does of doctrinal debate.

When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, the Wehrmacht included only six true "Panzer" Divisions, four "Light" Divisions, six other non-divisional armored formations, and three full-strength Motorized Infantry Divisions. As might have been predicted, the performance of the Light Divisions was as disappointing in combat as it was in training. In the interim between this campaign and the invasion of France in May 1940, all Light Divisions were converted to Panzer Divisions. "Leichte Divisionen", however, represented over 25% of the German mobile force that crossed the Polish

frontier in 1939 to begin WWII. It's about time that these flawed but interesting formations received the study and attention they deserve.

Notes:

1. In his book *Panzerleader*, Heinz Guderian, writes how Hitler, during a tour of Polish battlefields with him and Göring, came upon a group of wrecked vehicles. When Hitler asked, "Did our Stukas do this?" Guderian replied, "No! Our panzers!"

2. Greg Lardy & Chip Poland. *Feeding Management for Horse Owners - AS-953* (Revised). North Dakota State University Extension Service, February 2001.

3. An interesting sidelight on this comes from *Panzers At War*. When German tanks entered Warsaw unescorted, they tried to fight it out without waiting for their infantry support to come up. Tank losses were the most severe of the campaign (55 in a few hours). A lack of rubber track shoes made the panzers practically useless on Warsaw's smooth cobblestone streets. Any sudden acceleration or deceleration left their tracks spinning in place with almost no traction!

I found much of the following information at the University of Oregon Library. (See the "Suggested Reading" for details.) Much of it was in German and required considerable translation. Each of the four divisions had a different TO&E. Here is what I found.

Notes applying to all four Light Divisions:

- Anti-Tank Companies contained three Platoons of four guns each. So did the AA Companies.
- Armored Car companies contained 1x Co HQ(3x Kfz.13, 1x SdKfz.223) & 3x Armored Car Plt(3x SdKfz.222/231, 4x Kfz.13).
- You will note that there are in fact four tank companies in the Tank Battalion, three "line" companies and one under the direct and personal control of the battalion commander.

1st Leichte (Light) Division: 1939

Division Headquarters: 1x Division HQ/Trk, 1x Mcycle Plt, 1x 30T Supply Col

6th Motorized Brigade: 1x Brigade HQ/Trk

4th Motorized Regt: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Signals Plt, 1x Infantry Gun Co (6x 75mm IG, 2x 150mm sIG), 1x Transport Co

3x Motorized Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 3x Motorized Co (18x LMG, 2x HMG, 3x 50mm Mrtr), 1x Hvy Co (6x HMG, 6x 8cm Mrtr), 1x AT Plt (3x 37mm ATG, 1x LMG), 1x Trans Co

6th Motorcycle Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Mcycle, 3x Mcycle Co (18x LMG, 2x HMG, 3x 50mm Mrtr), 1x Hvy Co (8x HMG, 6x 8cm Mrtr), 1x AT Plt (3x 37mm ATG, 1x LMG), 1x Trans Co

6th Recon Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 1x Sig Plt, 1x Mcycle Recon Plt, 2x Arm Car Co, 1x Hvy Co (2x 75mm IG, 3x 37mm ATG, 1x Engineer Plt), 1x Lt Trans Co

76th Artillery Regt: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Signals Plt, 1x Meteorology Det, 1x Ammo Col

2x Artillery Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Truck, 3x Artillery Battery (4x 105mm How), 1x Sig Plt, 1x Calibration Plt

65th Tank Battalion: 1x Bn HQ/Tnk, 1x HQ/Hvy Tnk Co, 3x Lt Tnk Co, 1x Res Tank Det, 1x Maint Plt, 1x Transport Plt

41st Anti-Tank Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 1x Signals Plt, 3x AT Co (12x 37mm ATG), 1x AA Co (12x 20mm AA)

82nd Signal Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 1x Armored Sig Co, 1x Armored Radio Co, 1x Trans Co

57th Engineer Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 2x Lt Engineer Co, 1x Bridging Col (B type), 1x Lt Engineer Trans Co

57th Supply/Maint. Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 6x Trans Col, 2x P.O.L. Col, 3x Maint Co, 1x Supply Co

57th Medical Bn: 2x Medical Co, 3x Ambulance Det

57th Rations/Admin, Bakery, Butchery, Postal, and Military Police Detachments

Notes:

1. This unit became the 6th Panzer Division in October 1939, based on the VI Military District around Münster.
2. There were 73 tanks in this division: 20x Pz.II, 37x Pz.35t, 14x Pz.IV, and 2x Pz.I/Bef.

2nd Leichte (Light) Division: 1939

Division Headquarters: 1x Division HQ/Trk, 1x Mcycle Plt, 1x 30T Supply Column
6th Motorized Regiment: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Armored Signals Plt, 1x Lt Trans Co
 2x Motorized Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 3x Motorized Co(18x LMG, 4x HMG, 3x 50mm Mrtr), 1x Hvy Co(6x LMG, 6x 8cm Mrtr),
 1x Engineer Plt/Trk, 2x Infantry Gun Plt (2x 75mm IG), 1x AT Plt (3x 37mm ATG, 1x LMG)
7th Motorized Regiment: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Armored Signals Plt, 1x Lt Trans Co
 2x Motorized Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 3x Motorized Co(18x LMG, 4x HMG, 3x 50mm Mrtr), 1x Hvy Co(6x LMG, 6x 8cm Mrtr),
 1x Engineer Plt/Trk, 2x Infantry Gun Plt (2x 75mm IG), 1x AT Plt (3x 37mm ATG, 1x LMG)
7th Recon Regiment: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Signals Plt, 1x Mcycle Plt
 1x Recon Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 3x Mcycle Co (18x LMG, 4x HMG, 3x 50mm Mrtr), 1x Hvy Co(2x 75mm IG,
 3x 37mm ATG, 1x Engineer Plt), 1x Bridging Col (D type), 1x Lt Recon Trans Co
 1x Arm Car Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 4x Armored Car Co, 1x Motor Sig Plt. 1x Mcycle Recon Plt, 1x Lt Recon Trans Co
78th Artillery Regiment: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Signals Plt, 1x Meteorology Det, 1x Ammo Col
 2x Artillery Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Truck, 3x Artillery Battery (4x 105mm How), 1x Sig Plt, 1x Calibration Plt
66th Tank Battalion: 1x Bn HQ/Tnk, 1x HQ/Lt Tnk Co, 3x Lt Tnk Co, 1x Res Tank Det, 1x Arm Sig Plt, 1x Maint Plt,
 1x Lt Arm Trns Plt
42nd Anti-Tank Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 1x Signals Plt, 3x AT Co (12x 37mm ATG), 1x AA Co (12x 20mm AA)
58th Engineer Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 2x Lt Engineer Co, 1x Bridging Col (B type), 1x Lt Engineer Trans Co
58th Supply/Maint. Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 6x Trans Col, 2x P.O.L. Col, 3x Maint Co, 1x Supply Co
58th Medical Bn: 2x Medical Co, 3x Ambulance Det
2nd Co/29th Signal Bn: 1x Signals Co
58th Rations/Admin, Bakery, Butchery, Postal, and Military Police Detachments

Notes:

1. This unit became the 7th Panzer Division in October 1939, based on the IX Military District around Kassel.
2. There were 85 tanks in this division: 41x Pz.I, 42x Pz.II, and 2x Pz.I/Bef.

3rd Leichte (Light) Division: 1939

Division Headquarters: 1x Division HQ/Trk, 1x Mcycle Plt, 1x 30T Supply Column
8th Motorized Regiment: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Infantry Gun Co(6x 75mm IG, 2x 150mm sIG), 1x Trans Co
 2x Motorized Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 3x Motorized Co(18x LMG, 2x HMG, 3x 50mm Mrtr), 1x Hvy Co(8x HMG,
 6x 8cm Mrtr), 1x AT Plt(3x 37mm ATG, 1x LMG)
9th Motorized Regiment: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Infantry Gun Co(6x 75mm IG, 2x 150mm sIG), 1x Trans Co
 1x Motorized Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 3x Motorized Co(18x LMG, 2x HMG, 3x 50mm Mrtr), 1x Hvy Co(8x HMG,
 6x 8cm Mrtr), 1x AT Plt(3x 37mm ATG, 1x LMG)
 1x Motorcycle Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Mcycle, 3x Mcycle Co(18x LMG, 2x HMG, 3x 50mm Mrtr), 1x Hvy Co(8x HMG,
 6x 8cm Mrtr), 1x AT Plt(3x 37mm ATG, 1x LMG)
8th Recon Regiment: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Mcycle Plt
 2x Recon Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 1x Sig Plt, 1x Mcycle Recon Plt, 2x Armored Car Co, 1x Mcycle Recon Co(18x
 LMG, 2x HMG, 3x 50mm Mrtr), 1x Hvy Co(2x 75mm IG, 3x 37mm ATG, 1x Engineer Plt),
 1x Lt Trans Co
80th Artillery Regt: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Sig Plt, 1x Meteorology Det, 1x Ammo Col
 2x Artillery Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Truck, 3x Artillery Battery(4x 105mm How), 1x Sig Plt, 1x Calibration Plt
67th Tank Battalion: 1x Bn HQ/Tnk, 1x HQ/Lt Tnk Co, 1x Arm Sig Plt, 3x Lt Tank Co, 1x Res Tnk Det, 1x Maint Plt,
 1x Lt Arm Trns Plt
43rd Anti-Tank Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 1x Sig Plt, 3x AT Co(12x 37mm ATG), 1x AA Co(12x 20mm AA)
59th Engineer Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 2x Lt Engineer Co, 1x Bridging Col (B type), 1x Lt Engineer Trans Co
59th Supply/Maint. Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 6x Trans Col, 2x P.O.L. Col, 3x Maint Co, 1x Supply Co
59th Medical Bn: 2x Medical Co, 3x Ambulance Det
4th Co/3rd Signal Bn: 1x Signals Co
59th Rations/Admin, Bakery, Butchery, Postal, and Military Police Detachments

Notes:

1. This unit became the 8th Panzer Division in October 1939, based on the III Military District around Berlin.
2. There were 80 tanks in this division: 23x Pz.II, 55x Pz.38t, and 2x Pz.I/Bef.

4th Leichte (Light) Division: 1939

Division Headquarters: 1x Division HQ/Trk, 1x Mcycle Plt, 1x 30T Supply Column
10th Motorized Regiment: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Signals Plt, 1x Mcycle Plt, 1x Lt Trans Co
2x Motorized Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 3x Motorized Co(18x LMG, 4x HMG, 3x 50mm Mrtr), 1x Hvy Co (6x LMG, 6x 8cm Mrtr),
1x Engineer Plt/Trk, 2x Infantry Gun Plt (2x 75mm IG), 1x AT Plt (3x 37mm ATG, 1x LMG)
11th Motorized Regiment: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Signals Plt, 1x Lt Trans Co
2x Motorized Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 3x Motorized Co(18x LMG, 4x HMG, 3x 50mm Mrtr), 1x Hvy Co (6x LMG, 6x 8cm Mrtr),
1x Engineer Plt/Trk, 2x Infantry Gun Plt (2x 75mm IG), 1x AT Plt (3x 37mm ATG, 1x LMG)
9th Recon Regiment: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Signals Plt, 1x Mcycle Plt
1x Recon Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 3x Mcycle Co(18x LMG, 4x HMG, 3x 50mm Mrtr), 1x Hvy Co(2x 75mm IG,
3x 37mm ATG, 1x Engineer Plt), 1x Bridging Col (D type), 1x Lt Recon Trans Co
1x Arm Car Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 3x Armored Car Co, 1x Signals Plt, 1x Mcycle Recon Plt, 1x Lt Recon Trans Co
102nd Artillery Regiment: 1x Regt HQ/Trk, 1x Sig Plt, 1x Meteorology Det, 1x Ammo Col
2x Artillery Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Truck, 3x Artillery Battery(4x 105mm How), 1x Sig Plt, 1x Calibration Plt
33rd Tank Battalion: 1x Bn HQ/Tnk, 1x HQ/Lt Tnk Co, 3x Lt Tank Co, 1x Arm Sig Plt, 1x Res Tnk Det, 1x Maint Plt,
1x Lt Arm Trns Plt
50th Anti-Tank Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 1x Sig Plt, 3x AT Co(12x 37mm ATG), 1x AA Co(12x 20mm AA)
86th Engineer Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 2x Lt Engineer Co, 1x Bridging Col (B type), 1x Lt Engineer Trans Co
60th Supply/Maint. Bn: 1x Bn HQ/Trk, 6x Trans Col, 2x P.O.L. Col, 3x Maint Co, 1x Supply Co
60th Medical Bn: 2x Medical Co, 3x Ambulance Det
3rd Co/29th Signal Bn: 1x Signals Co
60th Rations/Admin, Bakery, Butchery, Postal, and Military Police Detachments

Notes:

1. This unit became the 9th Panzer Division in April 1940, based on the X VII Military District around Vienna.
2. There were 62 tanks in this division: 34x Pz.I, 23x Pz.II, and 5x Pz.I/Bef.

Suggested Reading

A.J. Barker, *Panzers At War* (New York: Scribners, 1978)

T. Booth, *Handbook of German Military Symbols* (Solihull, England: Helion, 2001)

M. Cooper & J. Lukas, *Panzer: The Armored Force of the Third Reich* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1976)

T.L. Jentz, *PANZERTRUPPEN: Volume I, 1933-1943* (Atglen, PA, Schiffer Military History, 1996)

Dr L. Niehorster, *German World War II Organizational Series* (Private: 1992-94)

Courtesy: U.S. Military Academy Library, West Point

US War Dept, *Basic Field Manual FM 30-22: Foreign Conventional Signs and Symbols* (Wa, D.C., 1942)

Courtesy U of Oregon Library

US War Dept, *Technical Manual TM 30-506: German Military Dictionary* (Wa, D.C., 1944)

Courtesy U of Oregon Library

Dr P. Gryner, *Command Magazine (Issue 24) Czechoslovakia 1938: What If They Fought*
(San Luis Obispo, XTR Corp, 1993)

S. Zaloga & V. Madej, *The Polish Campaign: 1939* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1985)

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