

# THE DIVISION – AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

For an army that wishes to be taken seriously, the division provides the basic building block of deployable capability. Only at the divisional level can the full orchestra of ‘all arms’ be combined or integrated to best effect, and the next battle or engagement be planned when the current one is underway. The division, which should be self-sustaining with a sufficient ‘slice’ of Force Support troops and other ‘enablers’, represents the minimum credible contribution to a coalition or alliance operation for anything other than an enduring peacekeeping operation. A well-trained, quickly deployed warfighting division provides reassurance to friends and allies, and contributes to the robust deterrence of our opponents. Thus regenerating the warfighting division within the context of multinational corps operations represents one of the most important tasks facing the British Army today.

Although the number of divisions a nation can raise and deploy does not necessarily reflect an army’s overall capability, there is nonetheless a quality in numbers. As can be seen from the table opposite, the British Army fielded the greatest number of divisions in its history during the First World War. Scale matters with regard to friends and foes alike. During the 1944-45 campaign in north-western Europe, Montgomery’s Twenty-First Army Group contained only two field armies in comparison to Haig’s five during 1916-1918. Montgomery was typically an army – six to 12 divisions – short throughout the campaign. Without owning a sufficient proportion of the forces in a coalition or alliance, it is hard to influence the decisions made as to their employment during a campaign – an enduring lesson from recent conflicts as well as earlier ones.

Historically, the division has its origins in the mid-18th century. Like the later ‘army corps’ introduced in 1799, it was a French innovation. The introduction of self-contained divisions and corps allowed armies to make the best use of limited roads and foraging possibilities in Europe, and then to fight united on the battlefield. The British Army first fielded numbered divisions during the Napoleonic Wars (*pictured*), and again during the Crimean War. In contrast to their Continental counterparts, however, these were ad-hoc formations that did not exist in peacetime. The French, Prussian/German and Russian Armies of the 19th century all developed similar systems of standing – territorially based – army corps that consisted of a number (usually two-to-three)

The number of divisions in the British Army		
Date	War	Type and number
1800s	Peninsula	<b>5-10</b> (including Portuguese)
1853-1856	Crimea	<b>5-6</b> Infantry; <b>1</b> Cavalry
1899-1902	Boer	<b>11</b>
August 1914	Opening of the First World War	<b>6</b> Infantry; <b>1</b> Cavalry (Regular); <b>14</b> Territorial
1914-1918	Course of the First World War	<b>90</b> raised ( <b>66</b> employed on the Western Front)
Sept 1939	Opening of the Second World War	<b>7</b> Regular; <b>21</b> Territorial
1939-1945	Course of the Second World War	<b>46</b> raised
1970s-1980s		<b>4-5</b> Infantry; <b>3-4</b> in BAOR

divisions, often two infantry and one cavalry. Each infantry division comprised typically two brigades, each with two regiments, which in turn had three-to-four battalions apiece.

While the British adopted the levels of command division and brigade, the term ‘regiment’ meant, and remains, something completely different: for the infantry, it has never been a fighting formation. The confusion in terminology remains today. The British Army still refers to cavalry, artillery, engineer, signals and logistic regiments that are only battalion-sized. This is not just a matter of semantics. A Continental infantry regiment (a system that the U.S. Army also adopted) had the mass of a British brigade, and was capable of being developed into a well-balanced combined arms structure that facilitated the conduct of divisional operations.

At the start of the First World War, Britain deployed four infantry divisions (each of 12 battalions grouped into three brigades) and one cavalry division in its Expeditionary Force on what became known as the Western Front. Although the



infantry division consisted of a number of ‘arms’, it was not yet a fully combined arms formation. As Kitchener’s New Armies of volunteers appeared, the number of divisions steadily rose in total. The German Army division had 12 battalions grouped into four regiments and two brigades. By the time of the battle of the Somme, the Germans were in the process of dispensing with the brigade level and reducing to nine battalions. French divisions had a similar structure. In early 1918, manpower shortages forced the British Army to reduce the number of infantry battalions in each brigade from four to three at a time when the width of the Western Front was being extended. The German Michael offensive hit the over-extended and diluted British Fifth Army particularly hard. The U.S. Army arrived in France in 1917/1918 with divisions of 16 infantry battalions, almost twice the size of the British, French and German divisions.

The British infantry division of the Second World War contained three brigades each of three battalions, a machine-gun battalion (an innovation of the First World War) plus three regiments of close support artillery. By the end of the war, this formation had grown in size and capability, including reconnaissance, anti-aircraft and anti-tank regiments (battalions). Armoured divisions were quite differently structured containing an armoured brigade and a motorised brigade. The former contained three armoured regiments and a motorised infantry battalion. The motorised infantry brigade held three lorried infantry battalions. Reconnaissance, anti-aircraft and anti-tank regiments completed the divisional structure in a similar manner to the infantry division.

Divisional structures evolved in the British Army of the Rhine during the Cold War. Typically three-to-four divisions were subordinated to 1st (British) Corps. In the 1980s, for example, the mobilised Corps comprised three armoured divisions and an infantry division (the latter containing two Territorial Army infantry brigades). Armoured brigades consisted of three-to-four battlegroups, each based on either an infantry battalion or an armoured regiment. In fact, the ‘battle group’ was in many ways a misunderstood adoption from the German Army. In its original manifestation, the Kampfgruppe was a combined arms formation of variable size (but typically regimental in a German sense) created for a special task. By the end of the

Second World War, however, a Kampfgruppe could equally mean the remnant of a shattered division.

The 1st Armoured Division deployed to Saudi Arabia on Operation Granby in 1990 was an ad-hoc formation. It comprised the 7th Armoured Brigade (two Challenger 1 armoured regiments and a Warrior armoured infantry battalion) and the 4th Armoured Brigade (only one armoured regiment and two armoured infantry battalions). What made this division particularly effective, however, was the amount of integral combat support. This included no fewer than six artillery regiments (one MLRS, one 8-inch [203mm] M110, three 155mm M109 and one Rapier air defence); and three engineer regiments, two close support and one heavy armoured general support. The Division

also received as general support artillery a U.S. Army National Guard brigade (one MLRS, two M109 battalions). The divisional medium reconnaissance regiment, however, was woefully under-equipped with CVR(T) – with insufficient sensors, firepower and protection to undertake its role in an open desert, or anywhere else for that matter. Nearly 30 years later, Ajax will at last provide the necessary set of capabilities!

A division’s fighting power rests on far more than its personnel and materiel. It must be trained and well led, following appropriate doctrine. Historical experience shows the importance of collective skills. The 3rd [Infantry] Division in May 1940, for example, was able to conduct a number of complex retrograde operations in its fighting withdrawal to Dunkirk because Montgomery had trained

it accordingly. The 1st Armoured Division under Rupert Smith on Operation Granby underwent a demanding set of command post and formation training exercises in the desert before active operations commenced.

Many challenges face the regeneration of the warfighting division. It requires a balanced set of combat, combat support, combat service support and command support capabilities. Development of the Army 2025 force structure and the warfighting division contained within it will require some hard choices as to what is required, based on a sound concept of employment. Therefore the ‘what with?’ must follow the ‘how to?’, and not the other way about.

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*Division in the desert: A Challenger commanded by D Squadron, Royal Scots Dragoon Guards moves into a base camp during Op Granby.*  
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