

Stormtrooper

By [Ralf Raths](#)

Storm troopers were soldiers in specialized assault units, which emerged in the German army during the First World War.

Table of Contents

[1 Development of the German *Sturmtruppen*](#)

[2 Developments in Other Armies](#)

[3 After 1918](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Development of the German *Sturmtruppen*

Prior to the war and during its first months, the [infantry](#) firefighting of all armies relied, in principle, on massive waves of riflemen attacking in broad lines. These attacks collapsed under the defensive fire of modern [weapons](#), especially if the defenders were entrenched.

German officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) began experimenting with new assault tactics immediately after the army entered the trenches. In March 1915, an experimental unit called the *Sturmabteilung* (enlarged to a *Sturmbataillon* in April 1916) was founded to centralize the process. The *Sturmabteilung* developed a procedure called "infiltration tactics". Storm troopers (*Sturmtruppen*) were organized in very small groups which were flexible enough to cross the [no-man's-land](#) quickly. Instead of attacking the enemy trenches over the whole width, they only assaulted key points, entered the trenches and then fought their way inside and alongside the trenches. Instead of surging against the trenches like a wave, the storm troops opened holes and flowed through the trench system. For that, the storm troopers needed massive firepower. They did not rely on the [rifle](#) but specialized in [close range weapons](#) such as [hand grenades](#), pistols, light mortars, [machine guns](#), knives, bayonets and spades.

Speed was key. The scattered, but massive and quickly spreading assaults were supposed to create shock, confusion and fear among the enemy. Keeping up the pace was imperative. If an enemy section was not immediately overwhelmed, it was isolated and kept in check by just a few storm troopers, then left behind for the regular infantry. Meanwhile, the majority of the storm troopers continued attacking, in order to exploit the enemy's confusion for as long as possible. These tactics demanded independence, prudence and resourcefulness from soldiers on all levels, since direct control by officers was neither possible nor reasonable in such a chaotic style of fighting.

The new tactics were very successful. In May 1916, a *Sturmabteilung* was created in every army command. During offensives, the *Sturmabteilungen* were deployed at crucial locations and served both as spearheads and moral support. When they were not carrying out an operation, the *Sturmabteilungen* taught the regular infantry the new tactics. In 1917, the new procedure was so widely spread that even companies chose skilled men to form *Stoßtruppen*. The theory of infiltration tactics, at least, became common doctrine in the German army in 1918.

Developments in Other Armies

The British army developed similar tactics in roughly the same time frame. Although the new methods were better mastered by some divisions than others, no special units were formed. By 1918, the new methods were widespread throughout the army.

Austrian officers combined German ideas with their own. The Austrian *Sturmtruppen* became very heterogeneous elite units. The broad teaching of infiltration tactics was planned on paper, but was considered as impossible in practice.

The first Italian *Arditi* units were formed in summer 1917. The *Arditi* were seen as elite units with special skills from the very beginning; broad training of the regular infantry in these methods was never planned.

The French army produced the first paper on infiltration as early as 1915, but after the mutinies in 1917, a system with less control seemed dangerous for the normal army. Also, it was thought that the brunt of attacking should be divided evenly, so special units were considered problematic.

After 1918

Storm troopers were regarded as elite units during and after the war in [Germany](#). Many contemporaries saw storm troopers as self-reliant, modern “warriors” and a symbol of a looming militaristic society. The [paramilitary](#) wing of the Nazi party was explicitly called *Sturmabteilung* (SA) to conjure up images of “elite warriors”. Likewise, many veterans of the *Arditi* in this era were involved in political violence in [Italy](#) – but both on the political right and the left. The tactical concepts of the storm troops are still alive. They shape large parts of the current doctrines of modern ground [warfare](#).

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