

= Schutzstaffel =

The Schutzstaffel ( SS ; also stylized as with Armanen runes ; German pronunciation : [ ʃʊʦʦtʰafəl ] ; literally " Protection Squadron " ) was a major paramilitary organization under Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers ' Party ( NSDAP ; Nazi Party ) in Nazi Germany . It began with a small guard unit known as the Saal @-@ Schutz ( Hall @-@ Protection ) made up of NSDAP volunteers to provide security for party meetings in Munich . In 1925 , Heinrich Himmler joined the unit , which had by then been reformed and given its final name . Under his direction ( 1929 ? 45 ) , it grew from a small paramilitary formation to one of the most powerful organizations in Nazi Germany . From 1929 until the regime 's collapse in 1945 , the SS was the foremost agency of surveillance and terror within Germany and German @-@ occupied Europe .

The two main constituent groups were the Allgemeine SS ( General SS ) and Waffen @-@ SS ( Armed SS ) . The Allgemeine SS was responsible for enforcing the racial policy of Nazi Germany and general policing , whereas the Waffen @-@ SS consisted of combat units of troops within Nazi Germany 's military . A third component of the SS , the SS @-@ Totenkopfverbände ( SS @-@ TV ) , ran the concentration camps and extermination camps . Additional subdivisions of the SS included the Gestapo and the Sicherheitsdienst ( SD ) organizations . They were tasked with the detection of actual or potential enemies of the Nazi state , the neutralization of any opposition , policing the German people for their commitment to Nazi ideology , and providing domestic and foreign intelligence .

The SS was the organization most responsible for the genocidal killing of an estimated 5 @.@ 5 to 6 million Jews in the Holocaust . Members of all of its branches committed war crimes and crimes against humanity during World War II ( 1939 ? 45 ) . The SS was also involved in commercial enterprises and exploited concentration camp inmates as slave labor . After Nazi Germany 's defeat , the SS and the NSDAP were judged by the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg to be criminal organizations . Ernst Kaltenbrunner , the highest @-@ ranking surviving SS officer , was found guilty of crimes against humanity at the Nuremberg trials and hanged in 1946 .

= = Origins = =

= = = Forerunner of the SS = = =

By 1923 , the Nazi Party ( NSDAP ) had created a small volunteer guard unit known as the Saal @-@ Schutz ( Hall @-@ Protection ) to provide security at their meetings in Munich . That same year , party leader Adolf Hitler ordered the formation of a small bodyguard unit dedicated to his personal service . He wished it to be separate from the " suspect mass " of the party , including the paramilitary Sturmabteilung ( " Storm Battalion " ; SA ) , which he did not trust . The new formation was designated the Stabswache ( Staff Guard ) . Originally the unit was composed of eight men , commanded by Julius Schreck and Joseph Berchtold , and was modeled after the Erhardt Naval Brigade , a Freikorps of the time . The unit was renamed Stoßtrupp ( Shock Troops ) in May 1923 .

The Stoßtrupp was abolished after the failed 1923 Beer Hall Putsch , an attempt by the NSDAP to seize power in Munich . In 1925 , Hitler ordered Schreck to organize a new bodyguard unit , the Schutzkommando ( Protection Command ) . It was tasked with providing personal protection for Hitler at NSDAP functions and events . That same year , the Schutzkommando was expanded to a national organization and renamed successively the Sturmstaffel ( Storm Squadron ) , and finally the Schutzstaffel ( Protection Squad ; SS ) . Officially , the SS marked its foundation on 9 November 1925 ( the second anniversary of the Beer Hall Putsch ) . The new SS was to provide protection for NSDAP leaders throughout Germany . Hitler 's personal SS protection unit was later enlarged to include combat units .

= = = Early commanders = = =

Schreck , a founding member of the SA and a close confidant of Hitler , became the first SS chief in March 1925 . On 15 April 1926 , Joseph Berchtold succeeded him as chief of the SS . Berchtold changed the title of the office to Reichsführer @-@ SS ( Reich Leader @-@ SS ) . Berchtold was considered more dynamic than his predecessor , but became increasingly frustrated by the authority the SA had over the SS . This led to him transferring leadership of the SS to his deputy , Erhard Heiden , on 1 March 1927 . Under Heiden 's leadership , a stricter code of discipline was enforced than would have been tolerated in the SA .

Between 1925 and 1929 , the SS was considered to be a small Gruppe ( battalion ) of the SA . Except in the Munich area , the SS was unable to maintain any momentum in its membership numbers , which declined from 1 @, @ 000 to 280 as the SA continued its rapid growth . As Heiden attempted to keep the SS from dissolving , Heinrich Himmler became his deputy in September 1927 . Himmler displayed good organizational abilities compared to Heiden . The SS established a number of Gaus ( regions or provinces ) . The SS @-@ Gau consisted of SS @-@ Gau Berlin , SS @-@ Gau Berlin Brandenburg , SS @-@ Gau Franken , SS @-@ Gau Niederbayern , SS @-@ Gau Rheinland @-@ Süd , and SS @-@ Gau Sachsen .

= = = Himmler appointed = = =

With Hitler 's approval , Himmler assumed the position of Reichsführer @-@ SS in January 1929 . There are differing accounts of the reason for Heiden 's dismissal from his position as head of the SS . The party announced that it was for " family reasons " . Under Himmler , the SS expanded and gained a larger foothold . He considered the SS an elite , ideologically driven National Socialist organization , a " conflation of Teutonic knights , the Jesuits , and Japanese Samurai " . His ultimate aim was to turn the SS into the most powerful organization in Germany and most influential branch of the party . He expanded the SS to 3 @, @ 000 members in his first year as its leader .

In 1929 , the SS @-@ Hauptamt ( main SS office ) was expanded and reorganized into five main offices dealing with general administration , personnel , finance , security , and race matters . At the same time , the SS @-@ Gaus were expanded into three SS @-@ Oberführerbereiche areas , namely the SS @-@ Oberführerbereich Ost , SS @-@ Oberführerbereich West , and SS @-@ Oberführerbereich Süd . The lower levels of the SS remained largely unchanged . Although officially still considered a sub @-@ organization of the SA and answerable to the Stabschef ( SA Chief of Staff ) , it was also during this time that Himmler began to establish the independence of the SS from the SA . The SS grew in size and power due to its exclusive loyalty to Hitler , as opposed to the SA , which was seen as semi @-@ independent and a threat to Hitler 's hegemony over the party , mainly because they demanded a " second revolution " beyond the one that brought the NSDAP to power . By the end of 1933 , the membership of the SS reached 209 @, @ 000 . Under Himmler 's leadership the SS continued to gather greater power as more and more state and party functions were assigned to its jurisdiction . Over time the SS became answerable only to Hitler , a development typical of the organizational structure of the entire Nazi regime , where legal norms were replaced by actions undertaken under the Führerprinzip ( leader principle ) , where Hitler 's will was considered to be above the law .

In the latter half of 1934 , Himmler oversaw the creation of SS @-@ Junkerschule ( Junker schools ) , institutions where SS officer candidates received leadership training , political and ideological indoctrination , and military instruction . The training stressed ruthlessness and toughness as part of the SS value system , which helped foster a sense of superiority among the men and taught them self @-@ confidence . The first schools were established at Bad Tölz and Braunschweig , with additional schools opening at Klagenfurt and Prague during the war .

= = = Ideology = = =

The SS was regarded as the NSDAP 's elite unit . In keeping with the racial policy of Nazi Germany , in the early days all SS officer candidates had to provide proof of Aryan ancestry back to 1750 and for other ranks to 1800 . Once the war started and it became more difficult to confirm ancestry , the

regulation was amended to just proving the candidate 's grandparents were Aryan , as spelled out in the Nuremberg Laws . Other requirements were complete obedience to the Führer and a commitment to the German people and nation . Himmler also tried to institute physical criteria based on appearance and height , but these requirements were only loosely enforced , and over half the SS men did not meet the criteria . Inducements such as higher salaries and larger homes were provided to members of the SS , since they were expected to produce more children than the average German family as part of their commitment to NSDAP doctrine .

Commitment to SS ideology was emphasized throughout the recruitment , membership process , and training . Members of the SS were indoctrinated in the racial policy of Nazi Germany , and were taught that it was necessary to remove from Germany people deemed by that policy as inferior . Esoteric rituals and the awarding of regalia and insignia for milestones in the SS man 's career suffused SS members even further with Nazi ideology . Members were expected to renounce their Christian faith , and Christmas was replaced with a solstice celebration . Church weddings were replaced with SS Ehwain , a pagan ceremony invented by Himmler . These pseudo @-@ religious rites and ceremonies often took place near SS @-@ dedicated monuments or in special SS @-@ designated places . In 1933 , Himmler bought Wewelsburg , a castle in Westphalia . He initially intended it to be used as an SS training centre , but its role came to include hosting SS dinners and neo @-@ pagan rituals .

The SS ideology included the application of brutality and terror as a solution to military and political problems . The SS stressed total loyalty and obedience to orders unto death . Hitler used this as a powerful tool to further his aims and those of the NSDAP . The SS was entrusted with the commission of atrocities , illegal activities , and war crimes . Himmler once wrote that an SS man " hesitates not for a single instant , but executes unquestioningly ... " any Führer @-@ Befehl ( Führer order ) . Their official motto was " Meine Ehre heißt Treue " ( My Honour is Loyalty ) .

As part of its race @-@ centric functions during World War II , the SS oversaw the isolation and displacement of Jews from the populations of the conquered territories , seizing their assets and deporting them to concentration camps and ghettos , where they were used as slave labor or immediately killed . Chosen to implement the Final Solution for Jews and other groups deemed inferior or enemies of the state , the SS led the killing , torture , and enslavement of approximately 12 million people . Most victims were Jews or of Polish or other Slavic extraction . A significant number of victims were members of other racial or ethnic groups such as the Romani people . The SS was involved in killing people viewed as threats to race hygiene or NSDAP ideology , including the mentally or physically handicapped , homosexuals , and political dissidents . Members of trade unions and those perceived to be affiliated with groups that opposed the regime ( religious , political , social , and otherwise ) , or those whose views were contradictory to the goals of the NSDAP government , were rounded up in large numbers ; these included clergy of all faiths , Jehovah 's Witnesses , Freemasons , Communists , and Rotary Club members . According to the judgments rendered at the Nuremberg trials as well as many war crimes investigations and trials conducted since then , the SS was responsible for the majority of Nazi war crimes . In particular , it was the primary organization which carried out the Holocaust .

= = Pre @-@ war Germany = =

After Hitler and the NSDAP came to power on 30 January 1933 , the SS were considered a state organization and a branch of the government . Law enforcement gradually became the purview of the SS , and many SS organizations became de facto government agencies .

The SS established a police state within Nazi Germany , using the secret state police and security forces under Himmler 's control to suppress resistance to Hitler . In his role as Minister President of Prussia , Hermann Göring had in 1933 created a Prussian secret police force , the Geheime Staatspolizei or Gestapo , and appointed Rudolf Diels as its head . Concerned that Diels was not ruthless enough to use the Gestapo effectively to counteract the power of the SA , Göring handed over its control to Himmler on 20 April 1934 . Also on that date , in a departure from long @-@ standing German practice that law enforcement was a state and local matter , Hitler appointed

Himmler chief of all German police outside Prussia . Himmler named his deputy and protégé Reinhard Heydrich chief of the Gestapo on 22 April 1934 . Heydrich also continued as head of the Sicherheitsdienst ( SD ; security service ) .

The Gestapo 's transfer to Himmler was a prelude to the Night of the Long Knives , in which most of the SA leadership were arrested and subsequently executed . The SS and Gestapo carried out most of the killings . On 20 July 1934 , Hitler detached the SS from the SA , which was no longer an influential force after the purge . The SS became an independent elite corps of the NSDAP , answerable only to Hitler . Himmler 's title of Reichsführer @-@ SS now became his actual rank , equivalent to the rank of field marshal in the army ( his previous rank was Obergruppenführer ) . As Himmler 's position and authority grew , so did his de facto rank .

On 17 June 1936 , all police forces throughout Germany were united under the purview of Himmler and the SS . Himmler and Heydrich thus became two of the most powerful men in the country 's administration . Police and intelligence forces brought under their administrative control included the SD , Gestapo , Kriminalpolizei ( Kripo ; criminal investigative police ) , and Ordnungspolizei ( Orpo ; regular uniformed police ) . In September 1939 , the security and police agencies , including the Sicherheitspolizei ( SiPo ; security police ) and SD ( but not the Orpo ) , were consolidated into the Reich Main Security Office ( RSHA ) , headed by Heydrich . This further increased the collective authority of the SS .

In September 1939 , the authority of the SS expanded further when the senior SS officer in each military district also became its chief of police . Most of these SS and police leaders held the rank of SS @-@ Gruppenführer or above , and answered directly to Himmler in all SS matters within their district . Their role was to police the population and oversee the activities of the SS men within their district . By declaring an emergency , they could bypass the district administrative offices for the SS , SD , SiPo , SS @-@ Totenkopfverbände ( SS @-@ TV ; concentration camp guards ) , and Orpo , thereby gaining direct operational control of these groups .

During Kristallnacht ( 9 ? 10 November 1938 ) , SS security services clandestinely coordinated violence against Jews as the SS , Gestapo , SD , Kripo , SiPo and regular police did what they could to ensure that while Jewish synagogues and community centers were destroyed , Jewish @-@ owned businesses and housing remained intact so that they could later be seized . In the end , thousands of Jewish businesses , homes , and graveyards were vandalized and looted , particularly by members of the SA . Some 500 to 1 @,@ 000 synagogues were destroyed , mostly by arson . On 11 November , Heydrich reported a death toll of 36 people , but later assessments put the number of deaths at up to two thousand . On Hitler 's orders , around 30 @,@ 000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps by 16 November . It is likely that as many as 2 @,@ 500 of these people died in the following months . It was at this point that the SS state began in earnest its campaign of terror against political and religious opponents , who they imprisoned without trial or judicial oversight for the sake of " security , re @-@ education , or prevention " .

= = = Hitler 's personal bodyguards = = =

As the SS grew in size and importance , so too did Hitler 's personal protection units . Three main SS groups were assigned to protect Hitler . In 1933 , his larger personal bodyguard unit ( previously the 1st SS @-@ Standarte ) was called to Berlin to replace the Army Chancellery Guard , assigned to protect the Chancellor of Germany . Sepp Dietrich commanded the new unit , previously known as SS @-@ Stabswache Berlin ; the name was changed to SS @-@ Sonderkommando Berlin . In November 1933 , the name was changed to Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler . In April 1934 , Himmler modified the name to Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler ( LSSAH ) . The LSSAH guarded Hitler 's private residences and offices , providing an outer ring of protection for the Führer and his visitors . LSSAH men manned sentry posts at the entrances to the old Reich Chancellery and the new Reich Chancellery . The number of LSSAH guards was increased during special events . At the Berghof , Hitler 's residence in the Obersalzberg , a large contingent of the LSSAH patrolled an extensive cordoned security zone .

From 1941 , forward , the Leibstandarte became four distinct entities , the Waffen @-@ SS division

( unconnected to Hitler 's personal protection but a formation of the Waffen @-@ SS ) , the Berlin Chancellory Guard , the SS security regiment assigned to the Obersalzberg , and a Munich @-@ based bodyguard unit which protected Hitler when he visited his personal apartment and the Brown House NSDAP headquarters in Munich . Although the unit was nominally under Himmler , Dietrich was the real commander and handled day @-@ to @-@ day administration .

Two other SS units composed the inner ring of Hitler 's personal protection . The SS @-@ Begleitkommando des Führers ( Escort Command of the Führer ) , formed in February 1932 , served as Hitler 's protection escort while he was travelling . This unit consisted of eight men who served around the clock protecting Hitler in three eight @-@ hour shifts . Later the SS @-@ Begleitkommando was expanded and became known as the Führerbegleitkommando ( Führer Escort Command ; FBK ) . It continued under separate command and remained responsible for Hitler 's personal protection . The Führer Schutzkommando ( Führer Protection Command ; FSK ) was a protection unit founded by Himmler in March 1933 . Originally it was charged with protecting Hitler only while he was inside the borders of Bavaria . In early 1934 , they replaced the SS @-@ Begleitkommando for Hitler 's protection throughout Germany . The FSK was renamed the Reichssicherheitsdienst ( Reich Security Service ; RSD ) in August 1935 . Johann Rattenhuber , chief of the RSD , for the most part took his orders directly from Hitler . The current FBK chief acted as his deputy . Wherever Hitler was in residence , members of the RSD and FBK would be present . RSD men patrolled the grounds and FBK men provided close security protection inside . The RSD and FBK worked together for security and personal protection during Hitler 's trips and public events , but they operated as two groups and used separate vehicles . By March 1938 , both units wore the standard field grey uniform of the SS . The RSD uniform had the SD diamond on the lower left sleeve .

= = = Concentration camps founded = = =

The SS was closely associated with Nazi Germany 's concentration camp system . On 26 June 1933 , Himmler appointed SS @-@ Oberführer Theodor Eicke as commandant of Dachau concentration camp , one of the first Nazi concentration camps . It was created to consolidate the many small camps that had been set up by various police agencies and the NSDAP to house political prisoners . The organizational structure Eicke instituted at Dachau stood as the model for all later concentration camps . After 1934 , Eicke was named commander of the SS @-@ Totenkopfverbände ( SS @-@ TV ) , the SS formation responsible for running the concentration camps under the authority of the SS and Himmler . Known as the " Death 's Head Units " , the SS @-@ TV was first organized as several battalions , each based at one of Germany 's major concentration camps . Leadership at the camps was divided into five departments : commander and adjutant , political affairs division , protective custody , administration , and medical personnel . By 1935 , Himmler secured Hitler 's approval and the finances necessary to establish and operate additional camps . Six concentration camps housing 21 @,@ 400 inmates ( mostly political prisoners ) existed at the start of the war in September 1939 . By the end of the war , hundreds of camps of varying size and function had been created , holding nearly 715 @,@ 000 people , most of whom were targeted by the regime because of their race . The concentration camp population rose in tandem with the defeats suffered by the Nazi regime ; the worse the catastrophe seemed , the greater the fear of subversion , prompting the SS to intensify their repression and terror .

= = SS in World War II = =

By the outbreak of World War II , the SS had consolidated into its final form , which comprised three main organizations : the Allgemeine SS , SS @-@ Totenkopfverbände , and the Waffen @-@ SS , which was founded in 1934 as the SS @-@ Verfügungstruppe ( SS @-@ VT ) and renamed in 1940 . The Waffen @-@ SS evolved into a second German army alongside the Wehrmacht and operated in tandem with them , especially with the Heer ( German Army ) . Although SS ranks generally had equivalents in the other services , the SS rank system did not copy the terms and ranks used by the

Wehrmacht 's branches . Instead it used the ranks established by the post @-@ World War I Freikorps and the SA . This was primarily done to emphasize the SS as being independent from the Wehrmacht .

= = = Invasion of Poland = = =

In the September 1939 invasion of Poland , the LSSAH and SS @-@ VT fought as separate mobile infantry regiments . The LSSAH became notorious for torching villages without military justification . Members of the LSSAH committed atrocities in numerous towns , including the murder of 50 Polish Jews in B?onie and the massacre of 200 civilians , including children , who were machine gunned in Z?oczew . Shootings also took place in Boles?awiec , Torzeniec , Goworowo , M?awa , and W?oc?awek . Some senior members of the Wehrmacht were not convinced the units were fully prepared for combat . Its units took unnecessary risks and had a higher casualty rate than the army . Generaloberst Fedor von Bock was quite critical ; following an April 1940 visit of the SS @-@ Totenkopf division , he found their battle training was " insufficient " . Hitler thought the criticism was typical of the army 's " outmoded conception of chivalry . " In its defence , the SS insisted that its armed formations had been hampered by having to fight piecemeal and were improperly equipped by the army .

After the invasion , Hitler entrusted the SS with extermination actions codenamed Operation Tannenberg and AB @-@ Aktion to remove potential leaders who could form a resistance to German occupation . The killings were committed by Einsatzgruppen ( task forces ; deployment groups ) , assisted by local paramilitary groups . Men for the Einsatzgruppen units were drawn from the SS , the SD , and the police . Some 65 @, @ 000 Polish civilians , including activists , intelligentsia , scholars , teachers , actors , former officers , and others , were killed by the end of 1939 . When the army leadership registered complaints about the brutality being meted out by the Einsatzgruppen , Heydrich informed them that he was acting " in accordance with the special order of the F?hrer . " The first systematic mass shooting of Jews by the Einsatzgruppen took place on 6 September 1939 during the attack on Krak?w .

Satisfied with their performance in Poland , Hitler allowed further expansion of the armed SS formations , but insisted new units remain under the operational control of the army . While the SS @-@ Leibstandarte remained an independent regiment functioning as Hitler 's personal bodyguards , the other regiments ? SS @-@ Deutschland , SS @-@ Germania , and SS @-@ Der F?hrer ? were combined to form the SS @-@ Verf?gungs @-@ Division . A second SS division , the SS @-@ Totenkopf , was formed from SS @-@ TV concentration camp guards , and a third , the SS @-@ Polizei , was created from police volunteers . The SS gained control over its own recruitment , logistics , and supply systems for its armed formations at this time . The SS , Gestapo , and SD were in charge of the provisional military administration in Poland until the appointment of Hans Frank as Governor @-@ General on 26 October 1939 .

= = = Battle of France = = =

On 10 May 1940 , Hitler launched the Battle of France , a major offensive against France and the Low Countries . The SS supplied two of the 89 divisions employed . The LSSAH and elements of the SS @-@ VT participated in the ground invasion of the Battle of the Netherlands . Simultaneously , airborne troops were dropped to capture key Dutch airfields , bridges , and railways . In the five @-@ day campaign , the LSSAH linked up with army units and airborne troops after a number of clashes with Dutch defenders .

SS troops did not take part in the thrust through the Ardennes and the river Meuse . Instead , the SS @-@ Totenkopf was summoned from the army reserve to fight in support of Generalmajor Erwin Rommel 's 7th Panzer Division as they advanced toward to the English Channel . On 21 May , the British launched an armored counterattack against the flanks of 7th Panzer Division and SS @-@ Totenkopf . The Germans then trapped the British and French troops in a huge pocket at Dunkirk . On 27 May , 4 Company , SS @-@ Totenkopf perpetrated the Le Paradis massacre , where 97 men

of the 2nd Battalion , Royal Norfolk Regiment were machine gunned after surrendering , with survivors finished off with bayonets . Two men survived . By 28 May the SS @-@ Leibstandarte had taken Wormhout , 10 miles ( 16 km ) from Dunkirk . There , soldiers of the 2nd Battalion were responsible for the Wormhoudt massacre , where 80 British and French soldiers were murdered after they surrendered . According to historian Charles Sydnor , the " fanatical recklessness in the assault , suicidal defense against enemy attacks , and savage atrocities committed in the face of frustrated objectives " exhibited by the SS @-@ Totenkopf division during the invasion were typical of the SS troops as a whole .

At the close of the campaign , Hitler expressed his pleasure with the performance of the SS @-@ Leibstandarte , telling them : " Henceforth it will be an honour for you , who bear my name , to lead every German attack . " The SS @-@ VT was renamed the Waffen @-@ SS in a speech made by Hitler in July 1940 . Hitler then authorized the enlistment of " people perceived to be of related stock " , as Himmler put it , to expand the ranks . A number of Danes , Dutch , Norwegians , Swedes , and Finns volunteered to fight in the Waffen @-@ SS under the command of German officers . They were brought together to form the new division SS @-@ Wiking . In January 1941 , the SS @-@ Verfügungs Division was renamed SS @-@ Reich Division ( Motorized ) , and was renamed as the 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich when it was reorganized as a Panzergrenadier division in 1942 .

= = Campaign in the Balkans = =

In April 1941 , the Germany Army invaded Yugoslavia and Greece . The LSSAH and Das Reich were attached to separate army Panzer Corps . Fritz Klingenberg , a company commander in the Das Reich , led his men across Yugoslavia to the capital , Belgrade , where a small group in the vanguard accepted the surrender of the city on 13 April . A few days later Yugoslavia surrendered . SS police units immediately began taking hostages and carrying out reprisals , a practice that became common . In some cases , they were joined by the Wehrmacht . Similar to Poland , the war policies of the Nazis in the Balkans resulted in brutal occupation and racist mass murder . Serbia became the second country ( after Estonia ) declared Judenfrei ( free of Jews ) .

In Greece , the Wehrmacht and Waffen @-@ SS encountered resistance from the British Expeditionary Force ( BEF ) and Greek Army . The fighting was intensified by the mountainous terrain , with its heavily defended narrow passes . The LSSAH was at the forefront of the German push . The BEF evacuated by sea to Crete , but had to flee again in late May when the Germans arrived . Like Yugoslavia , the conquest of Greece brought its Jews into danger , as the Nazis immediately took a variety of measures against them . Initially confined in ghettos , most were transported to Auschwitz concentration camp in March 1943 , where they were killed in the gas chambers on arrival . Of Greece 's 80 @,@ 000 Jews , only 20 percent survived the war .

= = War in the east = =

On 22 June 1941 , Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa , the invasion of the Soviet Union . The expanding war and the need to control occupied territories provided the conditions for Himmler to further consolidate the police and military organs of the SS . Rapid acquisition of vast territories in the East placed considerable strain on the SS police organizations as they struggled to adjust to the changing security challenges .

The 1st and 2nd SS Infantry Brigades , which had been formed from surplus concentration camp guards of the SS @-@ TV , and the SS Cavalry Brigade moved into the Soviet Union behind the advancing armies . At first they fought Soviet partisans , but by the autumn of 1941 , they left the anti @-@ partisan role to other units and actively took part in the Holocaust . While assisting the Einsatzgruppen , they formed firing parties that participated in the liquidation of the Jewish population of the Soviet Union .

On 31 July 1941 , Göring gave Heydrich written authorization to ensure the cooperation of administrative leaders of various government departments to undertake genocide of the Jews in territories under German control . Heydrich was instrumental in carrying out these exterminations ,

as the Gestapo was ready to organize deportations in the West and his Einsatzgruppen were already conducting extensive killing operations in the East . On 20 January 1942 , Heydrich chaired a meeting , called the Wannsee Conference , to discuss the implementation of the plan .

During battles in Soviet Union in 1941 and 1942 , the Waffen @-@ SS suffered enormous casualties . The LSSAH and Das Reich lost over half their troops to illness and combat casualties . In need of recruits , Himmler began to accept soldiers that did not fit the original SS racial profile . In early 1942 , SS @-@ Leibstandarte , SS @-@ Totenkopf , and SS @-@ Das Reich were withdrawn to the West to refit and were converted to Panzergrenadier divisions . The SS @-@ Panzer Corps returned to the Soviet Union in 1943 and participated in the Third Battle of Kharkov in February and March .

= = = The Holocaust = = =

The SS was built on a culture of violence , which was exhibited in its most extreme form by the mass murder of civilians and prisoners of war on the Eastern Front . Augmented by personnel from the Kripo , Orpo ( Order Police ) , and Waffen @-@ SS , the Einsatzgruppen reached a total strength of 3 @, @ 000 men . Einsatzgruppen A , B , and C were attached to Army Groups North , Centre , and South ; Einsatzgruppe D was assigned to the 11th Army . The Einsatzgruppe for Special Purposes operated in eastern Poland starting in July 1941 . The historian Richard Rhodes describes them as being " outside the bounds of morality " ; they were " judge , jury and executioner all in one " , with the authority to kill anyone at their discretion . Following Operation Barbarossa , these Einsatzgruppen units , together with the Waffen @-@ SS and Order Police , engaged in the mass killing of the Jewish population in occupied eastern Poland and the Soviet Union . The greatest extent of Einsatzgruppen action occurred in 1941 and 1942 in Ukraine and Russia . Before the invasion there were five million registered Jews throughout the Soviet Union , with three million of those residing in the territories occupied by the Germans ; by the time the war ended , over two million of these had been murdered .

The extermination activities of the Einsatzgruppen generally followed a standard procedure , with the Einsatzgruppen chief contacting the nearest Wehrmacht unit commander to inform him of the impending action ; this was done so they could coordinate and control access to the execution grounds . Initially the victims were shot , but this method proved impracticable for an operation of this scale . Also , after Himmler observed the shooting of 100 Jews at Minsk in August 1941 , he grew concerned about the impact such actions were having on the mental health of his SS men . He decided that alternate methods of killing should be found , which led to introduction of gas vans . However , these were not popular with the men , because removing the dead bodies from the van and burying them was a horrible ordeal . Prisoners or auxiliaries were often assigned to do this task so as to spare the SS men the trauma .

= = = Anti @-@ partisan operations = = =

In response to the army 's difficulties in dealing with Soviet partisans , Hitler decided in July 1942 to transfer anti @-@ partisan operations to the police . This placed the matter under Himmler 's purview . As Hitler had ordered on 8 July 1941 that all Jews were to be regarded as partisans , the term " anti @-@ partisan operations " was used as a euphemism for the extermination of Jews as well as actual combat against resistance elements . In July 1942 Himmler ordered that the term " partisan " should no longer be used ; instead resisters to Nazi rule would be described as " bandits " .

Himmler set the SS and SD to work on developing additional anti @-@ partisan tactics and launched a propaganda campaign . Sometime in June 1943 , Himmler issued the Bandenbekämpfung ( bandit fighting ) order , simultaneously announcing the existence of the Bandenkampfverbände ( bandit fighting formations ) , with SS @-@ Obergruppenführer Erich von dem Bach @-@ Zelewski as its chief . Employing troops primarily from the SS police and Waffen @-@ SS , the Bandenkampfverbände had four principal operational components : propaganda ,



centralized control and coordination of security operations , training of troops , and battle operations . Once the Wehrmacht had secured territorial objectives , the Bandenkampfverbände first secured communications facilities , roads , railways , and waterways . Thereafter , they secured rural communities and economic installations such as factories and administrative buildings . An additional priority was securing agricultural and forestry resources . The SS oversaw the collection of the harvest , which was deemed critical to strategic operations . Any Jews in the area were rounded up and killed . Communists and people of Asiatic descent were killed presumptively under the assumption that they were Soviet agents .

= = = Death camps = = =

After the start of the war , Himmler intensified the activity of the SS within Germany and in Nazi occupied Europe . An increasing numbers of Jews and German citizens deemed politically suspect or social outsiders were arrested . As the Nazi regime became more oppressive , the concentration camp system grew in size and lethal operation , and grew in scope as the economic ambitions of the SS intensified .

Intensification of the killing operations took place in late 1941 when the SS began construction of stationary gassing facilities to replace the use of Einsatzgruppen for mass killings . Victims at these new extermination camps were killed with the use of carbon monoxide gas from automobile engines . During Operation Reinhard , run by officers from the Totenkopfverbände , who were sworn to secrecy , three death camps were built in occupied Poland : Bełżec ( operational by March 1942 ) , Sobibór ( operational by May 1942 ) , and Treblinka ( operational by July 1942 ) , with squads of Trawniki men ( Eastern European collaborators ) overseeing hundreds of Sonderkommando prisoners , who were forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoria before being murdered themselves . On Himmler 's orders , by early 1942 the concentration camp at Auschwitz was greatly expanded to include the addition of gas chambers , where victims were killed using the pesticide Zyklon B.

For administrative reasons , all concentration camp guards and administrative staff became full members of the Waffen SS in 1942 . The concentration camps were placed under the command of the SS Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt ( SS Main Economic and Administrative Office ; WVHA ) under Oswald Pohl . Richard Glücks served as the Inspector of Concentration Camps , which in 1942 became office " D " under the WVHA . Exploitation and extermination became a balancing act as the military situation deteriorated . The labor needs of the war economy , especially for skilled workers , meant that some Jews escaped the genocide . On 30 October 1942 , due to severe labor shortages , Himmler ordered that large numbers of able bodied people in the Soviet occupied territories should be taken prisoner and sent to Germany as forced labor .

By 1944 , the SS TV had been organized into three divisions : staff of the concentration camps in Germany and Austria , in the occupied territories , and of the extermination camps in Poland . By 1944 , it became standard practice to rotate SS members in and out of the camps , partly based on manpower needs , but also to provide easier assignments to wounded Waffen SS members . This rotation of personnel meant that nearly the entire SS knew what was going on inside the concentration camps , making the entire organization liable for war crimes and crimes against humanity .

= = Business empire = =

In 1934 , Himmler founded the first SS business venture , Nordland Verlag , a publishing house that released propaganda material and SS training manuals . Thereafter , he purchased Allach Porcelain , which then began to produce SS memorabilia . Because of the labor shortage and a desire for financial gain , the SS started exploiting concentration camp inmates as slave labor . Most of the SS businesses lost money until Himmler placed them under the administration of Pohl 's Verwaltung und Wirtschaftshauptamt ( Administration and Business office ; VVWHA ) in

1939 . Even then , most of the enterprises were poorly run and did not fare well , as SS men were not selected for their business experience , and the workers were starving . In July 1940 Pohl established the Deutsche Wirtschaftsbetriebe GmbH ( German Businesses Ltd ; DWB ) , an umbrella corporation under which he took over administration of all SS business concerns . Eventually the SS founded nearly 200 holding companies for their businesses .

In May 1941 the VVWHA founded the Deutsche Ausrüstungswerke GmbH ( German Equipment Works ; DAW ) , which was created to integrate the SS business enterprises with the burgeoning concentration camp system . Himmler subsequently established four major new concentration camps in 1941 : Auschwitz , Gross @-@ Rosen , Natzweiler @-@ Struthof , and Neuengamme . Each had at least one factory or quarry nearby where the inmates were forced to work . Himmler took a particular interest in providing laborers for IG Farben , which was constructing a synthetic rubber factory at Auschwitz III ? Monowitz . The plant was almost ready to commence production when it was overrun by Soviet troops in 1945 . Life expectancy of inmates at Monowitz averaged about three months . This was typical of the camps , as inmates were underfed and lived under disastrously bad living conditions . Their workload was intentionally made impossibly high , under the policy of extermination through labor .

In 1942 , Himmler consolidated all of the offices for which Pohl was responsible into one , creating the SS Main Economic and Administrative Office ( Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt ; WVHA ) . The entire concentration camp system was placed under the authority of the WVHA . The SS owned Sudetenquell GbmH , a mineral water producer in Sudetenland . By 1944 , the SS had purchased 75 percent of the mineral water producers in Germany and were intending to acquire a monopoly . Several concentration camps produced building materials such as stone , bricks , and cement for the SS @-@ owned Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke ( German Earth And Stone Works ; DEST ) . In the occupied Eastern territories , the SS acquired a monopoly in brick production by seizing all 300 extant brickworks . The DWB also founded the Ost @-@ Deutsche Baustoffwerke ( East German Building Supply Works ; GmbH or ODBS ) and Deutsche Edelmöbel GmbH ( German Noble Furniture ) . These operated in factories the SS had confiscated from Jews and Poles .

The SS owned experimental farms , bakeries , meat packing plants , leather works , clothing and uniform factories , and small arms factories . Under the direction of the WVHA , the SS sold camp labor to various factories at a rate of three to six Reichsmarks per prisoner per day . The SS confiscated and sold the property of concentration camp inmates , confiscated their investment portfolios and their cash , and profited from their dead bodies by selling their hair to make felt and melting down their dental work to obtain gold from the fillings . The total value of assets looted from the victims of Operation Reinhard alone ( not including Auschwitz ) was listed by Odilo Globocnik as 178 @,@ 745 @,@ 960 @.@ 59 Reichsmarks . Items seized included 2 @,@ 909 @.@ 68 kilograms of gold worth 843 @,@ 802 @.@ 75 RM , as well as 18 @,@ 733 @.@ 69 kg of silver , 1 @,@ 514 kg of platinum , 249 @,@ 771 @.@ 50 American dollars , 130 diamond solitaires , 2 @,@ 511 @.@ 87 carats of brilliants , 13 @,@ 458 @.@ 62 carats of diamonds , and 114 kg of pearls . According to Nazi legislation , Jewish property belonged to the state , but many SS camp commandants and guards stole items such as diamonds or currency for personal gain , or took seized foodstuffs and liquor to sell on the black market .

= = Military reversals = =

On 5 July 1943 , the Germans launched the Battle of Kursk , an offensive designed to eliminate the Kursk salient . The Waffen @-@ SS by this time had been expanded to 12 divisions , and most took part in the battle . Due to stiff Soviet resistance , Hitler halted the attack by the evening of 12 July . On 17 July he called off the operation and ordered a withdrawal . Thereafter , the Germans were forced onto the defensive as the Red Army began the liberation of Western Russia . The losses incurred by the Waffen @-@ SS and the Wehrmacht during the Battle of Kursk occurred nearly simultaneously with the Allied assault into Italy , opening a two @-@ front war for Germany .

= = = Normandy landings = = =

Alarmed by the raids on St Nazaire and Dieppe in 1942 , Hitler had ordered the construction of fortifications he called the Atlantic Wall all along the Atlantic coast , from Spain to Norway , to protect against an expected Allied invasion . Concrete gun emplacements were constructed at strategic points along the coast , and wooden stakes , metal tripods , mines , and large anti @-@ tank obstacles were placed on the beaches to delay the approach of landing craft and impede the movement of tanks . In addition to several static infantry divisions , eleven panzer and Panzergrenadier divisions were deployed nearby . Four of these formations were Waffen @-@ SS divisions . In addition , the SS @-@ Das Reich was located in Southern France , the LSSAH was in Belgium refitting after fighting in the Soviet Union , and the newly formed panzer division SS @-@ Hitlerjugend , consisting of 17- and 18 @-@ year @-@ old Hitler Youth members supported by combat veterans and experienced NCOs , was stationed west of Paris . The creation of the SS @-@ Hitlerjugend was a sign of Hitler 's desperation for more troops , especially ones with unquestioning obedience .

The Normandy landings took place beginning 6 June 1944 . 21st Panzer Division under Generalmajor Edgar Feuchtinger , positioned south of Caen , was the only panzer division close to the beaches . The division included 146 tanks and 50 assault guns , plus supporting infantry and artillery . At 02 : 00 , Generalleutnant Wilhelm Richter , commander of the 716th Static Infantry Division , ordered 21st Panzer Division into position to counter @-@ attack . However , as the division was part of the armoured reserve , Feuchtinger was obliged to seek clearance from OKW before he could commit his formation . Feuchtinger did not receive orders until nearly 09 : 00 , but in the meantime on his own initiative he put together a battle group ( including tanks ) to fight the British forces east of the Orne . SS @-@ Hitlerjugend began to deploy in the afternoon of 6 June , with its units undertaking defensive actions the following day . They also took part in the Battle for Caen ( June ? August 1944 ) . On 7 ? 8 and 17 June , members of the SS @-@ Hitlerjugend shot and killed twenty Canadian prisoners of war in the Ardenne Abbey massacre .

The Allies continued to make progress in the liberation of France , and on 4 August Hitler ordered a counter @-@ offensive ( Operation Lüttich ) from Vire towards Avranches . The operation included LSSAH , Das Reich , 2nd , and 116th Panzer Divisions , with support from infantry and elements of the 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division Götz von Berlichingen under SS @-@ Oberstgruppenführer Paul Hausser . These forces were to mount an offensive near Mortain and drive west through Avranches to the coast . The Allied forces were prepared for this offensive , and an air assault on the combined German units proved devastating . On 21 August , 50 @,@ 000 German troops , including most of the LSSAH , were encircled by the Allies in the Falaise Pocket . Remnants of the LSSAH which escaped were withdrawn to Germany for refitting . Paris was liberated on 25 August , and the last of the German forces withdrew over the Seine by the end of August , ending the Normandy campaign .

= = = Battle for Germany = = =

Waffen @-@ SS units which had survived the summer campaigns were withdrawn from the front line to refit . Two of them , the 9th SS and 10th SS Panzer Divisions , did so in the Arnhem region of Holland in early September 1944 . Coincidentally , on 17 September , the Allies launched in the same area Operation Market Garden , a combined airborne and land operation designed to seize control of the lower Rhine . The 9th and 10th Panzers were among the units that repulsed the attack .

In December 1944 , Hitler launched the Ardennes Offensive , also known as the Battle of the Bulge , a significant counterattack against the western Allies through the Ardennes with the aim of reaching Antwerp while encircling the Allied armies in the area . The offensive began with an artillery barrage shortly before dawn on 16 December . Spearheading the attack were two panzer armies composed largely of Waffen @-@ SS divisions . The battle groups found advancing through the forests and wooded hills of the Ardennes difficult in the winter weather , but they initially made good progress in the northern sector . They soon encountered strong resistance from the US 2nd and

99th Infantry Divisions . By 23 December , the weather improved enough that the Allied air forces could attack the German forces and their supply columns , causing fuel shortages . In increasingly difficult conditions , the German advance slowed and was stopped . Hitler 's failed offensive cost 700 tanks and most of their remaining mobile forces in the west , as well as most of their irreplaceable reserves of manpower and materiel .

During the battle , SS @-@ Obersturmbannführer Joachim Peiper left a path of destruction , which included Waffen @-@ SS soldiers under his command murdering American POWs and unarmed Belgian civilians in the Malmedy massacre . Captured SS soldiers who were part of Kampfgruppe Peiper were tried during the Malmedy massacre trial following the war for this massacre and several others in the area . Many of the perpetrators were sentenced to hang , but the sentences were commuted . Peiper was imprisoned for eleven years for his role in the killings .

In the east , the Red Army resumed their offensive on 12 January 1945 . German forces were outnumbered twenty to one in aircraft , eleven to one in infantry , and seven to one in tanks on the Eastern Front . By the end of the month , the Red Army had made bridgeheads across the Oder , the last geographic obstacle before Berlin . The western Allies continued to advance as well , but not as rapidly as the Red Army . The Panzer Corps conducted a successful defensive operation on 17 ? 24 February at the Hron River , stalling the Allied advance towards Vienna . The 1st and 2nd SS Panzer Corps made their way towards Austria , but were slowed by damaged railways .

Budapest fell on 13 February . Hitler ordered Dietrich 's 6th SS Panzer Army to move into Hungary to protect the Nagykanizsa oilfields and refineries , which he deemed the most strategically valuable fuel reserves on the Eastern Front . Frühlingserwachen ( Operation Spring Awakening ) , the final German offensive in the east , took place in early March . German forces attacked near Lake Balaton , with 6th SS Panzer Army advancing north towards Budapest and 2nd Panzer Army moving east and south . Dietrich 's forces at first made good progress , but as they drew near the Danube , the combination of muddy terrain and strong Soviet resistance brought them to a halt . By 16 March the battle was lost . Enraged by the defeat , Hitler ordered the Waffen @-@ SS units involved to remove their cuff titles as a mark of disgrace . Dietrich refused to carry out the order .

By this time , on both the Eastern and Western Front , the activities of the SS were becoming clear to the Allies , as the concentration and extermination camps were being overrun . Allied troops were filled with disbelief and repugnance at the evidence of Nazi brutality in the camps .

On 9 April 1945 Königsberg fell to the Red Army , and on 13 April Dietrich 's SS unit was forced out of Vienna . The Battle of Berlin began at 03 : 30 on 16 April with a massive artillery barrage . Within the week , fighting was taking place inside the city . Among the many elements defending Berlin were French , Latvian , and Scandinavian Waffen @-@ SS troops . Hitler , now living in the Führerbunker under the Reich Chancellery , still hoped that his remaining SS soldiers could rescue the capital . In spite of the futility of the situation , members of the SS patrolling the city continued to shoot or hang soldiers and civilians for what they considered to be acts of cowardice or defeatism . The Berlin garrison surrendered on 2 May , two days after Hitler committed suicide . As members of SS expected little mercy from the Red Army , they attempted to move westward to surrender to the western Allies instead .

= = SS units and branches = =

= = = Reich Main Security Office = = =

Heydrich held the title of Chef des Sicherheitspolizei und SD ( Chief of the Security Police and SD ) until 27 September 1939 , when he became chief of the newly established Reich Main Security Office ( RSHA ) . From that point forward , the RSHA was in charge of SS security services . It had under its command the SD , Kripo , and Gestapo , as well as several offices to handle finance , administration , and supply . Heinrich Müller , who had been chief of operations for the Gestapo , was appointed Gestapo chief at this time . Arthur Nebe was chief of the Kripo , and the two branches of SD were commanded by a series of SS officers , including Otto Ohlendorf and Walter

Schellenberg . The SD was considered an elite branch of the SS , and its members were better educated and typically more ambitious than those within the ranks of the Allgemeine SS . Members of the SD were specially trained in criminology , intelligence , and counter @-@ intelligence . They also gained a reputation for ruthlessness and unwavering commitment to Nazi ideology .

Heydrich was attacked in Prague on 27 May 1942 by a British @-@ trained team of Czech and Slovak soldiers who had been sent by the Czechoslovak government @-@ in @-@ exile to kill him in Operation Anthropoid . He died from his injuries a week later . Himmler ran the RSHA personally until 30 January 1943 , when Heydrich 's positions were taken over by Ernst Kaltenbrunner .

= = = SS @-@ Sonderkommandos = = =

Beginning in 1938 and throughout World War II , the SS enacted a procedure where offices and units of the SS could form smaller sub @-@ units , known as SS @-@ Sonderkommandos , to carry out special tasks , including large @-@ scale murder operations . The use of SS @-@ Sonderkommandos was widespread . According to former SS Sturmbannführer Wilhelm Höttl , not even the SS leadership knew how many SS @-@ Sonderkommandos were constantly being formed , disbanded , and reformed for various tasks , especially on the Eastern Front .

A SS @-@ Sonderkommando unit led by SS @-@ Sturmbannführer Herbert Lange murdered 1 @,@ 201 psychiatric patients at the Tiegendorf psychiatric hospital in the Free City of Danzig , 1 @,@ 100 patients in Owieska , 2 @,@ 750 patients at Kościan , and 1 @,@ 558 patients at Działowo , as well as hundreds of Poles at Fort VII , where the mobile gas van and gassing bunker were developed . In 1941 ? 42 , SS @-@ Sonderkommando Lange set up and managed the first extermination camp , at Chełmno , where 152 @,@ 000 Jews were killed using gas vans .

After the battle of Stalingrad in February 1943 , Himmler realised that Germany would likely lose the war , and ordered the formation of Sonderkommando 1005 , a special task force under SS @-@ Standartenführer Paul Blobel . The unit 's assignment was to visit mass graves on the Eastern Front to exhume bodies and burn them in an attempt to cover up the genocide . The task remained unfinished at the end of the war , and many mass graves remain unmarked and unexcavated .

The Eichmann Sonderkommando was a task force headed by Adolf Eichmann that arrived in Budapest on 19 March 1944 , the same day that Axis forces invaded Hungary . Their task was to take a direct role in the deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz . The SS @-@ Sonderkommandos enlisted the aide of antisemitic elements from the Hungarian gendarmerie and pro @-@ German administrators from within the Hungarian Interior Ministry . Round @-@ ups began on 16 April , and from 14 May , four trains of 3 @,@ 000 Jews per day left Hungary and travelled to the camp at Auschwitz II @-@ Birkenau , arriving along a newly built spur line that terminated a few hundred metres from the gas chambers . Between 10 and 25 percent of the people on each train were chosen as forced laborers ; the rest were killed within hours of arrival . Under international pressure , the Hungarian government halted deportations on 6 July 1944 , by which time over 437 @,@ 000 of Hungary 's 725 @,@ 000 Jews had died .

= = = Einsatzgruppen = = =

The Einsatzgruppen had its origins in the ad hoc Einsatzkommando formed by Heydrich following the Anschluss in Austria in March 1938 . Two units of Einsatzgruppen were stationed in the Sudetenland in October 1938 . When military action turned out not to be necessary because of the Munich Agreement , the Einsatzgruppen were assigned to confiscate government papers and police documents . They secured government buildings , questioned senior civil servants , and arrested as many as 10 @,@ 000 Czech communists and German citizens . The Einsatzgruppen also followed Wehrmacht troops and killed potential partisans . Similar groups were used in 1939 for the occupation of Czechoslovakia .

Hitler felt that the planned extermination of the Jews was too difficult and important to be entrusted to the military . In 1941 the Einsatzgruppen were sent into the Soviet Union to begin large @-@ scale genocide of Jews , Romani people , and communists . Historian Raul Hilberg estimates that

between 1941 and 1945 the Einsatzgruppen and related agencies killed more than two million people , including 1 @. @ 3 million Jews . The largest mass shooting perpetrated by the Einsatzgruppen was at Babi Yar outside Kiev , where 33 @, @ 771 Jews were killed in a single operation on 29 ? 30 September 1941 . In the Rumbula massacre ( November ? December 1941 ) , 25 @, @ 000 victims from the Riga ghetto were killed . Another mass shooting early in 1942 claimed the lives of over 10 @, @ 000 Jews in Kharkov .

The last Einsatzgruppen were disbanded in mid @-@ 1944 ( although some continued to exist on paper until 1945 ) due to the German retreat on both fronts and the consequent inability to continue extermination activities . Former Einsatzgruppen members were either assigned duties in the Waffen @-@ SS or concentration camps . Twenty @-@ four Einsatzgruppen commanders were tried for war crimes following the war .

= = = SS Court Main Office = = =

The SS Court Main Office ( Hauptamt SS @-@ Gericht ) was an internal legal system for conducting investigations , trials , and punishment of the SS and police . It had more than 600 lawyers on staff in the main offices in Berlin and Munich . Proceedings were conducted at 38 regional SS courts throughout Germany . It was the only authority authorized to try SS personnel , except for SS members who were on active duty in the Wehrmacht ( in such cases , the SS member in question was tried by a standard military tribunal ) . Its creation placed the SS beyond the reach of civilian legal authority . Himmler personally intervened as he saw fit regarding convictions and punishment . The historian Karl Dietrich Bracher describes this court system as one factor in the creation of the Nazi totalitarian police state , as it removed objective legal procedures , rendering citizens defenseless against the " summary justice of the SS terror . "

= = = SS Cavalry = = =

Shortly after Hitler seized power in 1933 , most horse riding associations were taken over by the SA and SS . Members received combat training to serve in the Reiter @-@ SS ( SS Cavalry Corps ) . The first SS cavalry regiment , designated SS @-@ Totenkopf Reitstandarte 1 , was formed in September 1939 . Commanded by then SS @-@ Standartenführer Hermann Fegelein , the unit was assigned to Poland , where they took part in the extermination of Polish intelligentsia . Additional squadrons were added in May 1940 , for a total of fourteen .

The unit was split into two regiments in December 1939 , with Fegelein in charge of both . By March 1941 their strength was 3 @, @ 500 men . In July 1941 , they were assigned to the Pripyat swamps punitive operation , tasked with rounding up and exterminating Jews and partisans . The two regiments were amalgamated into the SS Cavalry Brigade on 31 July , twelve days after the operation started . Fegelein 's final report , dated 18 September 1941 , states that they killed 14 @, @ 178 Jews , 1 @, @ 001 partisans , and 699 Red Army soldiers , with 830 prisoners taken . The historian Henning Pieper estimates the actual number of Jews killed was closer to 23 @, @ 700 . The SS Cavalry Brigade took serious losses in November 1941 in the Battle of Moscow , with casualties of up to 60 per cent in some squadrons . Fegelein was appointed as commander of the 8th SS Cavalry Division Florian Geyer on 20 April 1943 . This unit saw service in the Soviet Union in attacks on partisans and civilians . In addition , SS Cavalry regiments served in Croatia and Hungary .

= = = SS Medical Corps = = =

The SS Medical Corps were initially known as the Sanitätsstaffel ( sanitary units ) . After 1931 , the SS formed the headquarters office Amt V as the central office for SS medical units . An SS medical academy was established in Berlin in 1938 to train Waffen @-@ SS physicians . SS medical personnel did not often provide actual medical care ; their primary responsibility was medicalized genocide . At Auschwitz , about three @-@ quarters of new arrivals , including almost all children ,

women with small children , all the elderly , and all those who appeared on brief and superficial inspection by an SS doctor not to be completely fit were killed within hours of arrival . In their role as Desinfektoren ( disinfectors ) , SS doctors also made selections among existing prisoners as to their fitness to work , and supervised the killing of those deemed unfit . Inmates in deteriorating health were examined by SS doctors , who decided whether or not they would be able to recover in less than two weeks . Those too ill or injured to recover in that time frame were killed .

At Auschwitz , the actual delivery of gas to the victims was always handled by the SS , on the order of the supervising SS doctor . Many of the SS doctors also conducted inhumane medical experiments on camp prisoners . The most infamous SS doctor , Josef Mengele , served as a medical officer at Auschwitz under the command of Eduard Wirth of the camp 's medical corps . Mengele undertook selections even when he was not assigned to do so in the hope of finding subjects for his experiments . He was particularly interested in locating sets of twins . In contrast to most of the doctors , who viewed undertaking selections as one of their most stressful and horrible duties , Mengele undertook the task with a flamboyant air , often smiling or whistling a tune . After the war , many SS doctors were charged with war crimes for their inhumane medical experiments and for their role in gas chamber selections .

= = = Other SS units = = =

= = = = Ahnenerbe = = = =

The Ahnenerbe ( Ancestral Heritage Organization ) was founded in 1935 by Himmler , and became part of the SS in 1939 . It was an umbrella agency for more than fifty organizations tasked with studying the German racial identity and ancient Germanic traditions and language . The agency sponsored archaeological expeditions in Germany , Scandinavia , the Middle East , Tibet , and elsewhere to search for evidence of Aryan roots , influence , and superiority . Further planned expeditions were postponed indefinitely at the start of the war .

= = = = SS @-@ Frauenkops = = = =

The SS @-@ Frauenkops was an auxiliary reporting and clerical unit , which included the SS @-@ Helferinnenkorps ( Women Helper Corps ) , made up of female volunteers . Members were assigned as administrative staff and supply personnel , and served in command positions and as guards at women 's concentration camps . Like their male equivalents in the SS , females participated in atrocities against Jews , Poles , and others .

In 1942 , Himmler set up the Reichsschule für SS Helferinnen ( Reich school for SS helpers ) in Oberehnheim to train women in communications so that they could free up men for combat roles . Himmler also intended to replace all female civilian employees in his service with SS @-@ Helferinnen members , as they were selected and trained according to NSDAP ideology . The school was closed on 22 November 1944 due to the Allied advance .

= = = = SS @-@ Mannschaften = = = =

The SS @-@ Mannschaften ( Auxiliary @-@ SS ) were not considered regular SS members , but were conscripted from other branches of the German military , the NSDAP , SA , and the Volkssturm for service in concentration camps and extermination camps .

= = Foreign legions and volunteers = =

Beginning in 1940 , Himmler opened up Waffen @-@ SS recruiting to ethnic Germans that were not German citizens . In March 1941 , the SS Main Office established the Germanische Leitstelle ( Germanic Guidance Office ) to establish Waffen @-@ SS recruiting offices in Nazi @-@ occupied

Europe . The majority of the resulting foreign Waffen @-@ SS units wore a distinctive national collar patch and preceded their SS rank titles with the prefix Waffen instead of SS . Volunteers from Scandinavian countries filled the ranks of two divisions , the SS @-@ Wiking and SS @-@ Nordland . Belgian Flemings joined Dutchmen to form the SS @-@ Nederland legion , and their Walloon compatriots joined the SS @-@ Wallonien . By the end of 1943 about a quarter of the SS were ethnic Germans from across Europe , and by June 1944 , half the Waffen @-@ SS were foreign nationals .

Additional Waffen @-@ SS units were added from the Ukrainians , Albanians from Kosovo , Serbians , Croatians , Turkic , Caucasians , Cossack , and Tatars . The Ukrainians and Tatars , who had suffered persecution under Stalin , were likely motivated primarily by opposition to the Soviet government rather than ideological agreement with the SS . The exiled Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Amin al @-@ Husseini was made an SS @-@ Gruppenführer by Himmler in May 1943 . He subsequently used antisemitism and anti @-@ Serb racism to recruit a Waffen @-@ SS division of Bosnian Muslims , the SS @-@ Handschar . The year @-@ long Soviet occupation of the Baltic states at the beginning of World War II resulted in volunteers for Latvian and Estonian Waffen @-@ SS units . The Estonian Legion had 1 @,@ 280 volunteers under training by the end of 1942 . Eventually , approximately 25 @,@ 000 men served in the Estonian SS division , with thousands more conscripted into Police Front battalions and border guard units . Most of the Estonians were fighting primarily to regain their independence and as many as 15 @,@ 000 of them died fighting alongside the Germans . In early 1944 , Himmler even contacted Pohl to suggest releasing Muslim prisoners from concentration camps to supplement his SS troops .

The Indian Legion was a Wehrmacht unit formed in August 1942 chiefly from disaffected Indian soldiers of the British Indian Army captured in the North African Campaign . In August 1944 it was transferred to the auspices of the Waffen @-@ SS as the Indische Freiwilligen @-@ Legion der Waffen @-@ SS . There was also a French volunteer division , SS @-@ Charlemagne , which was formed in 1944 mainly from the remnants of the Legion of French Volunteers Against Bolshevism and French Sturmbrigade .

= = Ranks and uniforms = =

The SS established its own symbolism , rituals , customs , ranks and uniforms to set itself apart from other organizations . Before 1929 , the SS wore the same brown uniform as the SA , with the addition of a black tie and a black cap with a Totenkopf ( death 's head ) skull and bones symbol , moving to an all @-@ black uniform in 1932 . In 1935 , the SS combat formations adopted a service uniform in field grey for everyday wear . The SS also developed its own field uniforms , which included reversible smocks and helmet covers printed with camouflage patterns . Uniforms were manufactured in hundreds of licensed factories , with some workers being prisoners of war performing forced labor . Many were produced in concentration camps .

Hitler and the NSDAP understood the power of emblems and insignia to influence public opinion . The stylized lightning bolt logo of the SS was chosen in 1932 . The logo is a pair of runes from a set of 18 Armanen runes created by Guido von List in 1906 . It is similar to the ancient Sowil? rune , which symbolizes the sun , but was renamed as " Sig " ( victory ) in List 's iconography . The Totenkopf symbolized the wearer 's willingness to fight unto the death , and also served to frighten the enemy .

= = SS membership estimates 1925 ? 45 = =

After 1933 a career in the SS became increasingly attractive to Germany 's social elite , who began joining the movement in great numbers , usually motivated by political opportunism . By 1938 about one @-@ third of the SS leadership were members of the upper middle class . The trend reversed after the first Soviet counter @-@ offensive of 1942 .

= = SS offices = =



By 1942 all activities of the SS were managed through twelve main offices .

Personal Staff Reichsführer @-@ SS

SS Main Office ( SS @-@ HA )

SS @-@ Führungshauptamt ( SS Main Operational Office ; SS @-@ FHA )

Reich Main Security Office ( RSHA )

SS Main Economic and Administrative Office ( WVHA )

Ordnungspolizei Hauptamt ( Main Office of the Order Police )

SS Court Main Office

SS @-@ Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt ( SS Office of Race and Settlement ; RuSHA )

SS Personnel Main Office

Hauptamt Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle ( Racial German Assistance Main Office ; VOMI )

SS Education Office

Main Office of the Reich Commissioner for the Consolidation of German Nationhood ( RKFDV )

= = Austrian SS = =

The term " Austrian SS " is often used to describe that portion of the SS membership from Austria , but it was never a recognized branch of the SS . In contrast to SS members from other countries , who were grouped into either the Germanic @-@ SS or the Foreign Legions of the Waffen @-@ SS , Austrian SS members were regular SS personnel . It was technically under the command of the SS in Germany , but often acted independently concerning Austrian affairs . The Austrian SS was founded in 1930 and by 1934 was acting as a covert force to bring about the Anschluss with Germany , which occurred in March 1938 . Early Austrian SS leaders were Kaltenbrunner and Arthur Seyss @-@ Inquart . Austrian SS members served in every branch of the SS . Political scientist David Art of Tufts University notes that Austrians constituted 8 percent of the Third Reich 's population and 13 percent of the SS ; he states that 40 percent of the staff and 75 percent of commanders at death camps were Austrian .

After the Anschluss , the Austrian SS was folded into SS @-@ Oberabschnitt Donau . The third regiment of the SS @-@ Verfügungstruppe ( Der Führer ) and the fourth Totenkopf regiment ( Ostmark ) were recruited in Austria shortly thereafter . On Heydrich 's orders , mass arrests of potential enemies of the Reich began immediately after the Anschluss . Mauthausen was the first concentration camp opened in Austria following the Anschluss . Before the invasion of the Soviet Union , Mauthausen was the harshest of the camps in the Greater German Reich .

The Hotel Metropole was transformed into Gestapo headquarters in Vienna in April 1938 . With a staff of 900 ( 80 percent of whom were recruited from the Austrian police ) , it was the largest Gestapo office outside Berlin . An estimated 50 @,@ 000 people were interrogated or tortured there . The Gestapo in Vienna was headed by Franz Josef Huber , who also served as chief of the Central Agency for Jewish Emigration in Vienna . Although its de facto leaders were Adolf Eichmann and later Alois Brunner , Huber was nevertheless responsible for the mass deportation of Austrian Jews .

= = Post @-@ war activity and aftermath = =

Following Nazi Germany 's collapse , the SS ceased to exist . Numerous members of the SS , many of them still committed Nazis , remained at large in Germany and across Europe . On 21 May 1945 , the British captured Himmler , who was in disguise and using a false passport . At an internment camp near Lüneburg , he committed suicide by biting down on a cyanide capsule . Several other leading members of the SS fled , but some were quickly captured . Kaltenbrunner , chief of the RSHA and the highest @-@ ranking member of the SS upon Himmler 's suicide , was captured and arrested in the Bavarian Alps . He was among the 24 defendants put on trial at the International Military Tribunal in 1945 ? 46 .

Some SS members were subject to summary execution , torture , and beatings at the hands of

freed prisoners , displaced persons , or Allied soldiers . American soldiers of the 157th Regiment , who entered the concentration camp at Dachau in April 1945 and saw the human deprivation and cruelty committed by the SS , shot some of the remaining SS camp guards . On 15 April 1945 , British troops entered Bergen @-@ Belsen . They placed the SS guards on starvation rations , made them work without breaks , forced them to deal with the remaining corpses , and stabbed them with bayonets or struck them with their rifle butts if they slowed their pace . Some members of the US Army Counter Intelligence Corps delivered captured SS camp guards to displaced persons camps , where they knew they would be subject to summary execution .

= = = International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg = = =

The Allies commenced legal proceedings against captured Nazis , establishing the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in 1945 . The first war crimes trial of 24 prominent figures such as Göring , Albert Speer , Joachim von Ribbentrop , Alfred Rosenberg , Hans Frank , and Kaltenbrunner took place beginning in November 1945 . They were accused of four counts : conspiracy , waging a war of aggression , war crimes , and crimes against humanity in violation of international law . Twelve received the death penalty , including Kaltenbrunner , who was convicted of crimes against humanity and executed on 16 October 1946 . The former commandant at Auschwitz , Rudolf Höss , who testified on behalf of Kaltenbrunner and others , was tried and executed in 1947 .

Additional SS trials and convictions followed . Many defendants attempted to exculpate themselves using the excuse that they were merely following superior orders , which they had to obey unconditionally as part of their sworn oath and duty . The courts did not find this to be a legitimate defense . A trial of 40 SS officers and guards from Auschwitz took place in Kraków in November 1947 . Most were found guilty , and 23 received the death penalty . In addition to those tried by the Western allies , an estimated 37 @,@ 000 members of the SS were tried and convicted in Soviet courts . Sentences included hangings and long terms of hard labor . Piotr Cywiński , the director of the Auschwitz @-@ Birkenau Museum , estimates that of the 70 @,@ 000 members of the SS involved in crimes in concentration camps , only about 1 @,@ 650 to 1 @,@ 700 were tried after the war . The International Military Tribunal declared the SS a criminal organization in 1946 .

= = = Escapes = = =

After the war , many former Nazis fled to South America , especially to Argentina , where they were welcomed by Juan Perón 's regime . In the 1950s , former Dachau inmate Lothar Hermann discovered that Buenos Aires resident Ricardo Klement was in fact Adolf Eichmann , who had in 1948 obtained false identification and a landing permit for Argentina through an organization directed by Bishop Alois Hudal , an Austrian cleric with Nazi sympathies then residing in Italy . Eichmann was captured in Buenos Aires on 11 May 1960 by Mossad , the Israeli intelligence agency . At his trial in Jerusalem in 1961 , he was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging . Eichmann was quoted as having stated , " I will jump into my grave laughing , because the fact that I have the death of five million Jews [ or Reich enemies , as he later claimed to have said ] on my conscience gives me extraordinary satisfaction . " Franz Stangl , the commandant of Treblinka , also escaped to South America with the assistance of Hudal 's network . He was deported to Germany in 1967 and was sentenced to life in prison in 1970 . He died in 1971 .

Mengele , worried that his capture would mean a death sentence , fled Germany on 17 April 1949 . Assisted by a network of former SS members , he traveled to Genoa , where he obtained a passport under the alias " Helmut Gregor " from the International Committee of the Red Cross . He sailed to Argentina in July . Aware that he was still a wanted man , he moved to Paraguay in 1958 and Brazil in 1960 . In both instances he was assisted by former Luftwaffe pilot Hans @-@ Ulrich Rudel . Mengele suffered a stroke while swimming and drowned in 1979 .

Thousands of Nazis , including former SS members such as Trawniki guard Jakob Reimer and Circassian collaborator Tscherim Soobzokov , fled to the United States under the guise of refugees ,

sometimes using forged documents . Other SS men , such as Soobzokov , SD officer Wilhelm Höttl , Eichmann aide Otto von Bolschwing , and accused war criminal Theodor Saevecke , were employed by American intelligence agencies against the Soviets . As CIA officer Harry Rositzke noted , " It was a visceral business of using any bastard so long as he was anti @-@ Communist ... The eagerness or desire to enlist collaborators means that sure , you didn 't look at their credentials too closely . " Similarly , the Soviets used SS personnel after the war ; Operation Theo , for instance , disseminated " subversive rumours " in Allied @-@ occupied Germany .

Simon Wiesenthal and others have speculated about the existence of a Nazi fugitive network code @-@ named ODESSA ( an acronym for Organisation der ehemaligen SS @-@ Angehörigen , Organization of former SS members ) that allegedly helped war criminals find refuge in Latin America . British writer Gitta Sereny , who conducted interviews with SS men , considers the story untrue and attributes the escapes to postwar chaos and Hudal 's Vatican @-@ based network . While the existence of ODESSA remains unproven , Sereny notes that " there certainly were various kinds of Nazi aid organizations after the war ? it would have been astonishing if there hadn 't been . "