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Hotel Prinz Albrecht, since 1934 the seat of the "Reichsfuehrung SS".

3.1 The Reichsfuehrer-SS and his Empire

The most important tasks of "Reichsfuehrer-SS" Heinrich Himmler and his SS were:

- the surveillance, persecution, and elimination of all political forces which the state considered its enemies,
- the preservation and advancement of the Aryan "race" and the creation of a "racially pure" Germany, especially through the systematic persecution and expulsion of the Jews,
- the conquest of living space ("Lebensraum") and the national and racial reorganization ("volkstumpolitische Neuordnung") of Europe.

In their respective spheres of police work and intelligence-gathering, the Secret State Police (Gestapo) and the Security Service (SD) had the task of guaranteeing the security of the Nazi State. Himmler's appointment as "Reichsfuehrer-SS" and Chief of the German Police (1936) served the long-range objective of separating all German police forces from the state and fusing their personnel with that of the SS.



The twelve Main Offices of the SS.

For Himmler, the security of the state meant: "To safeguard the German people as an organic entity, its vital energies, and its institutions against destruction and disintegration." To attain this safeguard and as a supplement to police work, Himmler created the concentration camp system. It was used to isolate and exclude all persons declared enemies of the state or the people. The concept of enemy included not only political opponents of National Socialism, but also a multitude of minorities and socially marginal groups. Special extermination camps were created for the purpose of murdering the "chief racial-political enemy" - the Jewish people.

Certain elite functions in creating the National Socialist Empire were allotted to the Nazi party's "Schutzstaffel" (SS - literally: protection squadron). As an ostensibly "racially pure" order, the SS furnished the personnel for the realization of the Nazi system's key objective, the "racial-political purification" initially of the Aryan people in Germany, and after the outbreak of war, of the populations in all the countries Germany conquered.

What had begun as a system designed to secure political power within Germany expanded after 1939 across all of Europe: the ruthless persecution and elimination of alleged and actual political enemies. Waffen-SS - SS combat units - participated in the campaigns of conquest. In cooperation with all police and other SS units and in consensus with all participating state institutions, they played a decisive role in the planning and execution of the "racial-political" concept of subjugation and extermination. Particularly in Eastern Europe, the SS was the driving force behind the demographic reorganization that was carried out with all available means.

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3.2. Assumption of Power and Early Terror

Hitler's appointment as Reich Chancellor on January 30, 1933 was followed by the systematic destruction of the democratic state - a state based upon due process of law. Since the means of power were now at the disposal of the state, the National Socialists were able to systematically eliminate every possible form of opposition. This they accomplished in part through the formation of an auxiliary police force in Prussia consisting of members of the Stormtroopers (SA) and SS. They also used the notorious Reichstag fire as an excuse to proclaim a state of emergency "for the protection of the people and the state". Mass arrests were carried out against Communists, Social Democrats, and other individual critics of the NSDAP.

The important stages of the so-called "rise of the nation" consisted of the eliminating the power of the Reichstag (parliament) and the various state diets. This was followed by the boycott of the Jews, the introduction of the first anti-semitic laws and decrees, and the "Gleichschaltung" ("standardization") of all autonomous and semi-autonomous institutions, including the labor unions, whose functionaries were often arrested. The Communist Party was virtually destroyed and the SPD and all other remaining parties banned, producing the Nazi one-party state.

In these months, the terror and the legal vacuum allowed the SA and SS to operate with impunity (in the SA torture cellars and "unofficial concentration camps", at the workplace, and in public spaces). This not only forced tens of thousands to flee Germany, it also produced the desired atmosphere of fear and intimidation necessary for the political and ideological "standardization" of the German people.

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3.3. The Secret State Police - Gestapo

The creation of a hard-hitting political police force was one of the first objectives of the Nazi state. In Prussia, Hermann Goering - initially Minister of the Interior, then Prussian Chief Minister - set up the Secret State Police Office (Geheime Staatspolizei, or Gestapo) on April 26, 1933. Its first director was Rudolf Diels, who had been engaged since February 1933 in creating a political police force. The Secret State Police, first detached from the general police and established as an agency of its own, was soon thereafter also removed from the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior and placed directly under the authority of the Chief Minister.



Headline of the "Voelkischer Beobachter"

Since the beginning of May, the Gestapo was located at Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8. From there proceeded the establishment of state police branches in all Prussian administrative districts.



The top leaders of the SS and the police with Hermann Goering, 1937.

In April 1934, Heinrich Himmler became Inspector and Deputy Chief of the Secret State Police. He appointed Reinhard Heydrich Director of the Secret State Police Office. Himmler, initially Chief of the Munich Police and Commander of the Political Police of Bavaria, was entrusted step-by-step with the command of the political police in nearly all German states except Prussia. Starting in May 1934, he coordinated the tasks of the entire political police from the headquarters of the Chief of Political Police of the States ("Politischer Polizeikommandeur der Laender") at Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8. In November 1934, Goering relinquished his directive functions and Himmler was able to accelerate the centralization of the Gestapo.

After his June 17, 1936 appointment as "Reichsfuehrer-SS" and Chief of the German Police - formally under the jurisdiction of Reich Minister of the Interior Wilhelm Frick - Himmler proceeded to reorganize the entire police force. The Main Office of the Security Police (under Reinhard Heydrich) included the Gestapo and the Criminal Police. The Main Office of General Police ("Ordnungspolizei") was headed by Kurt Daluge and included Municipal Police ("Schutzpolizei"), Rural Police ("Gendarmerie"), and Local Police ("Gemeindepolizei").



Law concerning the Secret State Police. February 10, 1936.

The Secret State Police Office started in 1933 with between 200 and 300 employees in the central office. As early as April 1934, their number had risen to 680. In 1942, about 1100 persons were employed in the central office of the Gestapo, 477 of them on the Prinz-Albrecht grounds. At this time, the offices immediately next door at Zimmerstrasse 16 - 19 had 250 employees, most of whom were busy establishing and administering the Gestapo's main card file.

"The Secret State Police Office is Prussia's most important political agency. Every civil servant and public sector employee must constantly be aware of this and must, through strictest subordination, faithful execution of duty, absolute discretion, and unflagging zeal, aid the Secret State Police Office to fulfill its assigned tasks."

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3.4. The Security Service of the Reichsfuehrer-SS

When Reinhard Heydrich assumed the directorship of the Prussian Secret State Police Office in April 1934, he had already been head of the Security Service of the Reichsfuehrer-SS (SD) for the preceding three years. The SD, which had grown rapidly since it was first established, had the task of keeping the opponents of the NSDAP under surveillance and to fend off possible dangers from the Party.

In 1934, Heydrich's took up headquarters in the Prinz-Albrecht-Palais at Wilhelmstrasse 102. Subordinate to the SD-Headquarters established in 1935 were the SD regional and local commands ([Leit]-Abschnitte) and local SD branches (SD-Aussenstellen) within the respective SS main regional commands (Oberabschnitte). A network of confidential agents provided the central office with information, and the central office in turn issued situation reports at regular intervals.

In 1934 the SD was declared the sole intelligence service of the Party, and in 1937 a precise division of duties between the SD and the Gestapo was worked out.

Through the SD, Himmler secured for himself a monopoly over the entire official intelligence activities of the NSDAP. Thus, the SD remained at all times a party institution, and its employees also received their salaries from the NSDAP. Heydrich, who was in charge of both the Gestapo and the SD ensured close cooperation between the two institutions. All official intelligence activities culminated in the regularly compiled "Reports from within the Reich", grassroots reports that kept the party leadership relatively frankly informed about the internal political situation, in particular about the prevailing mood of the population. Snooping within the Party, officially forbidden by Himmler but tacitly tolerated nevertheless, occasionally aroused displeasure among Party leaders, who felt that their work was being criticized. The SD also issued informative reports about the extent of corruption within the various German administrative agencies, especially in the occupied territories.

Another major focus of the SD was clandestine activity, some of it abroad. A familiar example is the fake attack on the Gleiwitz radio station, with which the SD, in close cooperation with the Gestapo, furnished Hitler with the desired pretext for an invasion of Poland.

From the ranks of the SD emerged a number of SS leaders who subsequently played a role in the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question", especially in the Special Units ("Einsatzgruppen") of the Security Police and the SD. Adolf Eichmann, chief organizer of the mass deportation of Jews from all over Europe to the extermination camps, also belonged to the service since 1935. He and others working in the Office of Jewish Affairs II/112 ("Judenreferat") of the SD Main Office would subsequently occupy leading positions in the machinery of the "Final Solution" throughout German-occupied Europe.



Reinhard Heydrich in his Munich police office in 1934, shortly before his transfer to Berlin.

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Reinhard Heydrich (1904 - 1942)

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Ernst Kaltenbrunner (1903 - 1946)

3.5. The Reich Security Main Office

With the establishment of the Reich Security Main Office (Reichssicherheitshauptamt = RSHA) on September 27, 1939, Himmler concentrated all forces organized within the state's Main Security Police Office (Secret State Police and Criminal Police) and those active within the Party's Security Service Main Office (SD) in one institution. He appointed Reinhard Heydrich Head of the Reich Security Main Office and Chief of Security Police and the SD.

This organizational fusion, however, did not mean that the existing agencies were dissolved. Whenever business was conducted with other departments, Department IV, for instance, continued to use the name "Secret State Police Office". The term Reich Security Main Office was only used for internal correspondence. For this reason, too, the RSHA had no central building. Its departmental branch offices were scattered throughout the city. But the building at Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8 in Berlin's postal district Southwest 11 remained the RSHA's headquarters and postal address. It also remained the official address of the "Reichsfuehrer-SS" and his personal staff.



Werner Best (1903 - 1989)

Subordinate to the RSHA was a wide network of branch offices. In 1943 alone, there were 70 State Police and 66 Criminal Police branch offices. In the occupied territories, mobile and stationary branch offices held sway: there were the Special Units ("Einsatzgruppen") and Special Commandos ("Einsatzkommandos"), and chiefs and commanders of SIPO (Sicherheitspolizei = Security Police) and SD (Security Service) with the units under their command. Even in the concentration camps, Secret State Police officials selected specially for the job by the RSHA worked in the "Political Departments".



Heinrich Müller (1900 - 1945)

With the RSHA, Himmler and Heydrich had established the most important agency contributing to the National Socialist reign of oppression and terror. Through a perverse combination of bureaucratic procedure and unrestrained arbitrariness, the RSHA's instructions and orders determined the "Third Reich's" policies of persecution and extermination. This office selected the personnel for the Special Units, which staged mass executions with hundreds of thousands of victims. Staff members of this office developed the gassing vans used for a while to murder the Jewish population. The "Office of Protective Custody" ("Schutzhaftreferat") decided who would be sent to concentration camps. Department V's "Institute for Criminal-Technical Matters" ("Kriminaltechnisches Institut") experimented on prisoners with poisoned ammunition - to mention only a few examples.



Bruno Streckenbach (1902 - 1977)

Along with the guards at concentration camps and extermination camps, the most important and most dreaded instruments of the National Socialist policies of persecution, oppression and extermination were the Security Police - i.e., Secret State Police (Gestapo) and Criminal Police (Kripo) - the agencies of the Security Service (SD), and police battalions of the Main Office of the General Police.

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Georgi Dimitroff (1882 - 1949)

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Werner Finck (1902 - 1978)

3.6. Gestapo Prison ("Hausgefaengnis") and Political Prisoners (1933-39)

In the late summer of 1933, a prison was installed in the building of the Secret State Police Office at Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8. Its purpose was to hold prisoners the Gestapo wanted to interrogate in the building. Despite repeated additions to the compound, the total number of cells remained limited. At most fifty persons could be accommodated in the 38 solitary cells and one communal cell. Many political prisoners were held in the police prison on Alexanderplatz or (until 1936) in Concentration Camp Columbiahaus, from where they were then transported for the day to Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8 for interrogation.

The interrogation of inmates in the Gestapo prison could extend over several hours or days, but also over many weeks and months. Long-term stays in the prison were the exception rather than the rule, but Kurt Schumacher was held here for four months in the summer of 1939, Rudolf Breitscheid and Kurt Lehmann in 1941-1942 for eleven months, and Berthold Jacob from 1942 to 1944 for two years. For most prisoners, though, the Gestapo prison was a way station on their journey through the prisons and concentration camps of the SS state.



Erich Honecker (1912 - 1994)

Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8 became notorious for the brutal tortures the Gestapo applied while trying to extract the desired information. Several prisoners were able to escape this terror only by committing suicide. "Intensified interrogations", as the tortures were called in the bureaucratic jargon, did not take place in the raised ground-floor prison cells but in the offices on the floors above. During the initial years, the victims were primarily Communists, Social Democrats, and members of labor unions, but also members of the socialist youth movement, smaller socialist parties, and resistance organizations ranging from the Socialist Workers Party to the group "Begin Anew". In addition, there were others equally unwilling to submit to the National Socialist state's claim to power, for example Jehovah's Witnesses or individual representatives of the Churches.



Karl (Carlo) Mierendorff (1897 - 1943)

Beyond that, the SS also used the Gestapo prison to hold oppositional National Socialists or SS men who had committed punishable offenses. But the vast majority of its inmates were those opponents of the NS system whose interrogations were of special interest to the machinery of persecution.

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3.7. Protective Custody

"Protective custody" was one of the severest measures the National Socialist State applied against those declared an "Enemy of State and People". As a rule, the individual State Police branches requested this category of arrest. Then the Protective Custody Section within the Secret State Police Office processed the case and eventually issued the requisite order, after obtaining approval from either the Chief of the Gestapo, Heinrich Mueller, Heydrich, or, in very special cases, Himmler himself. "Protective custody" was implemented in the concentration camps.

As early as October 1939, the rule was handed down that, generally, there would be no releases from "protective custody" for the duration of the war. From May 1943 on, the local Gestapo branches could, on their own authority, place Polish prisoners in "protective custody" and send them to a concentration camp. The Reich Security Main Office merely had to be informed of the matter. The precise number of "protective custody" warrants issued can no longer be ascertained. When Heydrich assumed his duties as Head of the Secret State Police Office in 1934, all such orders were marked by the initial letter of the arrested person's last name followed by a consecutive number.

One of the last, still extant "protective custody" warrants bears the number M 34 591. This means that, by 1945, at least 34 591 persons whose last name began with an M had been taken in "protective custody".

- The abrogation of fundamental rights by the Decree of February 28, 1933, following the Reichstag building fire,
- the elimination of formal court reviews of Gestapo procedures,
- and Gestapo authority to impose "protective custody" and to implement it in concentration camps cleared the way for whatever "special treatment" (Sonderbehandlung) the National Socialist leadership wanted to employ, in other words, the execution of any individual prisoner.

The official who had been in charge of the Reich Security Main Office's Protective Custody Section stated after the war: "As an official accustomed to obey orders, I could not possibly imagine that the Reich leadership, which had been formally recognized by all foreign powers, would issue unlawful orders. If severe orders were issued, I considered them justified measures taken in wartime."

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The most important concentration camps in the Third Reich.

3.8. Concentration Camps

Along with the standardization of the Political Police, Himmler's second objective was to centralize the concentration camps. During the period 1933-1934 the "wild", i.e. unofficial camps run by stormtroopers were closed down or placed under the administration of the state. On July 7, 1934, the Reichsfuehrer-SS appointed Theodor Eicke, who had run Camp Dachau since the summer of 1933, as Inspector of Concentration Camps. In addition to reorganizing the camps, Eicke and the guard units under his command - later known officially as "Death's Head Units" - systematized the terrorization of prisoners. In 1939, six camps existed with roughly 21,000 prisoners: Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Flossenbuerg, Mauthausen, and Ravensbrueck.

Although the camps were initially under the direction of the SS Main Office, Eicke always preserved his independent position. In 1942, Himmler placed the camps, now commanded by Eicke's successor, Richard Gluecks, under the control of the Main Office for Economic Administration of the SS as Departmental Group D 5. The enormous increase in the number of inmates after war had broken out increased the already existing tendency of systematically exploiting camp inmates for labor. From here it was merely a small step to that murderous treatment of prisoners referred to as "extermination through labor", which was employed particularly against Jewish prisoners.

The composition of prisoners changed during the war, and in 1945 roughly 90% of them were non-Germans. In 1944, there were 20 concentration camps with 165 satellite forced labor camps. Two figures reveal the disastrous conditions in the camps, where inmates were defenseless and completely at the mercy of their guards: during the second half of 1942, 57,503 inmates out of 95,000 died, and in the first eight months of 1943, more than 60,000. In January 1945, more than 700,000 human beings were imprisoned in the camps, 200,000 of them women. 40,000 guards secured this portion of the SS State at the end of the war.