

## Death's Head Units

(*Totenkopfverbände*), SS units assigned to guard concentration camps; later they also served as elite combat units.

The Death's Head Units were established in 1934 by Theodor Eicke, the first commandant of Dachau and later inspector of concentration camps. They were named for the skull-and-cross-bones symbol worn on the right collar of their uniforms. Eicke trained the units to conduct themselves with strict discipline and cruelty, and to view the prisoners under their guard as enemies of the state who should be destroyed if possible. Thus, he forged a group known for their extreme brutality.

At the beginning of World War II, the Death's Head Units had 24,000 members, including reservists; by January 1945 that number had increased to 40,000. In 1938 Hitler announced that they were to become military units. Some groups were then discharged from guarding the camps for combat duty, serving in Poland and the Soviet Union. Just as Eicke had trained the units to be barbaric in their treatment of camp prisoners, so did they act on the field of combat. They were known to be cruel and ferocious warriors.

After the war, the Death's Head Units were declared to be a criminal organization, and its members subject to war crimes trials.