



SS

(*Schutzstaffel*, Protection Squad), elite organization within the Third Reich that was responsible for the "Final Solution" and other acts of terror and destruction.

The SS was originally instituted in March 1923 as Adolf Hitler's personal bodyguard corps. It consisted of elite fighters, and competed with the Nazi Party's other militia, the Storm Troopers (SA), for superiority. SS members were subject to strict military discipline and swore an oath of complete loyalty to Hitler and those appointed by him.

In January 1929 Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler became the national head of the SS, or "Reich Leader of the SS." Under his leadership, the SS greatly expanded in size and strength. By the time Hitler rose to national power in Germany in 1933, Himmler had made the SS the dominant organization within the Reich. He created many new departments within the SS organization, such as an intelligence department called the Security Service (SD), which he put under the authority of Reinhard Heydrich; and the Race and Resettlement Main Office, which was in charge of all racial purity issues. Himmler also took charge of the security of the Nazi Party headquarters and leaders.

Himmler transformed the SS into the most elite group within the Reich. In order to become an SS officer, a person had to prove his "racial purity" and that of his wife back to the eighteenth century, be of Aryan appearance; and had to pledge unconditional allegiance to Hitler. SS members wore uniforms that contributed to their dark aura of fearlessness: black uniform, black cap, death's head badge, death's head "ring of honor," and officer's dagger, which was engraved with the SS's motto: "Loyalty is My Honor."

In 1934 Himmler concentrated the power of the SS. He crushed the original SA leadership, taking the militia under SS command, and took control of the Gestapo (the Reich's secret political police) and all concentration camps in Germany. He put the camps under the authority of Theodore Eicke, the head of the SS Guard and death's head units. The Death's Head Units were the source of SS military units that later became known as the *Waffen-SS*.



Himmler also developed a strategy for bringing key Germans into the SS as "honorary leaders" and recruiting low-level police officers.

Over the next few years, Himmler instituted young officers' schools and special SS police units, known as *Einsatzgruppen*. In 1939 he created special SS courts, which legally allowed the SS to ignore established German law.

After the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, the SS grew significantly. SD units, *Einsatzgruppen*, and local SS offices carried out the Reich's anti-Jewish policies all over occupied Europe. The Reich Security Main Office (reichssicherheitshauptamt, RSHA) was established, and given the tasks of internal Reich security, hunting and killing suspected enemies of the state, and sending prisoners to concentration camps.

SS officers were in charge of the planning of the "Final Solution" - the extermination of European Jewry. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the *Einsatzgruppen* mobile killing units spearheaded the execution of hundreds of thousands of Jews. The RSHA's Jewish affairs expert, Adolf Eichmann, planned and supervised the deportation of Jews from their homes to ghettos, and then on to their deaths at concentration or extermination camps. SS officers were also directly responsible for the management of those camps, where millions of Jews were murdered by poison gas. During its existence, millions of soldiers and officers passed through SS ranks.

After the war, the SS was declared to be a criminal organization by the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. Members of all its sub-organizations, including the *Gestapo*, SD, Death's Head Units, *Waffen-SS*, and others were tried as war criminals. Some were sentenced to death or life imprisonment, but many were released.