



Gestapo

(acronym of *Geheime Staatspolizei*, meaning Secret State Police). The Third Reich's secret political police force, serving as Hitler's main instrument of torture and terror.

The *Gestapo* was established prior to the Nazi rise to power, as a secret intelligence agency within the Prussian police department. As Hitler rose to power in 1933, he appointed Hermann Goering Interior Minister of Prussia. Goering maintained authority over the Prussian political police, including the *Gestapo*. Within a month, the *Gestapo* had the power to impose "protective custody" on whomever it liked. Ultimately, this meant that if a person was arrested by the *Gestapo*, they would lose all civil rights and were no longer protected by the law. Legally, the *Gestapo* had free reign to do whatever it wanted to its victims.

In April 1933, the *Gestapo* became a separate entity from the rest of the Prussian police and by 1934, a "Jewish section" was established within the operation. In April of that year, SS chief Heinrich Himmler took the *Gestapo* and all the concentration camps in Germany under SS control. The *Gestapo* now had the power to send its victims to concentration camps and determine their fate there—to live or die, and by what method. The German criminal code still forbade murder and torture, and thus the *Gestapo*—which often performed murder and torture—began using methods, developed in Dachau, of faking a victim's cause of death.

In June 1936 Himmler reorganized Germany's entire police system in order to release it from restrictions of government red tape. He divided the police into 2 main sections, the Order Police (*Ordnungspolizei*, ORPO), and the Security Police (*Sicherheitspolizei*, SIPO). The ORPO was the "regular" police force, while the SIPO included the *Gestapo* and the Criminal Police (*Kriminalpolizei* KRIPPO). Under Himmler, the *Gestapo* grew considerably and took control of all of Germany's political police agencies.

Until September 1939, the structure of the *Gestapo* was as follows: Division I, under the direction of Werner Best - in charge of organization and financial



matters, including legal affairs. Division II, the *Gestapo's* most important section, was under the direct control of Reinhard Heydrich. He along with his deputy, Heinrich Mueller, was responsible for destroying the opponents of the Nazi regime. Division III, headed by Guenther Palten, was in charge of counterintelligence. Between November 1937 and October 1938 the *Gestapo* trained special units to terrorize and "Nazify" foreign countries. In late 1938, after Adolf Eichmann led the campaign to expel Jews from the newly annexed Austria, Mueller and Eichmann took responsibility for the emigration and deportation of Jews from all Nazi-occupied areas. After the *Kristallnacht* pogrom of November 1938, the *Gestapo* became Germany's major executor of its anti-Jewish policies.

When World War II began in September 1939, the Security Police (SIPO) was united with the Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst*, SD) to form the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Security Main Office, RSHA). In the RSHA, Mueller became the official head of the *Gestapo*, while Eichmann headed up the agency's Jewish section. Under their lead, the *Gestapo*; participated in the arrest of Jews, Gypsies, and members of "inferior races;" suppressed the territories occupied by Germany with brutal terror tactics, persecuted Jews and played a major role in the implementation of the "Final Solution."

The *Gestapo* used the "protective custody" method to deal with European Jewry. They betrayed members of the ghettos' *Judenraete* and took them hostage, created "language regulation" (*Sprachregelung*), a type of euphemistic jargon used to refer to their anti-Jewish policies, in order to conceal the true nature of those acts and supervised the liquidation of the ghettos. Eichmann's section of the *Gestapo* organized the deportation of Jews to concentration and extermination camps and had direct control over the Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. *Gestapo* officers also headed the Einsatzgruppen units who mass-murdered Jews in the Soviet Union.

After the war, most of the *Gestapo's* major players eluded capture and trial.