

D How powerful were the SS and Gestapo?

■ Learning trouble spot

What was the connection between the Gestapo and the SS?

This is a very complex issue that can cause confusion. They originated as distinct bodies. The Gestapo was a state body, the Prussian secret police. The SS was a party body, created in 1925 as Hitler's personal bodyguard. It shared with the Gestapo a police role of rooting out enemies of the state but had a wider role for developing the new Nazi racial community. Kershaw describes it as 'the ideological power house of the Third Reich and executive organ of the "Führer will" '.

In 1936 Himmler was made Chief of German Police, adding control of the Gestapo to that of the SS and thus reinforcing the overlap. Kershaw comments on this link that 'The most powerful agency of repression thus merged with the most dynamic ideological force in the Nazi Movement.' Thus both the Gestapo and the SS can be seen as powerful police forces, with the SS having additional roles. It is convenient simply to refer to the SS-Gestapo complex.

Traditional interpretations of the Third Reich see it as a totalitarian state, supported by terror. This view has now been challenged. Undoubtedly, the state possessed a massive repressive machine and it did ruthlessly suppress opponents, but you also need to consider the following points:

- There is evidence that most Germans supported the regime.
- Many Germans did not encounter repression and believed that which did occur was generally justified.
- Thousands of Germans assisted the Gestapo and other repressive agents in their work.
- Repression was somewhat random; some people were actually moved out of Auschwitz; some were acquitted in the courts.
- Some people did protest and escaped punishment.

It is still controversial to make some of these points. However, with more histories influenced by the *Alltagsgeschichte* approach (the study of everyday life) and the expansion of detailed local studies, there is a growing body of evidence to support these views. Hitler's regime can thus be seen as partly based on popular support and co-operation as well as on intrusive and arbitrary terror.

How was the police organised in Nazi Germany?

Until 1933 each state in Germany had its own police force. By 1936 they had been centralised under Himmler as Chief of Police.

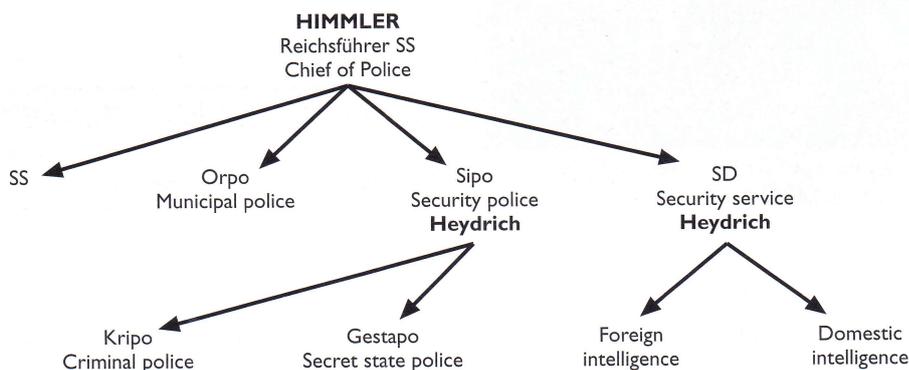
The Nazis developed a typically confusing variety of repressive agencies that overlapped and developed over time. Chart 11K clarifies the system. You may encounter references to any of these agencies, but the ones you need to understand are highlighted on this chart. The key points to grasp are:

- After the Night of the Long Knives, the SA was disarmed and restructured, and many members were purged. Its revolutionary power broken, it became a subservient body. However, it remained as an intimidatory force against potential opposition. It retained a visible presence on the streets, periodically beating up alleged opponents and NONCONFORMISTS.
- The SS developed into the main terror instrument of the regime. From an elite bodyguard it became a mass organisation, with a wide variety of roles.
- The Gestapo, originally the Prussian secret police, eventually covered all German states. In 1933 SS Leader Himmler was appointed as the head of the Gestapo, so it came under SS control. From 1936 it became the most important security agent of the state, able to decide for itself what the law was.
- The SD or Security Police was the internal security/intelligence service of the SS, headed by Heydrich; in some ways it was the elite of the elite. Its reports on public opinion in Nazi Germany have become a useful source for historians.
- The RHSA (Reich Main Security Department) was created in 1939 to try to draw together state and party security apparatus into one umbrella organisation.

■ 11K The police state: the Gestapo-SS complex

- Gestapo*: Geheime Staatspolizei
- Kripo: Kriminalpolizei
- Orpo: Ordnungspolizei ('order' police), including Schutzpolizei and the gendarmerie
- RHSA: Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Main Security Department)
- SA: Sturm-Abteilung
- SD*: Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service)
- Sipo: Sicherheitspolizei (Security Police)
- SS*: Schutzstaffel (defence echelon)

* Most significant agencies



FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 What roles were played under the Nazi regime by the SS and Gestapo?
- 2 Explain how Himmler and the SS became so powerful in the Third Reich.
- 3 What do recent historians' analyses of the Gestapo suggest about the nature of the Nazi state?
- 4 What evidence is there that the Nazi police forces were not alien institutions imposed upon the German people?



A 1941 Waffen-SS poster. The wording says 'Admission after 17th birthday'

How did the SS become so powerful?

SS – the two most sinister initials in the world. The blackshirted Schutzstaffel were originally Hitler's personal bodyguard. In 1929 there were only 280 members, but by the late 1930s it had become a vast organisation, a virtual state within a state, involved in most aspects of the Third Reich. In fact, the Third Reich has been called the 'SS State'. It was, alongside the Gestapo, the most powerful and feared of the organs of repression in Nazi Germany.

On Hitler's accession to power, the SS was authorised to act as auxiliary police. It used the Emergency Power Decree of February 1933 (which remained permanently in force) to take suspects into 'protective custody' and, after the weakening of the SA, the SS emerged as the chief police arm of the Nazi Party. Between 1933 and 1939 about 225,000 Germans were convicted and imprisoned for political crimes. By 1939 another 162,000 were in 'protective custody' without trial. It directed its energies against all enemies of Nazism, whether political or racial, later taking over responsibility for concentration and extermination camps. It also established a vast economic empire.

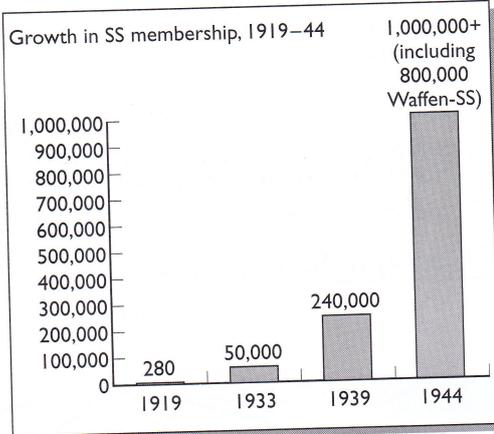
By 1939 there were 240,000 members organised into divisions. The main branch was the Waffen-SS, primarily a military organisation. The Death's Head Formations (SS-Totenkopfverbände) administered the concentration camps and formed Panzer units. At the Nuremberg trials, the SS was declared to be a criminal organisation.

SOURCE 11.15 The American historian Sax has powerfully summarised how the role of the SS grew in *Inside Hitler's Germany*, 1992, p. 329

The SS was not merely a police, surveillance, and paramilitary organisation. Its main objective, from which it derived its 'legitimate' use of force, was to create the racially pure Volksgemeinschaft . . . The SS evolved from a police organisation, operating within an administrative whole to become an independent organisation . . . [It] became the active part of the political community, making all decisions of any political importance . . .

Yet the SS did not simply safeguard the new political order; in Himmler's words, it was also charged with 'creating' the new order. Police power became creative power within the Third Reich, its protective role enlarged so as to allow it to make policy beyond the limits of legitimate state activity and to fuse elements of the new racial community together . . . The police could do anything in the name of Volksgemeinschaft.

11L The rise of Himmler and the growth of the SS



July SS independent of SA
June Night of the Long Knives: SS weakens rival SA
April Himmler Inspector of Gestapo

Himmler Head of Bavarian police then other police forces

Himmler head of SS

SS created; part of SA

1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
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Heinrich Himmler (1900–45): the exterminator

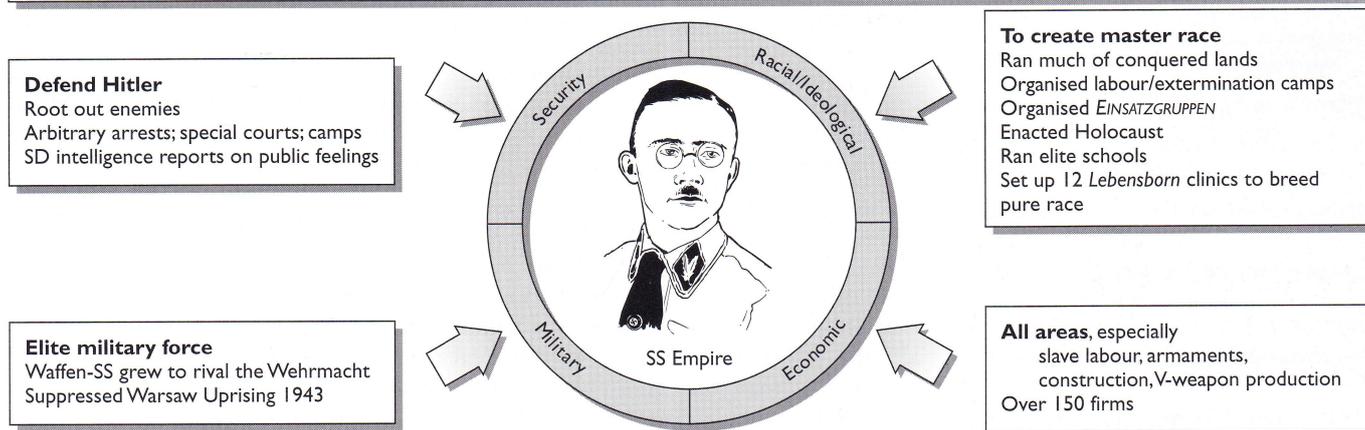
One of the most notorious Nazis, Himmler looked more like a bank clerk than a ruthless dictator. His evolution from conscientious, popular schoolboy into heartless exterminator remains something of a mystery. Noakes describes him as 'a bizarre combination of naive crank, pedantic [fussily precise] schoolmaster, and coldly efficient bureaucrat, a master at accumulating power in the administrative jungle of the Third Reich'.

The son of a teacher, Himmler joined the officer cadets in 1918 but did not see any war action. Bitter at Germany's defeat, he joined a nationalist paramilitary group and participated in the Munich Putsch. He failed as a poultry farmer, and by 1925 was becoming more active in the NSDAP. Himmler's real chance came when he became head of the SS in 1929. In 1933 he took over the Bavarian police and within three years had unified all the police and security forces under his control as Chief of German Police and Reich Leader SS. This enormous power was further extended when in 1939 he was made Reich Commissioner for Strengthening German Nationhood, with major powers over conquered territory in the east. There he was able to try to enact his aim of purifying the German nation by first removing alien elements, and then turning the SS by selective breeding into a racial elite.

Himmler ran the concentration camps. He also expanded the Waffen-SS to rival the Wehrmacht. In 1943 he became Minister of the Interior, and in July 1944 his power peaked when he was appointed Commander of the Reserve Army. In April 1945, hoping to preserve some form of Nazi state, on his own initiative he tried to negotiate an armistice with the West, and was dismissed by Hitler for treachery. Captured by the Allies, he committed suicide on 23 May 1945.

Himmler presided over the vast repressive machinery of the Third Reich, and had overall control of the Holocaust. His character reflected the contradictions of Nazism. A coldly efficient administrator, he suffered psychosomatic (caused by mental stress) illnesses, and nearly fainted when once observing mass executions. He firmly believed in the occult, in homeopathic medicine and in a romanticised view of history, with the need for pure Germans to 'return to the soil'. Yet he organised inhuman scientific experiments and 'modernised' murder. He inculcated strict discipline and a perverted idealism into the SS which made them see committing mass murder as a form of sacrifice for the cause of a pure German master race.

THE SS STATE: ROLE OF SS BY 1940s



July Increased power after Bomb Plot. Supreme Commander of People's Army

Himmler Interior Minister

Himmler Reich Commissioner for Strengthening of German Nationhood

November Waffen-SS created

Himmler head of German Police and Reichsführer SS

He finally wins two-year struggle with Goering and Frick for full control of security forces

April Himmler secretly opens negotiations with Allies

May Himmler flees but captured; takes cyanide

1936	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945
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ACTIVITY

- 1 What light do Sources 11.16–21 shed on the relationship between Germans and the Third Reich?
- 2 What can be deduced from Source 11.17 about the nature of repression in the Third Reich?
- 3 Laurence Rees in his book *The Nazis. A Warning from History*, based on the TV series, writes: 'I still have the image in my mind of Frau Kraus as we left her, after the interview ... a profoundly unexceptional figure and thus a deeply troubling one.' Explain his comment.

SOURCE 11.17 Origins of denunciations of people for committing race crimes against the German Race in Würzburg, 1933–45

Source	%
Reports from the general population	57
Statements extracted by interrogation	15
Information from NSDAP and other control organisations	14
Observation by Gestapo agents	0.5
Others (unspecified)	13.5

SOURCE 11.19 The Gestapo

Interviewed in the 1990s for the BBC programme The Nazis, an old man from Würzburg commented: 'They [the Gestapo] were everywhere.'

Records show that there were 28 Gestapo officials covering the million people living in Würzburg and surrounding Lower Franconia.



The Gestapo badge

Was the Gestapo the all-powerful agent of a terror state?

SOURCE 11.16 The installation of a new police chief in Essen in 1937



SOURCE 11.18 Jacques Delarue, *Nazism and German Society*, ed. D. Crew, 1994, p. 169

Never before, in no other land and at no other time, had an organisation attained such a comprehensive penetration [of society], possessed such power, and reached such a degree of 'completeness' in its ability to arouse terror and horror, as well as in its actual effectiveness.

Source 11.18 is the classic description of the power of that dread organisation, the Gestapo. But were the German people really held down in this way? The Gestapo itself fostered its image as an all-powerful body that brought dread to the enemies of the regime. Such a belief in itself helped the Gestapo to intimidate the population. This view was also propounded (put forward) after the war by many Germans, who could thus excuse their passivity and broad acceptance of the regime by their fear of the all-powerful Gestapo.

However, some historians now argue that this image of the Gestapo is a myth, and that the reality of repression in Nazi Germany was far more complex and, in a way, more disturbing. The might of the Gestapo was in fact much weaker and its power rested on popular consent more than on terror. This change of view has come about from studying the actual operation of the Gestapo on the ground in certain areas, rather than examining the impressive-looking directives of the Gestapo HQ and the reports of the Social Democratic Party in exile (SOPADE) which stress a potentially rebellious working class held down by Gestapo spies and terror.

Several major weaknesses have been seen in the Gestapo as a repressive body. Firstly, it lacked the personnel effectively to enact central directives. Major areas such as Frankfurt, Hanover and Bremen had under 50 officers each. Düsseldorf, covering the west Ruhr industrial area with a population of 4 million, had 281 agents in 1937. At its peak the Gestapo had only 30,000 officers for the whole country. Equally importantly, most Gestapo officers were recruited from existing police forces, with few SS members. In 1939 only 3,000 of 20,000 were in the SS. Furthermore, most of these were office workers not field agents. Gestapo officials were increasingly bogged down in paperwork in a highly bureaucratic system. Its activities were far more directed at ordinary Germans than high status ones, even though Hitler realised many of the latter were not committed to the regime.

However, this apparent weakness of the Gestapo must not be overplayed. The image of power, however unjustified, served to intimidate potential opposition. Even more importantly, its own meagre resources were greatly enhanced by

SOURCE 11.20 Record of a denunciation by Maria Kraus of her neighbour Ilse Totzke in July 1940

Ilse Totzke is a resident next door to us in a garden cottage. I noticed the above-named because she is of Jewish appearance . . . I should like to mention that Miss Totzke never responds to the German greeting [Heil Hitler]. I gathered from what she was saying that her attitude was anti-German. On the contrary she always favoured France and the Jews. Among other things, she told me the German Army was not as well equipped as the French . . . Now and then a woman of about 36 years old comes and she is of Jewish appearance . . . To my mind, Miss Totzke is behaving suspiciously. I thought she might be engaged in some kind of activity which is harmful to the German Reich.

SOURCE 11.21 Maria Kraus to Laurence Rees, the documentary filmmaker, who in the 1990s showed her the above denunciation with her signature

I do not know. My signature is correct. But where it comes from I do not know . . . I was talking to a friend of mine and she said 'Good God! To think that they rake it all up again fifty years later' . . . I mean I did not kill anyone. I did not murder anyone.

co-operation from the public. Local studies have revealed that over half, and in some cases over 80 per cent, of investigations stemmed from voluntary denunciations. This could suggest strong commitment to Nazism by the German people but Professor Gellately (in *Gestapo and German Society*, 1990) has shown convincingly that most denunciations were inspired by personal rather than political factors. Denunciation to the Gestapo could be a way of getting rid of an unwanted husband or an unpleasant neighbour or gaining the resources of a Jew. Hate, greed and spite were more the motive than Nazi faith.

The flood of denunciations contributed to a radicalisation of the Gestapo's actions. Increasingly, the Gestapo could not investigate cases properly, so it resorted to arbitrary arrest, preventative custody and torture. Gestapo operations became more random, dependent upon the decisions and priorities of individual officers. Ironically, this created greater opportunities for opposition and non-conformist behaviour.

Thus the Gestapo was essentially a reactive institution, dependent upon the willing co-operation of the Germans. In fact, the authorities became increasingly concerned about denunciations for personal motives. Overwhelmed by a sea of accusations, they tried to reduce their flow. In an ironic twist, Himmler threatened makers of malicious denunciations with being sent to concentration camps! As Mallman and Paul have written (in 'Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent?' in *Nazism and German Society 1933-45*, ed. D. Crew, 1994): 'The Nazi regime was quite definitely not in the position to engage in comprehensive surveillance or perfect repression. Although the Nazi regime's aspirations were totalitarian, the reality was not.'

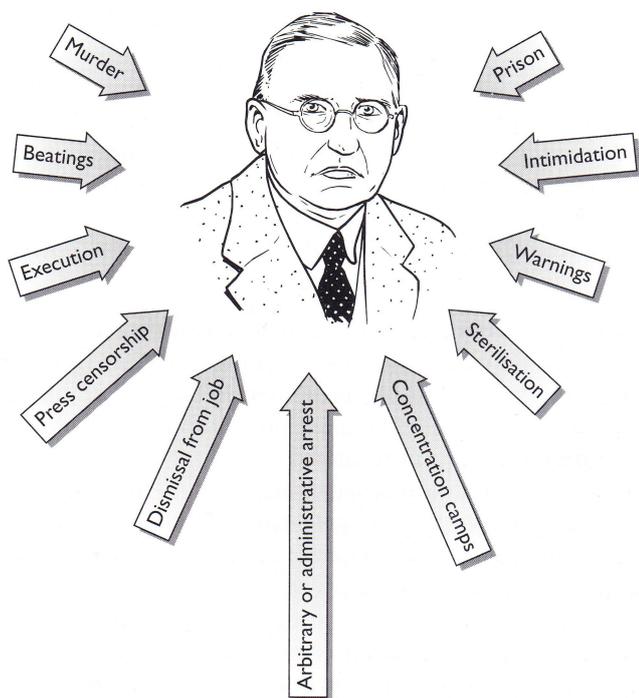
Although the Gestapo was not as all-powerful as is often proclaimed, and evidence suggests considerable support for the regime, the brutality of the Third Reich must not be underestimated. Basic individual freedoms were removed in 1933. Thousands of Germans were rounded up into concentration camps, and those the Nazis viewed as outsiders to their new society were imprisoned, sterilised and eventually murdered. Courts were increasingly expected to come to judgements in line with the wishes of 'true Germans' and the Führer. There was no authority that could protect individuals from the secret police.

TALKING POINT

Can informing on your neighbours ever be justified?

11M Forms of repression

- Instruments of repression**
- Gestapo
 - SS-SD
 - Other police
 - SA
 - NSDAP
 - Informers



- Extent of repression**
- 1942 30,000 Gestapo officers
 - 1939 50,000 SD officers
 - By July 1933 over 26,000 political prisoners
 - 1933-45 800,000 detained for resistance
 - 1933-9 Courts sentenced 225,000 people to a total of 600,000 years' imprisonment for political offences
 - April 1939 Gestapo claimed that 162,734 people in 'protective custody'
 - 1933-45 32,000 'legally' executed
 - 1933 onwards Series of concentration camps developed into a vast empire, with labour and extermination camps