



ARTYKUŁ

Gestapo. The Third Reich's political police

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How is it possible that the Secret State Police (Geheime Staatspolizei – Gestapo), despite a relatively low number of officers (it reached its peak number of 31 thousand officers in 1944), managed to efficiently protect the Third Reich's totalitarian regime in the occupied territories?

Gestapo originated from the political police of Prussia and other German states. During the times of the Weimar Republic, the political police was a very small service. It engaged in invigilation and suppression of extremist political movements whose activities were aimed against the legal authorities: the radical left – communists, and the radical right including the NSDAP (Nationalist Socialist German Workers' Party).

Against the Reich's enemies

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Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS

(photo: [dw.com](https://www.dw.com))

From that moment on, the political police consistently repressed all political opponents of the NSDAP, especially all leftist parties, organisations and trade unions, but also all other political parties (centre and right-wing) which opposed the NSDAP.



Reinhard Heydrich, head of the

SD (photo: [dw.com](https://www.dw.com))

The list of people in Gestapo's sights; however, did not stop there. It also included the Bible Students, freemasons, people playing international radio broadcasts or in any way questioning the state and its highest authorities. The Gestapo was also responsible for neutralising foreign intelligence in Germany.

Moreover, the Gestapo played a crucial role in the persecution of Jews, who were initially forced to emigrate,

deported to concentration camps, and harassed in other ways.

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Many Jews without German citizenship were i.e. forced to leave in the large deportation operation of 1938, when they were pushed beyond the Polish border. After the war began, Jews were taken east to the General Government, to ghettos and labour camps, and then to death camps.

The Gestapo's role, both in the Third Reich and in the occupied territories, was to effectively exclude Jews (and later Slavic peoples as well) from the German national community, especially when it came to their social interactions. This was done i.e. through drastic punishments for "bringing shame" to the Aryan race, meaning illegal sexual relationships. After the war broke out, Poles living or temporarily staying in the Reich were also met with massive repressions. Polish forced labourers were exposed to particular terror, since even the slightest "infractions" could cost them a deportation to concentration camps or even death.

Expensive expansion after the *Machtübernahme*

The political police received special competencies shortly after the national socialists came to power (January 30, 1933). The Reichstag's fire, which the NSDAP pinned on the communists, was used as a pretext for introducing a state of emergency (which remained in place until 1945). As a consequence, Gestapo got special rights, which were later additionally expanded. The raising of competencies was accompanied by a systematic expansion of the staff, too.

Such substantial growth of the number of Gestapo officers during the Third Reich's expansion meant that the service got less and less professional in its approach — its officers became less and less qualified for the job.

In January, 1937, the Gestapo only counted 1700 officers in the entire Third Reich, but their numbers grew every month. Three months later (in March, 1937), it had around 6500 men. That's still not many — one Gestapo officer for every 10,000 German citizens. While the political police continued to grow after the war broke out, the occupied territories and the number of people to control were also growing. In September, 1941, the Gestapo had 15,000 people at its disposal. But the officer count in the Third Reich's political police peaked in January, 1944, when it reached 31,000.

Such substantial growth of the number of Gestapo officers during the Third Reich's expansion meant that the service got less and less professional in its approach — its officers became less and less qualified for the job. How is it possible that such a small organisation kept not only Germany, but also all of its occupied territories in check?



Reichstag fire

Centre for cooperation between services and informers

The myth of all-powerful and all-knowing Gestapo has been debunked by historians. The political police wasn't operating in a vacuum and could count on the cooperation with other services, institutions, organisations and, first and foremost, the society. According to the Gestapo act from February, 1936, all police services (Kripo — criminal police, and Orpo — public order police) were obligated to assist the political police: they could be ordered to help establish someone's place of residence, as well as to arrest, interrogate or observe a suspect. They also had the duty to hand over any case of political character to Gestapo officers, as only they had the competence to deal with such matters. Public offices, party and paramilitary organisations (NSDAP and its branches, SS and SA) also had to hand over their political cases to the Gestapo.

Even though the so-called “rough interrogations” (verschärfte Vernehmung) initially required argumentation and acquiring a special permission from the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin, in practice, especially in the occupied territories, including the Polish lands, these methods were rather common.

Kripo played a key role in repressions against the Roma, the “anti-socials” (that's the word used in the Third Reich to describe those who avoided work and had no permanent jobs, criminals and prostitutes) and the homosexuals. Orpo (especially its paramilitary and well-armed police battalions), on the other hand, was used for conducting extensive anti-partisan and anti-Semitic operations in the Third Reich's occupied territories. On Gestapo's orders, Orpo conducted mass arrests, escorted prisoner transports to concentration camps and carried out executions.

The society's role is also not without its importance. The latest research into the Gestapo has revealed ways with which the Third Reich's citizens (also in the occupied territories) tried to use the political police to further their own agendas. Telling on others was one of the main pillars of Gestapo's activities. The total scope of informing in the society is difficult to estimate, but examples of some of the documents from several Gestapo facilities in the Third Reich, examined by historians, show that as much as several dozen percent of cases were opened based on civilian reports.

Secret collaborators or confidants

While most of the collaborators were voluntary and unpaid informers who reported to the Gestapo on a one-time basis, the title of permanent collaborators went to confidants who i.e. infiltrated secret political organisations. They differed from regular informers because they got paid for their information. However, their cooperation with the Gestapo was not always voluntary. Confidants were often recruited from among the people arrested by the Gestapo. Their release from prison or a camp was conditional on a commitment to permanent cooperation (this does not mean, however, that every person arrested or deported to a camp, and then released, was necessarily a confidant). Both denunciators and confidants often fed the Gestapo false information, consciously or inadvertently misleading the political police. In such cases, the confidant or denunciator (unless they were anonymous) became the subject of the Gestapo's interest themselves — purposefully providing false information could lead to the deportation to a concentration camp. The blowing of cover could also be the reason behind terminating the cooperation with a confidant.



Stutthof Museum in Sztutowo

Tools and forms of violence

During the interrogations, the political police officers often used violence on their detainees. Even though the so-called “rough interrogations” (*verschärfte Vernehmung*) initially required argumentation and acquiring a special permission from the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin, in practice, especially in the occupied territories, including the Polish lands, these methods were rather common, especially towards Jews and Slavs. Ethnic Germans could count on a more gentle approach.

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protective arrest (*Schutzhaft*) was the Gestapo's most powerful tool, which was widely used for political repression and preventive neutralising of political opponents, as well as blind repression of certain communities.

The information gathered by the Gestapo was put in archives (i.e. personal or organisation files etc.), which then made it easier to find connections between the suspects accused of acting against the Reich. In contrast to the police of democratic nations, where the courts are typically independent from the executive branch, the Gestapo not only had the competence to temporarily arrest a suspect (i.e. for the duration of the investigation), it also could send them to a concentration camp, meaning to deprive them of freedom without a court sentence and the need to prove guilt. It was possible to prolong the concentration camp incarceration indefinitely. The so-called protective arrest (*Schutzhaft*) was the Gestapo's most powerful tool, which was widely used for political repression and preventive neutralising of political opponents, as well as blind repression of certain communities. A good example of such tactics is the order of Himmler from July, 1935, to preventively raise the number of prisoners from communist communities by 1000 people. The heads of regional Gestapo stations who followed this order exceeded the plan by at least 50% — they arrested more than 1500 people (800 of them were sent to KL Sachsenhausen, 700 to KL Dachau). Similar methods were used to nip the resistance in the occupied territories in the bud, including in Poland, by repressing the communities deemed hostile to the Reich and the Germans, as well as those which were a good recruiting ground for the resistance.

Operational groups of the secret state police

The outbreak of the war caused the Gestapo to rapidly turn more radical, when it came to its methods. The invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, became a real turning point, because it was the first time that operational groups (whose commanders and some personnel were part of the Gestapo) were used on a large scale. They not only conducted arrests and deportations to concentration camps, but also executions. Another escalation of violence was the invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941, when the operational groups were used on an even larger scale by performing mass executions. Without doubt, when it came to the occupied territories of the Third Reich, the Gestapo was much more brutal in Central-Eastern Europe and the Balkans than in the Reich itself or Western Europe. The subsequent radicalisation of the political police's activity came in the last months of the war. The unsuccessful assassination attempt against Hitler on July 20, 1944, on one side proved that the "enemy" was inside the Reich itself, and at the same time the noose tightening around Germany's neck led to even more ruthless terror against i.e. forced labourers and Allied POWs.

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