



Interior of the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin, 1934. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-16180 (CC-BY-SA 3.0 de)

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Gestapo headquarters in Berlin

HISTORICAL ERA

(1939-1945) II wojna światowa

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When the social nationalists came to power in January, 1933, the Gestapo was not created overnight. The establishing of the political police responsible for eradicating the enemies of the state was a long process.

During that process, Heinrich Himmler systematically strengthened his position and pushed through his plan of joining the police (especially the political police, but not only) with the paramilitary organisation of the

NSDAP, meaning the SS (*Schutzstaffeln*, Protection Squadron), which he led since 1929.

Zum Schutz von Volk und Staat

The most important event in the first few months after Hitler rose to power was the fire of the German parliament building at the end of February, 1933. While it is known that the Reichstag's fire was arson, there has been no definite proof that it was done by the communists, as the NSDAP leaders wanted everyone to believe. Nevertheless, the national socialists' propaganda blamed the fire on them, which gave Hitler's government an excuse to limit the citizens' constitutional rights and introduce a state of emergency (with the approval of the Reich's president, Hindenburg), known as the decree on *The protection of the state and nation from February 28, 1933 (Die Verordnung des Reichspräsidenten zum Schutz von Volk und Staat vom 28. Februar 1933)*. Interestingly, the decree was never abolished — it was in power until the end of the Third Reich in 1945. From that moment forward, the swift destruction of the elements of the state of law ensued. The very elements which stood on Hitler's way to fully grab power: independent media, independent courts and opposition parties. The aforementioned decree, among other things, abolished the privacy of correspondence and the freedom to gather, as well as enabled the detention of the Reich's citizens under "protective arrest" — without any court order.



Heinrich Himmler receives wishes from Adolf Hitler on his 43rd birthday; October, 1943. Photo: National Digital Archives

Gestapa and Gestapo

This final element became the most important tool of repression and terror of the Gestapo - the Secret State Police. Without the need to present a case to the court and wait for a sentence (which could turn out to be acquitting), the political police gained a very convenient method of indefinite incarceration in concentration camps, without the need to prove guilt. Even though the details of the procedure changed with time, the

Gestapo was using this instrument all the way until 1945, both in the Third Reich and in the occupied territories.

Before the Gestapo was founded, however, the police competencies lied with the governments of the Reich's individual states. None of them had a separate (autonomous) political police — they were usually part of the regular police force. Naturally, it was in the interests of the national socialists to not only take control over the various police forces, but also their political departments, which were to be additionally expanded and made autonomous. Thus, after Hitler rose to power in the Reich, the managing positions in the police, especially the political departments, were gradually taken over by trusted men.

The Gestapo welcomed into its ranks these police officers who sympathised with the NSDAP and were members of the party. It also accepted members of the SS and SD (Sicherheitsdienst, Security Services — headed by Heydrich). In time, they began welcoming regular policemen (first and foremost members of the Gestapo) into the SS.

The SS paved the way in this regard. In March, 1933, Himmler became Munich's police president, and then he gave the position of the political department head to his close colleague — Reinhard Heydrich. While both of them had no competencies to run the police, they had something which was far more important to the NSDAP: they had the correct political views.

The situation in Prussia was quite different than in Bavaria. There, in April, 1934, prime minister Hermann Göring established the Office of Secret State Police in Berlin — known under the abbreviation *Gestapa* (*Geheimes Staatspolizeiamt*), which was subordinate to him. Himmler and Heydrich systematically took control over the police in other lands of the Reich, and in 1934 they also secured the highest positions in the *Gestapa*, which were only symbolically led by Göring at this point.

The next stage of Himmler and Heydrich's actions was the creation of uniform structures of the Secret State Police (*Geheimes Staatspolizei*, *Gestapo*) in all of the Reich's territories, its expansion and giving it more and more privileges.

In 1936, when Himmler once again expanded his competencies and became the head of the German police, the Gestapo was joined with Kripo and made up the Security Police (*Sicherheitspolizei*). The Gestapo welcomed into its ranks these police officers who sympathised with the NSDAP and were members of the party. It also accepted members of the SS and SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*, Security Services — headed by Heydrich). In time, they began welcoming regular policemen (first and foremost members of the Gestapo) into the SS, which allowed them to gain the “correct” worldview. This way, Himmler wanted to create the “state protection corps” whose members would answer to him, both police officers and members of the SS.



Exhibition German crimes in Poland 1939-1945 in Warsaw's National Museum; June, 1946. This part of the exhibition was devoted to the Reich Security Main Office (in German: Reichssicherheitshauptamt, RSHA). Photo: archives of the Institute of National Remembrance

Reichssicherheitshauptamt

Another important step in consolidating power over the police in the hands of Himmler was the establishing of the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, RSHA) at the end of September, 1939. It joined the Gestapo, Kripo and Security Service under the umbrella of a single institution with even wider competencies. It is not by accident that this occurred after the war broke out. The invasion of Poland launched the first wave of mass crimes beyond the Reich's borders, which were conducted by members of operational groups consisting of the Gestapo, Kripo, SS and Public Order Police. The joining of Polish lands to the Reich and the need to closely monitor the situation in the Reich itself meant that all services had to cooperate tightly with one another. The RSHA was tasked with controlling the social moods, both in the Reich and the occupied territories, counterintelligence (fighting against foreign intelligence in cooperation with Abwehr —

the military intelligence), eradicating political and racial opponents (this was naturally led by the Gestapo, which comprised Office no. 4 in the RSHA), fighting regular crime and relocating the population (including the forceful deportations of Jews and Poles). This central office of terror was led once again by Himmler's trusted man — Heydrich. After he died (he was assassinated in Prague, in the spring of 1942), Himmler took it upon himself to coordinate the work of the RSHA, and in 1943 he appointed Ernst Kaltenbrunner as its head. He served in this capacity until the Third Reich's surrender.

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