

The Pursuit of the SS in the Extermination of the Jews

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

With the outbreak of the war in Europe and the march of Nazi armies over the Continent, the Schutzstaffel (SS) participated in "solving" the Jewish question in all the countries of Europe. The solution was nothing short of extermination. The SS carried out the policies and beliefs of Hitler, the extermination of the Jews. The selection criteria of SS membership and their training largely explain their motivation and commitment to the systematic extermination of the Jews. The fundamental principle of selection and membership in the SS was what Heinrich Himmler, their leader, called that of "Blood and Elite."

The SS were indoctrinated into the beliefs of Adolph Hitler. Hitler developed his anti-Semitism by placing his desire to remove the Jews in the context of a wider theory of the struggle between races for living space. In Hitler's view, the Jews, lacking a state of their own, were parasites trying to destroy those states, which had been established by superior races. He referred to the Jews as a plague, an epidemic, germ carriers, a harmful bacillus, and a cancer and as maggots. In his writings and speeches, Hitler blamed the situation of Germany at the end of the First World War on an international Jewish conspiracy. His basic wish throughout had been by one means or another to remove the Jews from German soil. The SS were developed to be the master race who would occupy German soil.

The SS was to be the living embodiment of the Nazi doctrine of the superiority of Nordic blood, and of the Nazi conception of a master race. SS candidates were thoroughly examined and checked. Only 10 to 15 out of 100 men were selected for membership. They were asked for the political reputation record of their parents, brothers and sisters, the record of their ancestry as far back as 1750 and their physical examination and any records from the Hitler Youth. Further, they were asked for a record of hereditary health showing that no hereditary disease exists in their parents and in their family. Last, but perhaps most important, is a certification of the race commission. This examining commission was composed of SS leaders, anthropologists, and physicians. The very process of selection and acceptance gave the new member a sense of superiority.

The new formations of young SS captivated public imagination. Clad in smart black uniforms the SS attracted more and more young men. Many young people, looking for work and a sense of belonging, joined. They were taught why they were fighting, what kind of Germany was being resurrected before their very eyes. They were shown how Germany was being morally united through class reconciliation and physically united through the return of the lost German homelands. They were made aware of their kinship with all the other Germans living in foreign lands, in Poland, Russia, the Sudetenland, and other parts of Europe. They were taught that Jews were sub-human, to blame for most of Germany's ills and a scourge on society. These were the principles, which were publicly reiterated, repeatedly, so that the newest recruit was thoroughly steeped in them. They totally believed in Hitler's views. Indoctrination of the organization in principles of racial hatred was not enough. The members had to be ready and willing tools, prepared to carry out tasks of any nature, however distasteful, illegal or inhuman. Absolute obedience was the necessary second foundation stone of the SS. Every SS man was prepared, therefore, to carry out blindly every order which is issued by the Fuehrer or which is given by his superior, irrespective of the heaviest sacrifices involved." Their political indoctrination, training, and commitment to the Fuehrer made them willing participants in the extermination of Jews.

From its founding, the groups of the SS were involved in the persecution of the Jews. They were involved with harassment, relocation to ghettos and labor camps, and murder of Jews based on the principles and views of Hitler. In March 1936, Heinrich Himmler was put in charge of Germany's concentration camps. He formed a special unit from the SS called SS-Totenkopfverbände (Death's Head Units) to operate the labor and death camps. Martin Gilbert, in his book *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War*, describes how Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union launched on June 21, 1941, marked a turning point for in German policy towards the Jews and for the SS. The SS leaders had prepared special killing squads, the Einsatzgruppen, which set about finding and organizing local collaborators in murder gangs. As the

war went on, deportations of Jews from all over Europe to death camps increased significantly. More concentration camps were built in order to kill more Jews. It is estimated that 6 million people, mostly Jews, were exterminated during the war.

Armed with ideological instruction, racial indoctrination, and a sense of absolute obedience to the Fuehrer, the SS were highly motivated to systematically exterminate the Jews. The SS rounded up and killed Jews, Bolsheviks, Gypsies, and others, believing they were performing their duties for the German people and for Adolf Hitler. Groups of the SS was involved with every stage of the operations. The men assigned to these tasks did it for reasons, which ranged from a feeling that all orders should be obeyed, a hatred of Jews that began centuries ago, to total agreement with Nazi philosophy of a Jew-free Europe and a Nazi master race.

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