

WaffenSS Background

...We pledge to you, Adolf Hitler, loyalty and bravery. We swear obedience to you and the superiors appointed by you, even unto death, as God is our witness."

- SS Oath

WHAT WAS THE WAFFEN-SS?

The Waffen-SS - which translates as "Weapon-SS" or "Armed-SS", was the military wing of the Schutzstaffel. It's conceptual origins lay in the "politische bereitschaften" - or "political ready reserves" in the early days of the Nazi movement. These reserves were the fanatical Nazi's who would protect the party leaders and ruthlessly attack all enemies during the political chaos of Germany in the 1920's & '30's. It is important to distinguish that serving in the Waffen-SS (a military organization with foreign troops and conscription) wasn't the same as membership in the SS (a Nazi political organization and executive arm for racial Germans), although the 2 states commingled. The Waffen-SS was expected to be a military organization absolutely and perfectly obedient and loyal to its master, Adolf Hitler.

The origins of the Waffen-SS spring from three separate paramilitary units of the SS formed in the early to mid 1930's.

THE LEIBSTANDARTE SS "ADOLF HITLER"

The Leibstandarte was Hitler's bodyguard unit, his personal Praetorian Guard. They were troops handpicked as the perfect specimens of the Aryan ideal and the most faithful and committed to the Nazi cause.

THE SS-VERFÜGUNGSTRUPPEN (SSVT)

The SSVT or "special purpose" troops were several SS paramilitary battalions combined between 1935 and 1938. [Regiments Germania, Der Führer & Deutschland although some historians use the term "SSVT" to include the Leibstandarte as well.] The purpose of SSVT was never entirely clear, since national defense was already in the capable hands of the Wehrmacht, or German Armed Forces. Himmler and Hitler never came up with a satisfactory answer, usually referring to the SSVT as a Weltanschauliche Truppe or "political soldiers" that served Hitler directly as "the spearhead of National Socialism." Essentially, the purpose of the SSVT was whatever Hitler and Himmler wanted; its existence became Himmler's justification for the continued growth of the SS.

The SSVT is created to go into the field, to go to war. If I designate the total task of the SS together with the police...as guaranteeing the internal security of Germany, then it is only possible to perform this task if a part of this SS, this Führerkorps, stands at the front and bleeds.

- RFSS Himmler, November 1938

Like the Leibstandarte, troops of the SSVT were handpicked paragons of the Nazi Aryan ideal and they took their role very seriously. As a racial, ideological and military elite, Himmler

WaffenSS Background

expected great things from the SSVT - and they were more than willing to satisfy his expectations.

THE TOTENKOPF STANDARTEN (SSTK)

When Hitler came into power in 1933, his Storm Troopers wasted no time in setting up concentration camps - places to detain the political and ideological enemies of the Nazis. These "wild" camps gained a reputation for violence and cruelty but were too ad hoc for Nazi tastes. With the downfall of the SA in 1934, the SS took over the management of these concentration camps, and Himmler set to create special Totenkopf (Death's Head) guard units to oversee the camps in a more systematic, if no less brutal, fashion. With the outbreak of the war, the Totenkopf standarten replaced guard duty for front line duty.

PURPOSE OF THE WAFFEN-SS

"...The Gods of the new Germany will be the SS"
- RFSS Himmler, 1931

When Hitler began WWII, RFSS Himmler wanted to ensure that the SS - guardians of the internal security of the Reich - got their share of the military glory. In early 1940, he combined the above three units into the "Waffen-SS." By August, 1940, Hitler & Himmler further defined the purpose of the Waffen-SS:

The Waffen-SS will help execute the authority of the state within the borders of the Greater German Empire.

The Waffen-SS will be a paragon of both Aryan racial purity and of National Socialist philosophy.

The Waffen-SS will be organized along military lines, function as a "state police," but be prepared for any & all "special tasks" that may be required.

The Waffen-SS will earn its authority through front line combat.

The Waffen-SS will concentrate on internal enemies of the state; the Wehrmacht will concentrate on the external enemies.

The Waffen-SS will be an exclusive formation, limited in size.

The Waffen-SS were a political-ideological elite military formation akin to the Teutonic Knights; brave soldiers that represented both the Nazi ideal and were the future aristocratic spine of the German Empire. However, WWII created massive changes in the structure and purpose of the Waffen-SS.

THE GROWTH AND DECLINE OF THE WAFFEN-SS

During the course of WWII, the Waffen-SS grew from an elite force of 4 divisions of ethnic Germans to a polyglot force of 900,000 men in 41 divisions and other units, with over half of its troops foreign volunteers or conscripts. It gained a fearsome combat reputation and committed many war crimes.

Waffen-SS strength even at its peak represented only 10% of the German Army complement - although SS panzer units made up 25% of all German Armed forces Panzer strength!

WaffenSS Background

However, SS fighting capability did not increase proportionally to its growth in size. By 1944, the Waffen-SS order of battle was inflated with "divisions" with the strength of battalions and a plethora of mixed bag foreign conscripts.

Although the Waffen-SS is most famous for its battlefield exploits during the latter part of the war, and is often thought of as a military formation exclusively, it is important to recognize that the Waffen-SS never entirely disassociated itself from internal security duties for the Reich, either in practice or purpose:

Hitler's mind was on the shape of the Greater German Reich to come - and above all how Germany was to police the more turbulent and dissident peoples that would come within the Reich's frontiers. This, he declared to Colonel Schmudt on August 6 (1940), must be the peacetime task of the Waffen-SS. There would never be any need to call on the regular forces to take up arms against their fellow countrymen, These police troopers, noted Schmudt, must be unconditional champions of the Nazi ideology - a body of men who would never make common cause with the seditious proletariat; to increase their authority in the eyes of the people, the Waffen-SS must prove their value in the coming battlefields, they must be an elite.

* David Irving Hitler's War pg. 311

And this excerpt from a June 1943 training manual for the 9th SS-Panzer Division Hohenstaufen:

"...The necessity for an unflinching force at the disposal of the leadership of the Reich in any situation, even when this implies maintenance of order at home by the use of all methods."

But even early on, the sinister reputation of the SS was influencing the German public's perception of the Waffen-SS. An SD report, written March of 1942, reads:

"...it may be stated that by its achievements the Waffen-SS has won its place in the popular esteem. Particular reference is made to the good comradeship and excellent relations between officers, NCO's and men...voices are to be heard saying that the Waffen-SS possesses no trained officers and that therefore SS men are 'recklessly sacrificed'...Critical voices are to be heard saying that the Waffen-SS is a sort of military watchdog. SS men are trained to be brutal and ruthless, apparently so that they can be used against other German formations if necessary...The Waffen-SS is a most ruthless force."*

* Heinz Höhne The Order of the Death's Head pg. 436

GROWTH OF THE WAFFEN-SS: GERMAN VOLUNTEERS

German volunteers were at first the most plentiful, although they were subject to the most rigorous selection process. The SS actively tried to recruit Hitler Youth and RAD servicemen before they could be snatched up by the Wehrmacht.

GROWTH OF THE WAFFEN-SS: FOREIGN VOLUNTEERS

WaffenSS Background

Western Europeans

The Waffen-SS recruited many foreign volunteers into its ranks. After the May 1940 "Victory in the West," the SS began an active program to gain Western European recruits for several new Waffen-SS volunteer legions. This effort intensified after June 1941, as the SS exhorted volunteers to join the "anti-bolshevik" campaign in the Soviet Union.

Why were the Waffen-SS were so interested in Western European volunteers? This effort was in response to Hitler and the German army setting strict quotas on the number of German youth the SS could recruit.

Over 125,000 West Europeans volunteered for the SS. Although their experiences really need to be researched on a unit by unit basis, here are some common elements regarding their service:

They took slightly different oath than Germans

They were often (at least at first) treated as 2nd class citizens by German SS officers

Language differences were an issue

They were exposed to less Nazi indoctrination, or the Nazi propaganda was tailored to their nationality

The were often partly motivated by their own political or nationalistic agendas

They were often the most disciplined and fanatic SS warriors

As the war progressed, they realized that their countrymen began to look on them as traitors and collaborators

At first Nazi racial polices determined acceptance level of volunteers. For example: Flemish volunteers were considered "aryan" enough to volunteer for the Waffen-SS, whereas Walloons were not; which is why the Walloon volunteer legion was assimilated at first by the German Army, not the SS. These racial standards were increasingly ignored as the German war fortunes declined and the SS was in desparate need of manpower.

Volksdeutsche

The Waffen-SS also recruited great numbers of Volksdeutsche from central and eastern European countries as well. Despite their ethinc background, these troops often suffered greater language and motivation difficulties that the western legions. Volksdeutsche seemed to have a bit of a mixed reputation among the Reichdeutsche Waffen-SS - in some instances they were considered good soliders, yet in others the volksdeutsche were considered cowardly and untrustworthy.

Eastern/Central European/Balkan volunteers

As the German fortunes steadily declined, the Waffen-SS took to recruiting or conscripting increasing numbers of foreign recruits that were by no stretch of the imagination bore any relation to the Nazi "ideal." These troops, although numerous, were perhaps the least motivated of all.

Country/Ethnicity Estimated # of volunteers Waffen-SS Units
Albanian 3,000 21st SS Division

WaffenSS Background

Belgian: Flemish 23,000 5th SS Div., 27th SS Div.

Belgium: Walloon 15,000 5th SS Div., 28th SS Div.

British Commonwealth (English) 50 British Freikorps

Bulgaria 200-1,000? Bulgarisches Reg.

**Croatia (includes Bosnian Muslims) 30,000 7th SS Div., 13th SS Div.
23rd SS Div.**

Denmark 10,000 Freikorps Danemark, 11th SS Div.

Indian 3,500 Volunteer Leg.

Estonia 20,000 20th SS Div.

Finland 1,000 Volunteer Bat.

**Hungarians 15,000? 25th SS Div., 26th SS Div.
33rd SS Div.**

Latvia 39,000 15th SS Div., 19th SS Div.

Netherlands 50,000 23rd SS Div., 34th SS Div.

**Norway 6,000 5th SS Div., 6th SS Div.
11th SS Div., Volunteer Leg.**

France 8,000 33rd SS Div.

Italy 20,000 29th SS (Italian)

Poland/Ukraine 25,000 14th SS Div.

Russian (Belorussia) 12,000 29th SS Div., 30th SS Div.

Russian (Cossak) 40,000 XV SS Kosaken-Kavallerie-Korps

Russian (Turkic) 8,000 Ostürkische SS , Tatarische SS

Rumania 3,000? Waffen-Grenadierregiment der SS (rumänisches 1)

Serbia 15,000 Volunteer Corps

Spain 200 - 1,000? Spanische-Freiwilligen-Kompanie der SS 101

Sweden, Switzerland & Luxemburg 3,000? 5th SS Div., 11th SS Div.

WaffenSS Background

BRIEF WAFFEN-SS TIMELINE

1933: SS-Stabswache Berlin formed, becomes Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler

1934: SS takes over concentration camp system; SSK units formed; SS participates in the execution of SA leadership

1935: SSVT unit formed

1936-38: SS troops assist in occupation of Rhineland, Austria and Czechoslovakia.

Hitler decrees that the SSVT is a standing military force at his own disposal separate from the Wehrmacht or police.

Sept 1939: WWII begins; Germany overruns Poland

1939: Ergänzungsamt der Waffen-SS (Recruitment office of Waffen-SS) created under Gottlob Berger

1939-40: Waffen-SS formed as an elite force of Nazi warriors. Hitler limits its number to 4 divisions.

May 1940: Germany defeats France

1940: Himmler issues the first (and last) SS demobilization order.

1940: George Keppler, Paul Hausser and Sepp Dietrich receives the Knight's Cross at the Führer's victory celebration in the Reichstag, Berlin.

June 1941: SS troops participate in invasion of Soviet Union, show great courage and suffer heavy casualties

1941: Concentration Camp guards issued Waffen-SS uniforms, paybooks and ranks, and are placed under SS-FHA administration; RFSS Himmler orders the transfer of 10,000 SS from reservists to concentration camp personnel.

1941-42: Himmler attempts to skirt the size restrictions on the Waffen-SS by creating volunteer legions and recruiting volksdeutsche.

Feb 1942: Parental permission no longer needed for Hitler Youth to volunteer for the Waffen-SS

Feb 1943: Waffen-SS recaptures Soviet city of Kharkov; spectacular victory

March 1943: Rapid expansion of the Waffen-SS; new divisions and corps units created

July 1943: Battle of Kursk - a draw for SS panzer units

Oct 1943: Waffen-SS expands to 17 divisions, 7 corps, plus misc. guard, support and special forces troops.

1944: German fortunes rapidly decline

June 1944: SS troops fight tenaciously at Normandy

December 1944: SS troops counterattack in the Battle of the Bulge

March 1945: last Waffen-SS offensive campaign, Hungary

April 1945: RFSS Himmler meets with Swedish Red Cross emissary Count Bernadotte and proposes a separate peace with the Western Allies via a new German government (with Himmler as leader, of course!). The Western Allies refuse, but announce Himmler's proposal over the press wires. Hitler flies into a rage that Himmler, "die treue Heinrich," has betrayed him.

May 1945: Nazi Germany collapses; Hitler and Himmler commit suicide.

WaffenSS Background

WAFFEN-SS STATISTICS

Here are a small set of statistics regarding total size, unit composition, casualties, etc. for the Waffen-SS 1940-45. Many of these numbers are abstracts can only be used as a general estimate.

Waffen-SS Size

January 1940: 100,000

May 1940: 124,199

June 1941: 150,000 - 160,405

December 1941 - June 1942: 222,000 (note: of the 222,000, 35,000 are ethnic German (volksdeutsche), 10,000 are western European volunteers, and 177,000 are German (reichdeutsche))

Dec 1942: 156,438

Dec 1943: 257,472

June 1944: 368,654

September 1944: 910,00 - 950,000 (note: the number is probably inflated with the inclusion of non-Waffen-SS units such as the XV SS Kosaken-Kavallerie-Korps)

Waffen-SS Unit strengths June 22 1941 (Operation Barbarossa)

1st SS Division: 10,796

2nd SS Division: 19,021

3rd SS Division: 18,754

4th SS Division: 17,347

5th SS Division: 19,377

6th SS Division, 10,573

KommandoStab RFSS: unit strength: 18,438

Administrative: 4,007

Reserve: 29,809

KZ Inspectorate: 7,200

SS Guard Battalions: 2,159

Garrison posts: 992

Officer/NCO schools: 1,028

SS Volunteer Battalion Nordost: 904

Casualties

WaffenSS Background

Estimates vary: anywhere between 180-253,000 Waffen-SS members killed in action during WWII, with at least an additional 250,000 wounded.

Praise be that which toughens

- Nietzsche

Nazi Germany used a system of "Wehrkreis" (military districts) to recruit, train and replace Wehrmacht troops. There were 21 districts total at the height of Nazi expansion. The "Ersatzheer" (Replacement Army), formed in 1938 and revised in 1942, administered these 21 districts. The Waffen-SS was under the Replacement Army system, but maintained a degree independence with their own supply & weapons depots, training camps and military schools separate from the Heer.

BASIC TRAINING

Basic training lasted 3 weeks. All parade ground training eliminated in 1942. Unlike most modern armies, the German army recruit was immediately placed in their branch of service at the beginning of their basic training. The recruits were also exposed to an above-average amount of multi-disciplinary training - meaning that artillerymen would learn how to use radios, signals troops would learn how to fire heavy machine guns, etc. SS training stressed three main points:

physical fitness

character training

weapons training

Stressed aggressiveness, live fire exercises; initiative and self reliance; lots of sporting events, the concept of Napoleon's "Baton in every knapsack" and the "Führerprinzip" (leadership principle)-square bashing was discouraged.

20 minutes to dig a foxhole then have a tank run over it

Since 1942: All Hitler Youth have received 160 hours of military training

The main recruitment centers were initially in Berlin, Munich, Hamburg and Vienna. After the Germans occupied a regions , the SS would often set up a recruitment center in a major city.

The Waffen-SS were open to new ideas & innovations in terms of training - for example - Panzer crews of the 12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend were required as part of their training to spend a week working on the assembly line at the MAN tank factory in Nürnberg.

Officers & men addressed each other as "kamerad" when off duty.

locks forbidden on wardrobes - much emphasis placed on trust -- obedience was unconditional.

WaffenSS Background

WAFFEN SS-JUNKERSCHULEN

Junkerschule (Officer Candidate School) Bad Tölz and to a lesser extent, SS-Junkerschule Braunschweig were the premier Waffen-SS training centers for officers in the 1930's and during WWII. By 1937, the SS schools were graduating over 400 officers a year, in 2 sets of classes. Under the guidance of Oberstgruppenführer Paul Hausser, these officers were very well trained and often earned distinguished military reputations. The spirited aggressiveness taught at the school was not without cost - by 1942, nearly 700 Waffen-SS officers had been killed in action, including almost all of the 60 graduates of the 1934-35 Bad Tölz class.

The last Waffen-SS division - 38th SS-Grenadier-Division "Nibelungen" - formed at Bad Tölz in March 1945.

Question of ideological training. Not much? Courses at Marienburg did have political/ideological doctrine studies about the "Ost" Formalized programs to indoctrinate Waffen-SS troops with Nazi ideology usually were not as successful as hoped; however, informal Kameradschaftabend evenings certainly played a significant role in successful indoctrination.

tried to keep the training up to date - when Stadler took over the Panzer school in August 1944, he updated the training based on his experience during the Normandy Campaign

1st class SS units had better marksmanship skills, very skilled at night maneuvers and camouflage.

Blood is the price of Victory

- Otto von Bismark

WAFFEN-SS COMBAT TACTICS

At their best, Waffen-SS troops were experts at combat. As with so much else on this site, the subject matter deserves an entire study on its own. Although the subject of Waffen-SS tactics must be researched on a unit-by-unit basis, several generalizations can be made.

ON THE OFFENSIVE

It is important to remember that the majority of Waffen-SS troops considered themselves an elite force. This manifested itself in two ways:

SS troops, despite at times their inferior weapons were given the maximum amount of firepower possible - meaning more automatic weapons, more machine guns and more squad weapons such as mortars per unit than the average German Army equivalent. This trend continued to expand during the course of WWII, as SS troops (at least the "classic" divisions) were often given priority to receive the most of the best the German armaments industry could provide. This compliment of weapons allowed the SS to employ "firepower saturation" tactics which enabled them to overpower enemy forces and win territory.

WaffenSS Background

Since SS troopers considered themselves an elite force (a concept reinforced by their ideological training), they favored tactics that focused on frontal assaults and surprise attacks but often resulted in heavy casualties.

These 2 characteristics of the Waffen-SS caused friction between the SS and the German Army. For example, after the 1940 French campaign, the German army complained that the SS, despite their courage, were too ill-trained and their officers too reckless with their troops, resulting in higher SS casualties. RFSS Himmler replies that Waffen-SS troops are just full of "Draufgäugertum" ("Derring-doo") - and that the high casualty lists are due to the fact that the SS units have been given extra-difficult tasks and assigned to ad hoc units with poor interoperations. Himmler uses this argument to justify that Waffen-SS troops should serve in their own divisional units under separate Waffen-SS command. The German Army agrees, but stipulates that SS troops must be in separate army groups under Army commanders.

Certainly the SS Panzer divisions followed the Wehrmacht doctrine of "Panzerkeil" - the concept of an armored wedge with the strongest tanks at the front and flanks, followed by the weaker tanks, then followed by the panzergrenadiers.

ON THE DEFENSIVE

Waffen-SS troops were also masters at defensive warfare.

They were able to quickly dig in and hold positions despite appalling casualties (see Totenkopf division at the Demjansk pocket)

They became experts at concealment and camouflage as evident by the operations of the Hitlerjugend division at Normandy in 1944

They were able to employ effective delaying tactics, especially antitank tactics, so that small SS defensive units could hold back larger Allied units (for example the operations of the Langermark division at Narva in 1944.

In defensive operations, Waffen-SS casualties were prohibitively high, but the SS usually gave worse than they got. For example, Allied casualties (American, British, Canadian) in the 1944 Caen campaign were 6 times that of the Waffen-SS.

No wonder that the Eastern front was known as "Vernichtungskrieg" (the war of annihilation)
Antitank Innovations on the Battlefield

Waffen-SS troops were able to create ad-hoc, effective tactics to counter the material weight of Allied assaults. One of the more famous examples of the SS tactical innovation would be SS-Unterscharführer Remi Schrijnen's "Kopfstellung" (head position) in which a PAK antitank gun would be entrenched on a hillside like this:

Remi Schrijnen was a antitank gunner for the 27th SS Division Langemark who won the Knight's Cross for singlehandedly knocking out 7 (some accounts say 12) Soviet tanks during the Battle of Narva. Schrijnen's developed this unique tactic during his tour of duty on the Eastern Front. The benefits of the PAK Kopfstellung were:

Dug in at the crest of the hill made it difficult for Soviet tanks to spot the position or accurately

WaffenSS Background

estimate its distance

Firing from above negated the deflection effect of Soviet tank fire

The Zeltbann (triangular rain ponchos tacked down on the ground below the cannon) prevented tell-tale dust clouds

Waffen-SS troops were given the flexibility to experiment with tactics and encouraged to innovate. This tactical flexibility and innovation were a major reason why the SS earned such a good combat reputation. Of course, given the overwhelming odds the Waffen-SS often faced, innovation was often the result of desperation.

THE "KAMPFGRUPPE" CONCEPT

A Kampfgruppe is a combined-arms military formation formed for a specific objective. The Waffen-SS, just like German Army, was built as modular organization in which units and individuals could be combined and recombined in specialized, multi-disciplinary, formations - with unique, ad-hoc compliments of armor, artillery, infantry and support units. This "kampfgruppe" system allowed SS units to be organized into "fire brigades" of varying sizes to achieve either offensive or defensive objectives. In fact, the "kampfgruppe" doctrine still has a major influence on modern military doctrine. Despite their tactical importance, few Waffen-SS kampfgruppe formations existed long enough or played a large enough role to merit a mention in the history books - although there is one prominent exception - Kampfgruppe Pieper

ANIPARTISAN TACTICS

Partisans were not considered combatants with any rights (although the Hague convention does specify certain rights for resistance or guerilla fighters, so long as they honor certain criteria such as carrying weapons openly and prominently wearing some sort of identifiable uniform or insignia visible from a distance.

Also important to remember that German military tactical doctrine stressed harsh measures as a matter of occupation policy and had done so since the Franco-Prussian war. What was especially ruthless about German military occupation policies was its application of the concepts of massive retaliation and collective guilt. German troops on occupation duty or on antipartisan sweeps would set up an ad-hoc but by no means uncommon retaliation ratio for their casualties - for example, for every German soldier killed by "bandits" - 10 civilians ("suspected bandits") would be shot; for every German soldier wounded, 3 civilians. This is where the concept of "collective guilt" would come in - the unfortunate victims were often selected at random - literally pulled of the street or from their homes - and killed without trial, often publically to function as a "deterrent." In the eyes of the German military, just the fact that these people inhabited an area of anti-German agitation was reason enough to warrant their execution. Collective punishment would also extend to the looting and destruction of civilian property.

And that although the reputation of the WSS may not be clean, recent evidence has come to light that the Wehrmacht was by no means blameless - in fact it is credibly implicated in its own bloody share of war crimes.

WaffenSS Background

That being said, the Waffen-SS went to such extremes, especially in regard to the concept of collective responsibility, that it is questionable if the harsh tactics they used decreased insurrection or enflamed it.

The Waffen-SS completely failed to understand the political dimensions of antipartisan warfare and their overzealous efforts at punishment often caused problems between the Nazi administration and the collaborationist governments in the occupied territories. Surround an area. Advance inward, torching towns, evacuating civilians (women & children) taking livestock

"raubzug" a plunder raid.

suhnemassnahmen = "atonement operations"

certainly on many of the antipartisan raids carried out in the Soviet Union during 1941 and 1942, they were operating under a judenvernichtungsbefehl - an annihilation order to kill all Jews

aufrätrupp (clear up unit) - an ad hoc military formation that would collect booty (weapons, equipment, documents, clothing, supplies, livestock, etc.) after an antipartisan sweep or during säuberungen (mopping-up operations)

use of counterterror units (death squads)

Hitler did not want to use the terms "partisan" or "Freischärler" so ordered the indigenous guerrilla forces in the occupied territories to be referred to as "bandits" or "criminal gangs".

COMMAND, CONTROL & STAFF WORK

Heer Generaloberst Balck blamed the failure of the IV SS-Panzerkorps to break the siege of Budapest in January 1945 partly to poor Waffen-SS staff work. SS-Obergruppenführer Herbert Gille was always at the front, looking for an opening and never back at his headquarters doing the necessary staff work essential to manage and coordinate a major offensive.

**German divisional commander Maj Gen. Heinz Kokott, CO of the 26th Volkstrum Division, had this to say about the command capabilities of the Waffen-SS:
...These units - unduly boastful and arrogant anyway - with their total lack of discipline so typical for them, their well-known unreserved ruthlessness, paired with a considerable lack of reason, had a doennright devastating effect and in all cases proved a handicap for any systematic conduct of fighting."**

Stephen Ambrose "Citizen Soldiers" pg. 189.

**Unraveling the unit structure history of Waffen-SS units is an extremely complex job. Any historical analysis of Waffen-SS unit structure is complicated by several factors:
frequent unit name changes, often to reflect unit type, size and even ethnic composition.
units frequently split up with elements assigned to other units**

WaffenSS Background

the fortunes of war

commanders would sometime alter their unit structure without informing the Inspector General. What the unit looked like "on paper" sometimes did not match the reality.

The German Kampfgruppe concept - throwing together units from different formations in order to achieve a specific objective rather than keeping coherent formations.

severe casualties. Many SS units were completely annihilated, along with a majority of their paperwork, making a postwar study difficult.

The 1944-45 tendency for the Waffen-SS to exaggerate its strength - calling regiments "divisions" and so forth.

MILITARY FORMATIONS

It is useful to understand some basic information on the military formation/structure used by the German WWII Wehrmacht in general and the Waffen-SS in particular. Starting off from smallest unit to largest:

Trupp (troop):

A tactical unit, perhaps independent unit of 10-20 men. for example, Waffen-SS divisions usually had a truppe of Feldgendarmarie (military police).

Zug (platoon):

A tactical unit of 30-40 soldiers.

Batterie (battery):

A group of support weapons (artillery, mortar, etc.) operating as a unit. The amount of weapons and men depended on the weapon type.

Kommando (detachment):

A tactical military formation of indeterminate size.

Stab (staff):

A headquarters unit; its size depended on the size of the unit it commanded. A Stab would contain officers who would be assigned to a specific role such as the examples below:

Ia = operations

Ib = supply & transport

Ic = intelligence

Id = training

IIa = personnel matters, officers

IIb = personnel matters, men

III = judge advocate

IVa = administration

IVb = medical

V = motor transport

WaffenSS Background

Kompanie (company):

A tactical unit of 3+ Züge; with anywhere from 100-200 soldiers.

Bataillon (Battalion)

A tactical unit of 3 or more Kompanien, sometimes with additional Züge with anywhere between 500-1,000 soldiers.

Abteilung (no English equivalent):

Similar to a battalion, but an abteilung was a formation of combined arms (to some extent) designed to be an independent and self-sufficient unit on the battlefield.

Regiment:

A formation of several (e.g. 3+) battalions, with anywhere between 2-6,000 men. Waffen-SS regiments were usually sequentially numbered with the numbers growing larger as the war progressed.

Brigade/Legion:

An independent military formation, usually of 1-7,000 soldiers. Most Waffen-SS brigades and/or legions were foreign volunteer units of varying size.

Division:

A combined arms formation of several (e.g. 4) regiments and Abteilungen. A division's manpower could be anywhere from 10-21,000 soldiers, depending on the type of formation and its subcomponents. Waffen-SS panzer divisions tended to have a large compliment of men; divisions formed late in the war were usually quite understrength.

Korps (Corps):

A Waffen-SS corps was (in theory) supposed to contain 2 or more divisions, plus several attached abteilungen such as flak (anti-aircraft), nachrichten (signals), aufklärungs (reconnaissance), and so on, in addition to the Korps headquarters staff. RFSS Heinrich Himmler started forming Waffen-SS corps in 1943 when Germany's fortunes were beginning to ebb. No 2 corps were alike; each could contain several hundred to several thousand troops.

Armee (Army):

An Armee comprised of several Korps units, plus any independent formations and operated on the strategic level. The Waffen-SS fielded only one real Armee during the close of WWII (see 6 SS-Panzer Army) and even that one was so severely understrength as to call its title into question.

MILITARY SPECIALTIES

Stab:

A divisional HQ would include the commanding officer, the Ia, or chief of staff, plus staff officers dedicated to operations, intelligence, etc., cartographers (kartenstelle), a signals unit, a military police unit (feldgendarmerie), plus an escort force and transport team.

WaffenSS Background

Aufklärung:

Due to the tactical doctrine of blitzkrieg, Waffen-SS reconnaissance units were well-armed. A division abteilung may contain 2 companies of armored cars, plus several motorcycle companies and a motorized heavy weapons company.

PanzerJäger:

The "tank hunter" abteilung usually contained some mixture of motorized and stationary antitank weapons - e.g. 21 Jagdpanzer IV/70's and 12 towed 75mm guns. The unit was subdivided into 3 companies.

Pionier:

German Pionier troops were trained to build the bridges and fortifications - the customary engineer's job - but were also highly trained assault troops specializing in urban fighting and weapons like flamethrowers and satchel charges. Usually 1,138 men, split into an armored company, several Pionier companies and a special bridging co.

Flak:

The anti-aircraft (AA) unit usually had some sort of heavy, medium and light AA guns - for example, say batteries of six 88mm, 2 batteries of four 37mm, and 2 batteries of four 20mm quad guns. The size of a divisional flak abteilung would be roughly 1,200 men.

Rocket launchers:

The German Army regarded Nebeltruppe (specialized rocket launcher troops) as their exclusive domain and resisted all of Waffen-SS attempts to be armed with rocket launcher equipment or raise specialized rocket launcher troops. It wasn't until 1943 that RFSS Himmler could find enough equipment to raise 6 battalions of SS rocketeers.

Werfer:

The German armed forces were well armed with mortars. A divisional werfer abteilung might contain 3 batteries of six 150mm towed mortars & 1 batteries of six 210mm towed mortars.

Nachrichten:

The signals unit, specializing in all communications via telephone, radio, etc.

Panzer:

Tank units were organized into companies, with 1 or more command tanks per company. In addition, each panzer regiment would have at least 1 workshop/repair company (kraftfahrzeug) - as tanks tend to break down or suffer battle damage! A panzer division would also have a separate armored maintenance detachment, including a weapons unit and a spares unit, for more long-term care.

Feldpostamt (FPA):

The military post office

WaffenSS Background

Feldlazarett:

Military hospital. A related term is the Krankenkraftwagem, or the motorized ambulance section.

Nachschubtruppe:

The supply column. Other non-combat formations in a division would include a veterinary unit (many Waffen-SS division had thousands of horses or draft animals), the bakery, butchery, and quartermaster units.

Replacement Units:

when possible, Waffen-SS divisions would often have an Esartz, or replacement formation, from which to send replacements to front line units. Some replacement battalions were stationed separately of the main bulk of the division.

A SAMPLE OF WAFFEN-SS UNITS BY TYPE

The Panzer Units:

A full-strength 1944 panzer division would be 19,000 men and 3,000 vehicles. The major combat elements of a Panzer division were the Panzer regiment, the 2 Panzergrenadier regiments and the Panzer reconnaissance battalion. The Waffen-SS Panzer units were the best-armed, motivated & are often referred to as the "classic" divisions. 1st SS-Panzer Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler

2nd SS-Panzer Division Das Reich

3rd SS-Panzer Division Totenkopf

5th SS-Panzer Division Wiking

9th SS-Panzer Division Hohenstaufen

10th SS-Panzer Division Frundsberg

12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend Schwere SS-Panzer Abteilung 101 (501)

Schwere SS-Panzer Abteilung 102 (502)

Schwere SS-Panzer Abteilung 103 (503)

Kampfgruppe Pieper

Panzer Brigade Gross

The Panzergrenadier Units:

A panzergrenadier regiment would have 3 battalions of 4 companies each, plus a flak company, a reconnaissance company, a Pionier company and a heavy gun company. The main difference between a panzer and a panzergrenadier division? Tanks! 11th SS-Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division Nordland

16th SS-Panzergrenadier Division Reichsfuhrer-SS

17th SS-Panzergrenadier Division Gotz von Berlichingen 18th SS Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division Horst Wessel

23rd SS-Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier-Division Nederland

28th SS-Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division Wallonien

The Grenadier (infantry) Units:

WaffenSS Background

The units listed below were not motorized, formed later in the war (often of foreign troops) and were often understrength. They did not represent an elite force. 14th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS

15th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS
19th Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS
20th Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS
25th Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS Hunyadi
26th Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS Hungaria
27th SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division Langemarck
29th Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (italienische)
29th Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (russische)
30th Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS
31st SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division
32nd SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division 30 Januar
33rd Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS Charlemagne
36th Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS
38th SS-Grenadier-Division Nibelungen

The Gebirgs (Mountain) Units:

Mountain units tended to have specialized equipment, clothing and training to cope with the rigors of high-altitude combat. 6th SS-Gebirgs Division Nord
7th SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgs Division Prinz Eugen
13th Waffen-Gebirgs Division der SS (kroatische Nr 1) Handschar
21st Waffen-Gebirgs-Division der SS Skanderbeg (alban. Nr1)
24th Waffen-Gebirgs (Karstjäger) Division der SS
V SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgskorps
IX-Waffen Gebirgskorps (Kroatisches)

Police Troops:

4th SS-Panziergrenadier Division SS-Polizei
35th SS-Polizei-Grenadier-Division

cavalry Units:

8th SS-Kavallerie Division Florian Geyer
22nd SS-Freiwilligen-Kavallerie-Division Maria Theresa 33rd Waffen-Kavallerie-Division der SS (ungarische Nr 3)
37th SS-Freiwilligen-Kavallerie-Division Lützow

It was those defensive battles in Russia which I shall always remember for the sheer beauty of the

WaffenSS Background

fighting, rather than the victorious advances. Many of us died horribly, some even as cowards, but for those who lived...it was well worth all the dreadful suffering and danger. After a time we reached a point where we were not concerned for ourselves or even for Germany, but lived entirely for the next clash, the next engagement with the enemy."

- a LSSAH captain

Waffen-SS troops as a whole have earned a distinguished combat reputation during WWII, renowned for both stunning offensive victories and tenacious defensive operations. Without question, many SS troops exhibited incredible feats of bravery, courage and tactical brilliance, throughout the duration of the conflict. However, by 1944 the size of the Waffen-SS swelled to almost 900,000 men. With an armed force of such size, considerable variation among the combat capabilities of the troops must inevitably arise. Most accounts of the military history of the SS, particularly in the West, focus on the most stunning battles or exciting campaigns. However, it is important to take a closer look at the combat records of the individual Waffen-SS units to get a clearer picture of the military contribution of the SS during the war.

THE WAFFEN-SS IN COMBAT: A CLOSER EXAMINATION

There is no such thing as an overall combat reputation of the Waffen-SS. There are many "military-history lite" books that give the impression that the Waffen-SS was a monolithic force of 6-foot blond Teutonic warriors, armed to the teeth with submachine pistols riding hundreds of Tiger tanks - the lasting historical legacy of the propaganda unit SS-Standarte Kurt Eggers. In reality, SS troops were a much more varied bunch, and could be classified as follows:

The "Classic" Divisions a.k.a. the "fire brigades"

These were among the first SS units and were the best-armed, best trained units of primarily German personnel. These were the troops that carry the Waffen-SS stereotype. Division such as Das Reich, Hitlerjugend, Wiking and Frundsberg earned a well-deserved combat reputation in the major battles and campaigns of the war. At the pinnacle of this classic classification would be the division named after the Nazi dictator himself and his personal bodyguard unit, the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler. These divisions often spearheaded attacks or counterattacks, and rushed around from front to front as a "fire brigade" - plugging in the holes of the German lines.

The Western Legions

Next to the classic divisions, these were the Waffen-SS units with combat reputations ranging from excellent to fair. Unit such as

Nordland,

Wallonien,

and Langemarck

contained Western Europeans that volunteers for service in the "anti-bolshevik" crusade against the Soviet Union. Interesting enough, as the war progressed and Germany's fortune's declined, these volunteers fought harder and more recklessly. Considered traitors by their countrymen, with no home to return to, they had nothing to lose.

WaffenSS Background

The Eastern Legions

Beneath the Western legions were the Waffen-SS units raised from Eastern Europeans, - primarily the Baltic states and the Ukraine. Despite the SS belief in the superiority of the German race, the decline in German military fortunes caused the SS to quietly shelve their racist beliefs about Untermenschen in favor of the more practical policy of recruiting them to fight against the Soviets. The eastern legion units included

the 14th SS

15th SS

and 20th SS divisions.

These divisions could fight extremely well but often fought valiantly once never to fight as well again.

Second string and antipartisan units.

These are the units that the propaganda companies spent little time photographing. The armament for these units was usually captured or substandard equipment. Their training tended to be more haphazard. They were also a mix of Reichdeutsche, Volksdeutsche and other ethnic groups without a shred of resemblance to the Nazi Aryan ideal. The 2nd string units sometimes fought on the front lines, but were often relegated to security duty and antipartisan sweeps. This type of service led to a higher level of atrocities. Not all of these units were bad, but most were fair to poor - examples being

SS-Polizei,

Prinz Eugen,

Florian Geyer, Handschar,

Reichsführer-SS,

29th SS (italian)

and 30th SS divisions.

The Savage and the Remnants

The propaganda units didn't bother with these guys. "Savage" units were unreliable, bloodthirsty crews such as the 29th SS (russian) and 36th SS better suited to hunting partisans and executing civilians. The war-work of "Savage" units was often too grisly even for military journalists to cover. The remnants - units such as

Hunyadi,

the 37th SS

and 38th SS division

were understrength units formed too late in the war to affect its outcome.

WEHRMACHT- WAFFEN-SS RELATIONS

In the 1930's the relationship between the Wehrmacht and the SS troops was strained. The army thought the SS-Verfügungstruppen were amateurs; the SS-Totenknopf were sadists and the

WaffenSS Background

Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler were "asphalt soldiers" who looked great on the parade ground but weren't capable of fighting. The SS organization during the late 1930's was constantly fighting the German Army for access to new volunteers and better equipment. The German Army look at the SS troops with suspicion, seeing them as a competitor for scarce German conscripts.

WWII began with the invasion of Poland in September 1939. With the outbreak of the war, RFSS Himmler and the German Army determined the command responsibilities. Himmler oversaw the administration of the SS troops, but the troops operated under the tactical control of the Heer. This tactical/administrative split worked quite well and lasted for the duration of the war. On June 18, 1940, the OKW decreed that Waffen-SS military supplies would come through Wehrmacht channels - although the messy realities of war would render this more theory than practice.

At first the German Army looked down on the SS troops. While admiring their courage and recklessness during the Polish and French campaigns in 1939-40, the German Army felt that overall the SS troops suffered from a combination of recklessness and lack of training which resulted in high casualties. The SS countered that the Army often gave them the most difficult assignments with minimal support. Perhaps both allegations contained a grain of truth.

Army-Waffen-SS relations hit their low during the April 1941 invasion of Yugoslavia. There were several incidents in which SS troops threatened to fire on army columns clogging the line of advance. (One SS regiment leader even positioned antitank mines directly below the front tires of the first truck in an army column, and posted a SS grenadier with strict orders to shoot any German soldier who moved the mines!) In fact the Army's GrossDeutschland division and the Waffen-SS Das Reich division were competing to be the first to capture Belgrade, the Yugoslav capital. (The SS won, thanks to the efforts of SS-Oberführer Fritz Klingenberg - who captured the city first)

The Waffen-SS earned its reputation for bravery and steadfastness in Operation Barbarossa and the subsequent fall/winter campaign in Russia. No longer did the Army look down on SS troops, as their elan and courageousness determined many a German advance or repulsed many a Soviet attack. As German Army General von Mackenstein said about the 1st SS division, they are "...truly is an elite unit."

1943 and 44 were perhaps the high water mark for Waffen-SS troops. The number of divisions and corps multiplied; the Waffen-SS won stunning victories as at Kharkhov or were able to stubbornly defend their positions as in the battles of Narva or Caen. By this point in the war Heer units often looked up to the SS troops, who were constantly rushing about the front as a "fire brigade," plugging gaps in the line, rescuing encircled troops and mounting vicious counterattacks. Certainly Army-SS relations were influenced by Hitler's appointments of Waffen-SS Generals such as Oberstgruppenführer Paul Hausser and Oberstgruppenführer Joseph (Sepp) Dietrich to command Army groups, but this may be more of an example of Hitler's disillusionment with the Army officer corps than a barometer of Army-SS relations. No SS high ranking SS officer served as a permanent member of the OKH.

WaffenSS Background

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

"Troops like the SS have to pay the butcher's bill more heavily than anyone else..."

- Hitler

From their inception, the best Waffen-SS troops fought with an incredible fanaticism. Through this aggressiveness the Waffen-SS won the respect and admiration of Hitler, Himmler and the German Wehrmacht and thus were given increasingly difficult assignments. Waffen-SS troops expected to be sent to the most dangerous areas with the heaviest fighting. But this zeal came at a price - heavy casualties. SS officers and panzergrenadiers suffered extremely high attrition rates, and the loss of such highly-trained and highly-motivated soldiers undoubtedly effected Waffen-SS combat effectiveness, if not their morale. Time and again, SS troops displayed their willingness to keep on fighting even when their tactical situation was desperate or later in the war when it was clear Nazi Germany would lose the war. But despite their bravery, the Waffen-SS could not stem the Allied tide.

The turning point for Waffen-SS combat fortunes was the 1943 Battle of Kursk. The LSSAH, Das Reich & Totenkopf panzer divisions, despite their best efforts and their powerful tanks, could not gain a decisive penetration against the Soviet defences. Their waning strength became even more obvious during the 1944 Battle of the Bulge in the west and the attempt to relieve the siege of Budapest in the east. SS combat capability was in decline and even the SS troopers realized it.

With his Reich collapsing, Hitler gave the Waffen-SS units increasingly unrealistic and impossible orders to attack or to defend to the last man - orders that, at least in the attacking, the SS did not have the capability to execute. Hitler lost confidence in the SS troops and berated them, even ordering the honor cuffbands be removed from the uniforms of the troops of the 6th SS Panzer Army after their failed March 1945 counterattack in Hungary. The 6th SS Panzer commander, Sepp Dietrich, unswervingly loyal to Hitler, was upset with Hitler's callous delusions and refused to pass down the order. (It probably didn't matter much anyway, for at this point in the war most front-line SS troops removed their cuffbands anyway as a security measure.)

...Our lack of understanding and inner rejection of everything we heard from 'up there' or 'back home' lead us to accept only one last 'Heimat,' one final homeland. That was our unit, our 'little heap' of men." Officer, LSSAH Reconnaissance Abt.

So by the final months of the war the Waffen-SS were no longer fighting for National Socialism, for Germany, or for the Führer that abandoned them. They were fighting for their comrades. Disillusioned and facing inevitable defeat, it is no wonder that Waffen-SS troops transferred their loyalty to their unit, their comrades and their commanding officers. In that sense, their loyalty truly was their honor.

Our children's children will have to bear the blame for this."

Abwehr Chief Admiral Canaris

WaffenSS Background

No study of the Waffen-SS would be complete without addressing the multiple allegations of war crimes leveled against it. The subject of Waffen-SS war crimes still generates much controversy. The HIAG, the Waffen-SS postwar veteran's organization, along with many historians, have written gallons of ink absolving the Waffen-SS of war crimes, particularly those affiliated with the Holocaust. Other writers condemn any study of the Waffen-SS as morally suspect, due to the organizations bloodstained involvement with war crimes, including the Holocaust. Given these opposing poles of thought, attempting a non-partisan yet accurate study of the subject is a perilous task. Buried under layers of postwar allegations, cocooned by the Nazi's own euphemism for killing such as "special cleansing operations" and "dealt with in the usual manner," an accurate assessment of Waffen-SS war crimes is perhaps impossible. But there is enough evidence remaining for us to study the depth of these crimes, if not the full extent of these crimes.

For the purposes of this study, the documented cases of Waffen-SS war crimes can be segmented into 3 classifications:

Combat atrocities, or crimes of passion

War crimes as deliberate, premeditated policy

Waffen-SS Holocaust participation

Note that these are not exclusive; a specific Waffen-SS crime can span one or more of these classifications. Nor is the list below a complete tally of all allegations.

COMBAT ATROCITIES: CRIMES OF PASSION

War is unquestionably the most emotionally stressful of human situations. Soldiers can do unspeakably horrible acts when enraged with passions unleashed under combat stress. These type of war crimes have occurred throughout recorded human history, committed by all type of military formations regardless of nationality, ideology or training. WWII historians can find documented cases of combat atrocities among all the major participants, Allied as well as Axis.

There are several examples of Waffen-SS war crimes arising out of combat stress. These examples have common characteristics:

occurred either during or a short time after combat

do not reflect a specific order, but arise spontaneously

usually involve the execution of surrendering enemy troops or captured POWs.

Examples of Waffen-SS "crimes of passion:"

Leibstandarte (LSSAH)

May 1940: May 28: LAH massacres 65 (80?) British POWs from the British 48th Division [2nd Royal Warwickshire, Royal Artillery & Cheshire Regiments?] at Wormhout near Dunkirk, France. Wilhelm Mohnke is implicated as the officer who gave the execution order. Divisional CO Dietrich is cleared of any involvement in the war crime.*

WaffenSS Background

*** sources: Christopher Aisby's The Waffen-SS; pg. 211 and Gordon Williamson's The SS: Hitler's Instrument of Terror pg. 58. [see Bibliography] This is an oft-mentioned example; however, it seem that there was not enough evidence for the British government to press charges after the war.**

Totenkopf

May 1940 May 27: heavy combat & casualties at Bethume; 14th Co. 1st Battalion, I Regiment massacres 100 British POWs of 2nd Royal Norfolks at Le Paradis*

*** sources: Sydnor, Soldiers of Destruction [see Bibliography] pg. 106-107, plus others**

Hitlerjugend

June 1944 June 12: unit casualties: 900+ (estimate); divisional troops execute 40+ (64?) Canadian POWs, some wounded, either immediately after capture or after interrogation. Division CO Kurt Meyer is tried and condemned to death in 1946 for the killings, but he was released from prison in 1954. *

*** sources: Stein, The Waffen-SS, pg. 277.**

Kampfgruppe Peiper

December 1944 Peiper's troops massacre (71?) 84 captured US troops at the Bagneuz crossroads (54 POWs survive & several successfully escape) at the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge. To this date, Peiper's involvement and potential guilt for the war crime is still a controversial subject. In his postwar trial, Peiper proclaimed his innocence and stated he had left the crossroads at least 10 minutes before the shooting started. Both Peiper and other defendants argued that he nor anyone else ordered the shooting of prisoners, and that the incident occurred as either a result of mistaken identity (surrendered Americans mistaken for attacking Americans) or an escape attempt (it IS, apparently, within the bounds of the Geneva Convention to shoot escaping POWs) News of the "Malmédy Massacre" spreads throughout the US lines and stiffens the American's resolve, in addition to creating an unwritten agreement among US forces to take no Waffen-SS POWs*

*** sources: Stein, pg. 278. and Michael Reynolds The Devil's Adjutant [see Bibliography]**

WaffenSS Background

WAR CRIMES AS POLICY

**"...We have only one task - to stand firm and carry out the racial struggle without mercy."
- Reichführer-SS Heinrich Himmler**

There are multiple example of Waffen-SS war crimes arising from deliberate policies or explicit orders given by SS commanding officers, RFSS Himmler, or even Adolf Hitler. These war crimes usually contain the following characteristics:

Were based on premeditated policies or a specific directive

Occur during antipartisan, security or mopping up operations as opposed to front-line combat

Include civilian victims as well as military

Often involve the destruction of property in addition to inflicting casualties

Were politically or ideologically motivated.

War crimes as Waffen-SS policy most frequently occurred during the following phases:

OPERATION BARBAROSSA

The German 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union was the holy war of National Socialism. Hitler's purpose for the invasion was the removal of the main political and ideological opponent to Nazi Germany (Bolshevism i.e. Communism) and the elimination of the "racial and biological" elements that in Hitler's mind were its wellspring - the Slav and the Jew.

The Kommissarbefehl (Commissar Order) Hitler's specific order that all Soviet Army Commissars (political officers) were to be immediately shot upon capture. These orders were passed down to the rank & file Waffen-SS by their officers

"At a general meeting of all the officers in the SSTK on June 16, Eicke lectured again on the nature of the coming war in the east and reemphasized the need for carrying out Hitler's order to kill every commissar who falls in German hands."*

There is no historical record to indicate that any Waffen-SS unit refused to carry out this order during the summer months of 1941. Doubtless many thousands of Soviet officers were killed.

General Atrocities against Untermenschen

The ideological aspect of the Hitler's attack against Stalin affected how the Waffen-SS treated regular Soviet troops throughout the war on the eastern front. For example:

LSSAH, Oct. 1941, Taganrog, Soviet Union. Stepp Dietrich orders all surrendering Soviet troops shot for a 3-day period in reprisal for the capture, torture and murder of 6 SS soldiers. Over 4,000 Soviets attempting to surrender are killed.**

The SS Calvary Brigade During a summer mopping up operation in the Pripet marshes of Byelorussia, 1 regiment killed 259 Soviet troops and 6,504 civilians.****

the LSSAH division reported in February 1943 of killing 600 Russians and taking 5 prisoners.***

*** Sydnor, Soldiers of Destruction pg. 154, quoting from BAMA III SS 50/1 pg. 4**

**** James Weingartner, Hitler's Guard pg.129 & Stein, pg 133. Both reference Gerald Reitlingers**

WaffenSS Background

The SS: Alibi of a Nation, 1957

***** Ibid. pg.146. [see Bibliography]**

****** Stein, pg.275**

ANTIPARTISAN OPERATIONS

Nazi Germany's policies towards occupations was, generally speaking, severe. When faced with armed resistance from occupied peoples in the form of partisans or rebellions, German occupation forces became downright barbaric. The Waffen-SS played a major role in the antipartisan and pacification campaigns - enough of a role to merit entire book dedicated to the subject. This site can offer only a brief summary.

It must be said, however, that counterinsurgency warfare is exceedingly difficult for a regular (i.e. occupying) force to win. The occupying force is subject to much stress - hatred of the governed, an enemy that operates outside the rules of warfare and amid the civilian population, or operates out of remote locations and difficult terrain. Occupying forces, from any era and any nation, face the same set of challenges and difficulties attempting to suppress an guerilla movement, and often adopt similar strategies. Though less brutal in scale, the counterinsurgency tactics used by the USA in Vietnam (search & destroy mission, free-fire zones, forced evacuations, etc.) had their precedents in the SS campaigns against WWII Soviet partisans. Counterinsurgency warfare is very bestial - and endless cycle of atrocity and reprisal. Yugoslav partisan leader Milovan Djilas recounts in his 1977 memoir Wartime of personally executing a prisoner of the Prinz Eugen division in a fit of rage. Although counterinsurgency warfare can see-saw between severity (destroying a village) and mercy (winning their hearts and minds), the Waffen-SS reacted with the utmost, even exponential, severity. Most of these war crime occurred in the eastern front, although several did happen in the West.

Leibstandarte

Sept 1943 Sept 19: Reacting to a report that renegade Italian troops have captured 2 SS officers & are planning to attack the division, SS-standartenführer Joachim Peiper shells the town of Boves with 150mm SP guns. 34 (37?) Italian civilians are killed. In 1968, Italian authorities accuse Peiper of war crimes for the attack, but the charges are dropped for lack of evidence.*

* source: Michael Reynolds The Devil's Adjutant

Das Reich

June 1944: June 9: Division en route to Normandy & is attacked multiple times by the French resistance. DR relieves German garrison troops at Tulle under attack. Divisional troops hang 99 civilians at Tulle in reprisal for the deaths of 40 German soldiers.

June 10: Massacre at Oradour: 2 DR officers, Sturmbannführer Kampfe and Obersturmführer Gerlach, are captured by the Resistance. Gerlach escapes and tells his troops that he believes Kampfe is being held at the village of Oradour.

DR Company under Sturbannführer Diekman sent to investigate & massacres 642 civilians,

WaffenSS Background

including 207 children and loots and burns the village.

Sturbannführer Diekman scheduled to be court-marshalled for excessive force, (?) but is KIA at Normandy before proceedings begin.*

* There are 2 excellent books about the crimes at Tulle and Oradour. The first is *Das Reich* by Phillip Vickers (Combined Publishing, 2000), which is a historical and geographical guide to the route the division took to Normandy. The second is *Martyred Village* by Sarah Farmer (University of California Press, 1999) which is a treatise on the significance of the atrocity on postwar French culture and the disappointing efforts to bring all the perpetrators to justice.

Polizei division

March 1944: Atrocities Larissa (?) following a partisan ambush of a German convoy at Klissura..*

June 1944:

June 10: Units from SS-Panzer Grenadier Regiment 7 on an antipartisan sweep, massacre circa 218-300+ Greek civilians in the village of Distomo. George Koch, a member of the Wehrmacht GFP (Geheime Feldpolizei), accompanied the SS troops during the sweep and submits report on the incident. Koch's report states that: the Polizei troops walked through the village without incident, but were later ambused by Greek guerrillas outside of it. The guerrillas escaped, and that the SS troops actually doubled back into the village and began a vicious "atonement action" which included rape and looting as well as shooting civilians. Koch's report directly contradicts the report SS-Hauptsturmführer Fritz Lautenbach, submitted to his battalion CO (SS-Standartenführer Schührers).

June 20: A Red Cross delegation visits Distomo to investigate the incident and find corpses swinging from the trees along the route. News of the massacre travels to the collaborationist Greek government.

Concerned over the impact of the massacre on both the military and political situation in occupied Greece, the Wehrmacht opens up an investigation headed by Special Envoy Neubacher & charges SS-Hauptsturmführer Lautenbach with falsifying a military report. (of course the investigation team neither includes nor interviews Greek civilians) SS-Standartenführer Schührers responds to the charges that although his company is technically guilty of falsifying a report, his unit acted correctly under the circumstances. The inquiry is dropped as the massacre is judged a "military necessity" due to the supposed collaboration between the guerrillas and the Distomo villagers.**

* sources: Windrow & Burn, *The Waffen-SS* pg. 13 [see Bibliography]

** see *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation 1941-44* pg. 212, plus Dieter Begemann's Distomo War Crimes page

WaffenSS Background

Reichführer-SS

Fall 1944: Aug 12: Armored Reconnaissance unit massacres civilians at Sant'Anna di Stazzema, Aug 17-27: Divisional units massacre 369 Italians in anti-partisan operations, Bardene San Terenzo.

Sept 29-30: Divisional units massacre roughly 750-800 civilians in antipartisan sweeps at Marzabotto. One postwar affidavit from a 16th SS private: "Personally I am of the opinion that the majority of partisans killed were women and children."*

* sources: Ruchard Lamb, War in Italy 1943-45 [see Bibliography], plus others.

Kaminski &

Dirlewanger brigades

August 1944: Both of these units committed multiple atrocities during the suppression of the Warsaw Uprising.*

* sources: Stein, pg. 264, plus French McLean's The Cruel Hunters [see Bibliography] - The operational history of both units can be considered one long war crime.

It is clear that standard Waffen-SS policy when dealing with partisans or rebellions was to react with the utmost severity. However, this policy seems to have backfired, for it incited rebellion rather than crushing it.

WAFFEN-SS HOLOCAUST PARTICIPATION

Many Waffen-SS apologists, either former members or postwar revisionist historians, argue that the Waffen-SS did not participate in the Holocaust. There is some truth to their position. By 1944, the Waffen-SS had grown to 900,000 men, with the great majority of them fighting or destined to fight in front-line combat. Certainly hundreds of thousands of these men as individuals did not know of Hitler's "Final Solution" nor played a part in it. Although Reichführer-SS Himmer was unquestionable evil, he was not illogical - he would not waste well-trained, well-armed troops on killing operations or guarding concentration camps when substandard troops were available and while Allied armies battered the shrinking frontiers of the Reich.

However, these veterans and historians are incorrect when speaking of the Waffen-SS as an organization. The Waffen-SS was complicit in the Holocaust and the extent of its guilt must be revealed in a careful response several questions:

Did the Waffen-SS materially participate in the Holocaust (i.e. the deliberate killing of Jewish people)?

WaffenSS Background

The answer is yes:

Poland, Sept. 19, 1939: An SS soldier serving in Panzerdivision Kempf in the SS-Artillerie Regiment, along with a German Army Feldgendarmerie, shoot 50 Jews in a synagogue. The SS soldier is acquitted on the grounds "As an SS man, he was particularly sensitive to the sight of Jews...and thus acted quite unpremeditatedly in a spirit of youthful enthusiasm.*"

Poland 1939: SSTK division implicated in killing Jews**

April 1941: Das Reich assists Einsatzgruppen in killing 920 Jews near Minsk***

Wiking murders 600 Jews as "reprisal for Soviet cruelties."****

August 8, 1941 SS-Kallverie Regiment massacres 1,950 Jews at Pinsk.*****

Skanderbeg troops place 281 Albanian Jews on railway cars to concentration camps*****

* Ailsby, The Waffen-SS pg. 211. plus others

** Ailsby, pg. 217. plus others

*** Reitlinger The SS:Alibi of a Nation pg. 157 & 169, as cited by Stein, pg. 272-274.

**** Paul Wilson, Himmler's Calvary: The Equestrian SS, 1930-45 (Schiffler, 2000) pg. 155.

Postwar the Soviets sentenced SS-Kallverie Regiment officer Franz Magill to 5 years in prison for the murder of 5,254 Jews in 1941.

***** Kosovo: A Short History pg. 310, citing T-354, reel 160 frame 3805943 of the US National Archives.

Did Waffen-SS troops guard the concentration camps?

The answer is yes.

Martin Wirth, guard at Helmbrechts, a satellite camp of Flossenbürg KZ, estimated that of the 54 concentration camp guards in his unit, at least three were volksdeutsche drafted into the Waffen-SS. Martin Wirth was himself a Rumanian volksdeutsche, drafted in 1943 into the Prinz Eugen division but declared unfit for medical duty and reassigned as a concentration camp guard.*

Sonderkommando Dirlewanger (a.k.a the 36th SS Division) spent at least a portion of 1941 guarding the Jewish Ghetto and "Lipowa Camp" at Lubin, Poland.** The unit also operated under the command of SS-Gruppenführer Odilio Globocnik, commander of the "Jewish Camp at Dzikow." Globocnik tasked Dirlewanger's unit with "special activities" - a Nazi euphemism for killing Jews.**

The Totenkopfwachsturmbanne units were considered part of the Waffen-SS. They carried the standard Waffen-SS Soldbuch and received replacements from convalescent SS soldiers from front line units.*****

* Goldhagen, Hitler's Willing Executioners pg. 336.

** Ibid. pg. 299 "Supplementing the German personnel who ran and staffed the camp were, successively, contingents of ethnic German paramilitary units, ethnic Germans in the Waffen-SS, members of Kommando Dirlewanger, and finally Ukrainians."

*** The Cruel Hunters footnote #63. It is often claimed that only the poor-quality Waffen-SS troops participated in war crimes and/or the Holocaust while the "elite" Waffen-SS troops were above all that. Unfortunately the reality was much more grey. For example in August 1940 the SS-FHA transferred 4 NCO's from the Germania replacement battalion to Sonderkommando Dirlewanger. It is likely that these 4 Das Reich NCO's served as guards in the Lubin ghetto.

WaffenSS Background

(source The Cruel Hunters pg. 56)

**** See Stein The Waffen-SS. Stein estimates that 10,000 Waffen-SS men worked in organizations under the SS-WVHA, including the concentration camp system. Perry Pierik's From Leningrad to Berlin: Dutch Volunteers in the German Waffen-SS on pg. 24 quotes Wolfgang Solsky's (author of Die Ordnung des Terrors: das Konzentrationslager) figure of 55,000 SS worked in the camp system, of which 10,000 were Waffen-SS

Sadly, there are few documented cases of SS officers refusing to carry out orders vis a vis the Holocaust. One of the few known instances is the case of HSSPF leader and SS-Brigadeführer Karl Zech, who refused an order to confine Jews to the Krakau ghetto. He was dismissed from the SS in March 1944 and committed suicide a month later.

Did the Waffen-SS indirectly participate in the Holocaust?

The answer is yes.

...The whole SS did not do the killings, but the whole SS knew of them."

Robert Lewis Koehl, The Black Corps, pg. 425 (see bibliography)

Waffen-SS Officers as Holocaust perpetrators

The Waffen-SS has been big on claiming it had nothing to do with the Holocaust. But it had a lot to do with folks who did. Many of the worst Holocaust criminals held Waffen-SS rank. Indeed, in researching the bios of individual SS officers the evidence of Holocaust complicity begins to pile up:

Take the case of SS-Gruppenführer Odilio Globocnik the man appointed by Himmler to oversee the genocide of Polish Jewry and administer the concentration camps. As HSSPF Trieste in July 1944, the 24th Waffen-Gebirgs (Karstjäger) Division der SS was under his control. Recent research indicates that Globocnik may have served for a brief period in 1939 as a staff officer in the SSVT - for further information please visit the Axis Biographical Research website.

SS-Gruppenführer Bruno Streckenbach commanded the 19th SS Division commander in 1944, but in 1939 he was the RSHA Amtchef (bureau chief for the SS security service) in the Generalgouvernement of Poland, with Einsatzgruppen units under his direct command.

Kurt Becher, ordinance officer for the SS-Kavallerie Regiment, was sent to Hungary in 1944 by Himmler on a special assignment to procure horses & equipment. There is evidence to indicate that Becher may have assisted Adolf Eichmann's (who also, according to Höhne's The Order of the Death's Head served in the SS-VT for a brief stint) efforts to "trade" Jews. In 1945, Becher was assigned to be a special commissioner for all concentration camps.*

SS-Obergruppenführer Oswald Pohl, commander of the SS-WVHA, which administered both the SS economic enterprises and the concentration camp system, also held the rank of "General der Waffen-SS und Polizei****" Pohl was found guilty at the Nuremberg war crimes trials and executed by the Allies.

Another example of a nefarious SS officer with a Waffen-SS rank would be

SS-Oberstgruppenführer Karl Wolff, whose wartime career included developing death camps in Poland and surrender negotiations with the Allies on the behalf of Himmler in 1945. Wolff wrote an SS transportation official about his "Special joy now that 5,000 members of the Chosen People are going to Triblinka every day.****"

SS-Standartenführer Joachim Peiper is famous for his military exploits. A lesser known aspect of

WaffenSS Background

his career is is staff work as an adjutant for Himmler. Part of his job was arranging meetings between Himmler and concentration camp commanders.

* see Himmler's Calvary, footnote #69, p. 205

** SS: Roll of Infamy p. 133

*** Victory in Europe p. 26.

Totenkopf division originally staffed with concentration camp personnel. Divisional CO SS-Obergruppenführer Theodor "Papa" Eicke created the regulations governing concentration camp prisoners.*

Up to 1,500 Waffen-SS troops transferred to the Einsatzgruppen as a disciplinary measure: "...They are late or fall asleep on duty. They are court-marshalled but are told they can escape punishment by volunteering for the Special Commandos. Well, these commandos...are murder commandos. When these young men realize what they are being asked to do and refuse to take part in mass murder, they are told the orders are given them as a form of punishment. Either they can obey and take that punishment or they can disobey and be shot...By such methods decent young men are turned into criminals."

SS-Obergruppenführer Georg Keppler**

Waffen-SS Training & Replacement Units used to put down the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

*** Soldiers of Destruction**

**** Stein, pg. 263**

Did the Waffen-SS materially benefit from the Holocaust?

The answer is yes.

much Waffen-SS clothing and equipment made from Jewish slave labor confiscated Jewish winter clothing given to SSTK troops*

Soldiers of Destruction pg. 217. primary source BAMA: "part of the shipments came from the huge SS warehouse of confiscated goods in Riga controlled by the HSSPF for Northern Russia."

Doubtless some of this clothing formerly belonged to Jewish people. (since Riga contained a sizeable prewar Jewish population)

Was the Waffen-SS indirectly associated with the Holocaust?

The answer is yes.

Concentration camp personnel or Waffen-SS, all server under the same leader (Himmler)

It's a question of ideology. Were the commanders of the Waffen-SS not committed National Socialists? If you asked SS-Oberstgruppenführer ('Sepp') Dietrich, Eicke, SS-Brigaführer

Hermann Otto Fegelein, etc. "Are you willing to implement measures to implement Der Führer

"Final Solution to the Jewish Question?" - what do you think their answer would be?

Their answer would be "yes"

WaffenSS Background

Ultimately, the Nüemberg War Crimes trial was entirely correct in labeling the SS a "criminal organization."

The Waffen-SS is a disquieting paradox for the Western mind. It was an elite military formation in the Western model - corageous and sometimes chivalrous. It was simultaneously bloodthirsty, cruel and a willing participant in Hitler's Weltanschauung*

To deny the role of the Waffen-SS in war crimes is a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of the Waffen-SS as even Waffen-SS soldiers understood it. The purpose of the Waffen-SS was to impose and protect Hitler's world view on the greater European continent - nothing less.