

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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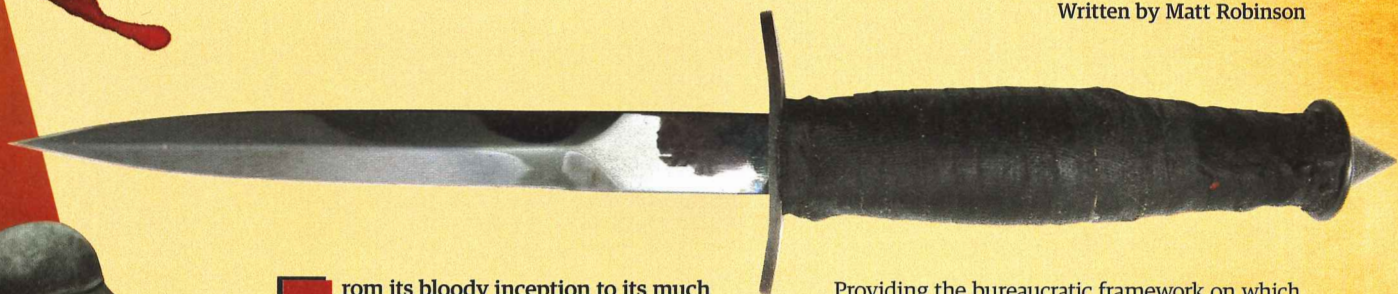
Robinson, M. (2018). Terror of the Gestapo. *All about history*, (73), pp. 28-37.



TERROR OF THE GESTAPO

Inside Hitler's secret police, from their insidious rise with the Third Reich combating enemies within to the brutality of Nazi occupation in the east

Written by Matt Robinson



From its bloody inception to its much overdue demise, the Nazi state was profoundly concerned with its appearance. In few domains was this obsession so consequential as that of the much-feared secret police force - the Gestapo.

Unlike other uniformed branches of the regime, however, these ruthless plain-clothed enforcers shied away from the public pageantry favoured by the National Socialist system. No mass Gestapo formations would participate in the annual party rallies. Instead relying on a carefully stage-managed and systematically disseminated image formed in the shadows to establish a reputation of omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. An intentionally vague arena leaving ample room for fears and assumptions.

This devoted cadre of ideological policemen would be used by the regime to extinguish dissent, further Nazi expansion, and pacify populations in occupied territories.

Providing the bureaucratic framework on which the Holocaust was built.

Such was the extent of the Gestapo's unbridled brutality that the spectre of this organisation still overshadows the European continent. Although the stories of the savagery of its methods remain true - emblematic of the interplay of bureaucracy and atrocity that marked the Nazi regime's existence - the idea of its pervasiveness, in particular, deserves closer inspection.

Founded 27 April 1933, shortly after the Nazi seizure of power, the Gestapo - an abbreviation of *Geheime Staatspolizei* (Secret State Police) coined as shorthand by a postal clerk - was initially a consolidation of the intelligence and political police in Prussia, the largest of Germany's states. Overseen by Hermann Göring, interior minister of Prussia and future *Luftwaffe* chief, this new organisation would grow to become a mechanism for exercising control over all of German society and ensuring complete obedience to the National

Geheime Staatspolizei

Socialist ideal. The ultimate administration of this political police force would involve much internal wrangling, as Heinrich Himmler - then in charge of the police force in Bavaria, Germany's second largest state - sought to wrestle control from Göring. By April 1934, Himmler was awarded command of the political police as head of the German police in all states outside of Prussia; two days later his deputy, Reinhard Heydrich, was appointed chief of the Gestapo. Heydrich would bring with him the ambitious workaholic Heinrich Müller - later to become chief of the Gestapo from 1939 - a dedicated police officer from Bavaria with a proven record of confronting left-wing groups.

Although the organisation had been involved in facilitating the Nazi takeover - with the first Gestapo chief, Rudolf Diels, tasked with interrogating the young Dutchman, Marinus van der Lubbe, held responsible for the 1933 Reichstag fire - the first major test of its true dedication to the cause would come in June 1934. In seizing control of Germany, the Nazis had turned against old enemies, exacting revenge on the so-called 'November Criminals' who were said to have betrayed the country during the First World War.

"By April 1934, Himmler was awarded command of the political police"

With equal viciousness they would turn against those within the party who stood as a threat to the continuity of the regime. The Gestapo's participation in the decapitation of the Sturmabteilung (SA) leadership in 1934 - commonly known as Night of the Long Knives - served not only to prove the organisation an essential tool deathly loyal to the Führer in purging enemies within the Nazi rank and file, but also an important administrative purpose. The Gestapo, and Hitler's bodyguard unit - the Schutzstaffel (SS) - were technically subordinate to the Sturmabteilung at this time. Participating in the bloodletting of the Brownshirts - with the Gestapo providing information and the SS carrying out executions - meant that both organisations could free themselves from the obstacle of being administered by the SA leadership.

While the SS eventually sought to position itself as the soul of the National Socialist movement, it was the Gestapo that would come to serve as its heart. The SS was tasked with maintaining the purity of the blood, while the Gestapo was more concerned with keeping the blood pumping in the name of the the German people.

Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Hitler and Viktor Lutze in Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film about the Nuremberg Rally



Gestapo conference following an assassination attempt against Adolf Hitler in 1939 (From left: Franz Huber, Arthur Nebe, Heinrich Himmler, Reinhard Heydrich and Heinrich Müller)



THE MACHINERY OF 'JUSTICE'

Step-by-step from investigation to arrest to the suspect's ultimate fate

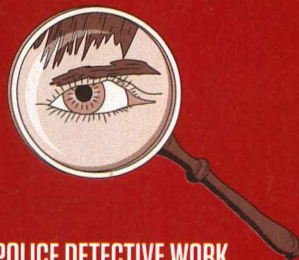
First Stage: Lead



DENUNCIATION

The vast amount of the Gestapo's information came from informers and public cooperation.

An estimated 80 per cent of all Gestapo investigations were started following denunciations from member of the public.



POLICE DETECTIVE WORK

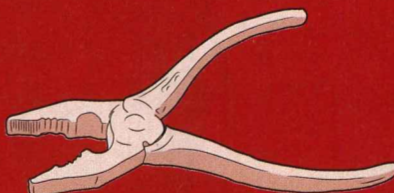
Unlike the criminal police, the Gestapo existed to counter political crimes - although this would also sometimes require the same police techniques. Around 10 per cent of investigations were started using information the Gestapo unearthed.



DEPARTMENTAL REPORTS

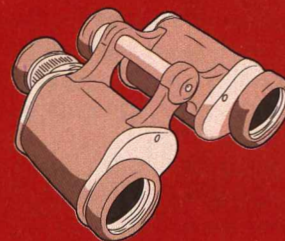
Reports to the Gestapo would often be provided by different government branches, especially the Sicherheitsdienst. An estimated 10 per cent of Gestapo investigations were started following reports from other agencies.

Second Stage: Investigation



INTERROGATION

The questioning of a prisoner was essential to every case, as it served not only to unearth information relevant to the offence but also as an opportunity to acquire information about other offenders. Torture existed as a means of 'loosening up' uncooperative suspects. It is widely considered that torture by the Gestapo often yielded imperfect results but was easier than relying on detective work.



MONITORING

Where necessary Gestapo officers may open a case file on an individual suspected of an offence, or denounced, but rather than bringing the suspect in for questioning decide to monitor and follow the individual. Monitoring for further information allowed the Gestapo to construct a better understanding of a opposition network before trying to infiltrate it or establishing a special task unit.

Final Stage: Judgement



PROTECTIVE CUSTODY

As a means of indeterminate detention, the protective custody order was a method of expediting the Gestapo's approach to transforming German society. Imprisonment was usually imposed in a concentration camp, such as Dachau or Sachsenhausen. While the acquisition of prisoners fell under the control of the Gestapo, their detention following arrest and a protective custody order meant they would be transferred into the hands of the SS.



EXECUTION

Although death in Gestapo custody was not uncommon as a result of torture or interrogation, the execution of prisoners would often take place within the realm of the concentration camp at the hands of the SS or in an execution house following a trial. Towards the end of the Second World War, when the Gestapo was tasked with countering defeatism in the population, officers would bypass the first stages and pronounce judgement before personally executing individuals.



THE PEOPLE'S COURT

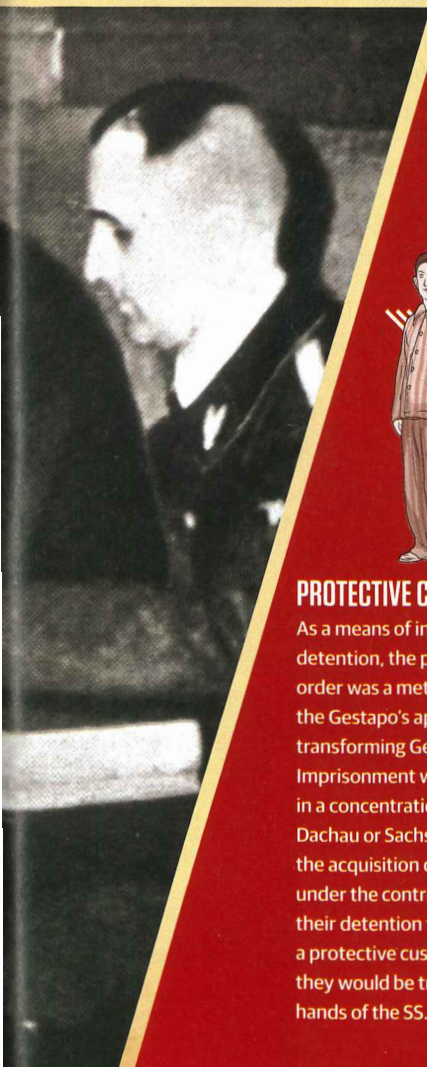
Where it was seen necessary to make a spectacle of the accused, as in the case of the July 1944 assassination attempt plotters, the Gestapo could send individuals to the People's Court for public pronouncement. Members of the White Rose resistance group were also found guilty in the People's Court, after Gestapo arrest. Two thirds of the individuals found not guilty would be subsequently arrested by the Gestapo and sent to concentration camps regardless.



RELEASE

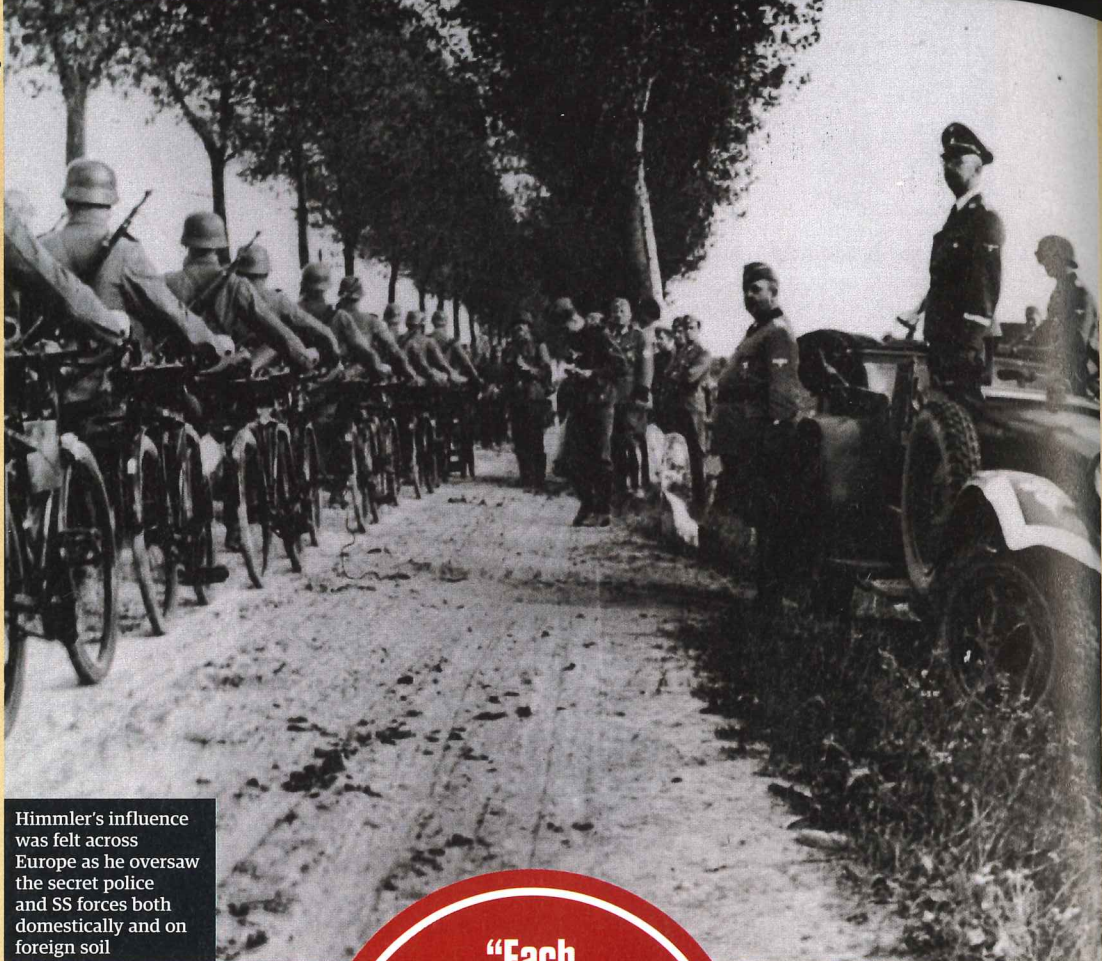
When the offence committed was not considered sufficient to warrant further action the individual could be released. First-time offenders, specifically those who joked about the regime, were often released, so long as there were no obvious ties to dissident organisations. Releasing a suspect back into the general population could also send a message to a dissident group that the individual had been turned and was now working for the state - making them ineffective.

Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS and Gestapo



Speaking to Gestapo staff in October 1934, Himmler described the action against the Sturmabteilung leadership as "the worst day that could happen to a soldier in his life". And that "having to shoot one's own comrades... is the most bitter experience that can happen to a person". Outlining his idyllic vision of the agency, he added, "The nation must believe that if someone is pulled in he has been justly pulled in; they must believe that in all other matters, if they don't harm the state, the members of the Secret State Police will behave in a friendly way, that they have warm hearts and an absolute sense of justice."

By 1936, the Gestapo would emerge as an independent organisation - subordinate to Heinrich Himmler as head of the SS, who was directly answerable only to Adolf Hitler. With the passage of the so-called Gestapo Law, Hitler had unified all police forces in Germany and named Himmler as the chief of the German Police.



Himmler's influence was felt across Europe as he oversaw the secret police and SS forces both domestically and on foreign soil

THE POWER OF THE GESTAPO

This law ensured the complete autonomy of the Gestapo to act without judicial review or be accountable to any civil authority, stating that "neither the instructions nor the affairs of the Gestapo will be open to review by the administrative courts" while the organisation was tasked with searching "for any intention which would endanger the state".

From 1936, the right to act with impunity became a Gestapo prerogative. Individuals threatening the unity of the National Socialist state would fall under its remit merely by their thoughts or intentions - rather than their actions. Before even committing a crime an individual could be dealt with - based on the most minor evidence. Although this served largely as a way of fast-tracking known enemies into detention rather than dealing with new ones guilty of the variety of new offences introduced by the state.

The true power of the Gestapo was most apparent in its authority to arrest and detain

suspects indefinitely without trial. The imposition of so-called 'Protective Custody' (Schutzhaft) existed as the most significant instrument in the arsenal of the Nazi secret police, ensuring that the organisation was able to quickly dispatch anyone considered an enemy of the regime with little concern for anything other than its own efficiency. Unlike the Stalinist Soviet system of the time that preferred public show trials - with foregone conclusions - the Nazi stranglehold on society would be frequently performed in the shadows, providing cover for the numerical deficiencies of the organisation that largely relied on denunciations from the populace

"Each Gestapo agent operated like a spider at the center of a large web of spies"

or fellow Nazi party officials.

At its peak the Gestapo employed only about 40,000 individuals, including office personnel. But each Gestapo agent operated like a spider at the centre of a large web of spies and informants - allowing fear and horror to weave its way through the public mind. Following the purge of the Brownshirts in 1934, Nazi officials certainly knew that there was a responsibility to denounce enemies within their own ranks to the Gestapo. They were aware of the consequences if they did not, but also aware of the reward of being seen as true servants of the machinations of the Third Reich when they did, which was also a powerful motivator.



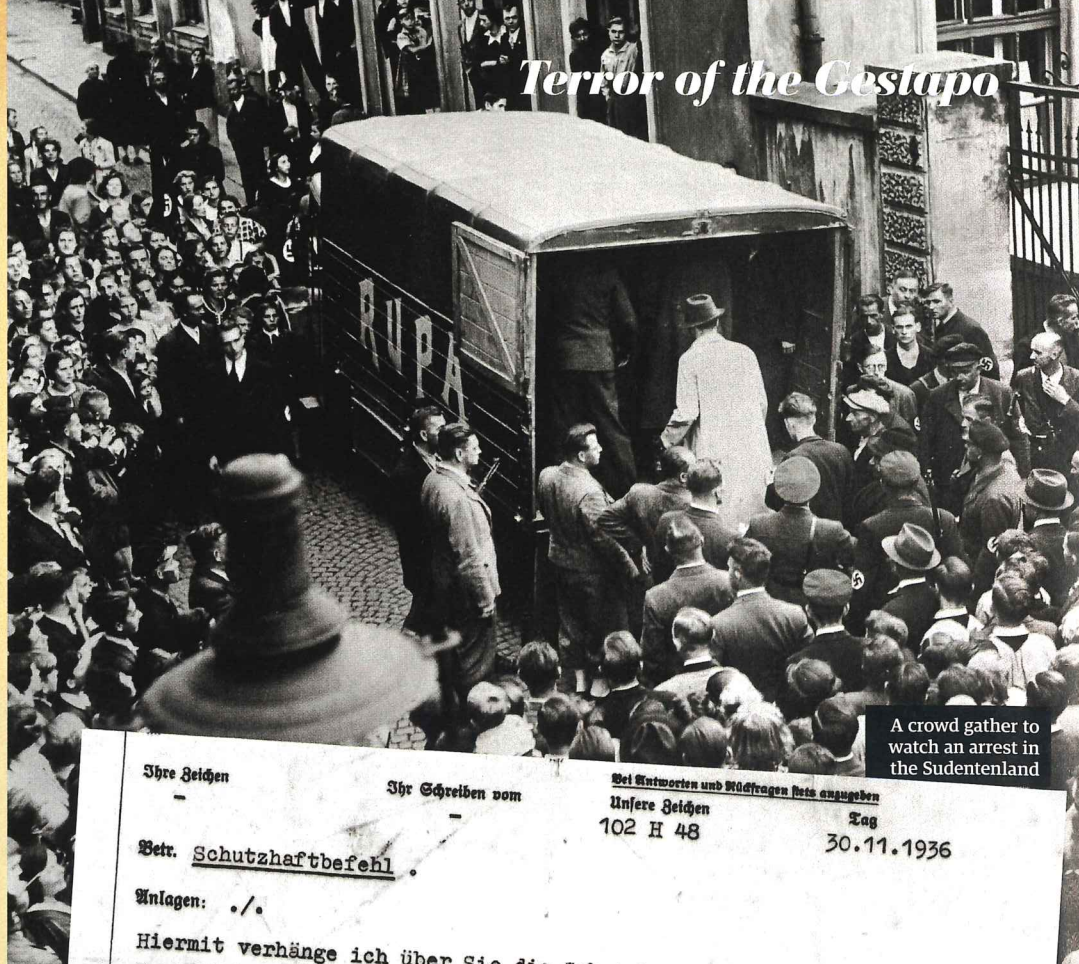
TIMELINE OF THE GESTAPO

The rise and fall of the totalitarian terror state





Hermann Göring, founder of the Gestapo, yields control to SS Chief Heinrich Himmler in 1934

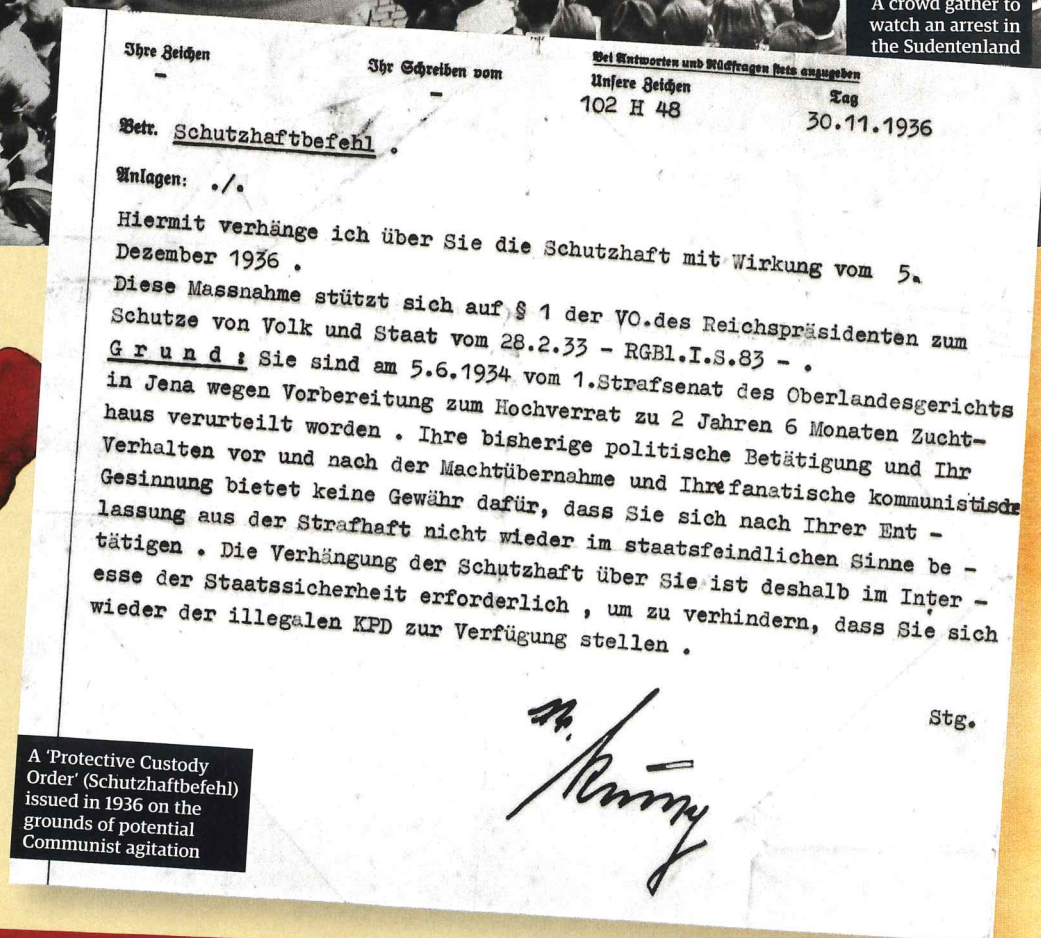


A crowd gather to watch an arrest in the Sudetenland

THE GESTAPO IN GERMANY

Nowhere in Germany were the enemies of National Socialism safe from the Gestapo. Communists, Social Democrats, and other political enemies of the regime were monitored, arrested and subject to indefinite detention - often leading to their death.

Catholic priests critical of the regime would be investigated, murdered or deported to concentration camps. Homosexuals tortured, imprisoned, and killed. Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma/Sinti, so-called "Asocials" and the workshy found themselves targets of the Gestapo. Sharing political jokes could lead to imprisonment. Questioning the Party's wisdom or failing to return the 'Heil Hitler' greeting would prompt further investigation. The Gestapo would seek to combat the 'Anglophiliac tendencies' of the swing dance youth, where jazz and swing music were seen as an expression of opposition to the regime.



A 'Protective Custody Order' (Schutzhaftbefehl) issued in 1936 on the grounds of potential Communist agitation



Geheime Staatspolizei

In 1940 the organisation even began to target clairvoyants and astrologers to try to paint the flight of Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess as a result of his occult beliefs. Anyone guilty of spreading rumours about the state or making derogatory remarks about the Nazi leadership could be targeted by the Gestapo, following a law introduced in 1934 criminalising 'malicious gossip'. Listening to foreign radio after the start of the Second World War in 1939 was said to endanger the war effort by undermining the will of the German people to fight.

The Extraordinary Radio Measures of 1939 made listening to enemy broadcasts an offence punishable by hard labour, sharing information with others from the broadcasts was a capital offence. Within the first year of the law's introduction some 4,000 people were arrested and prosecuted for radio crime.

Although this was more severely punished than malicious gossip, defeatism would come to be considered an even greater offence. In reality the attempted pacification of the German population by the Gestapo hardly meant true adherence to Nazi doctrine, beyond what was displayed in public. Although, the presence of such a haunting

image of a political police within German society did succeed in creating a Panopticon effect whereby this seemingly monolithic agency turned the populace into a self-policing body.

Driven by the assumption that the Gestapo was all-seeing and all-knowing, citizens would seek to denounce each other before being denounced themselves. Constantly vigilant and uniformly fearful. Around 80 per cent of Gestapo cases would begin with denunciations.

Torture of prisoners has since been considered widespread during Gestapo interrogations, although what constituted acceptable methods was clearly outlined in prisoners records, which often featured blank spaces or short phrases seemingly indicating a lack of details. In reality this is a likely indication of the use of 'extraordinary measures'.

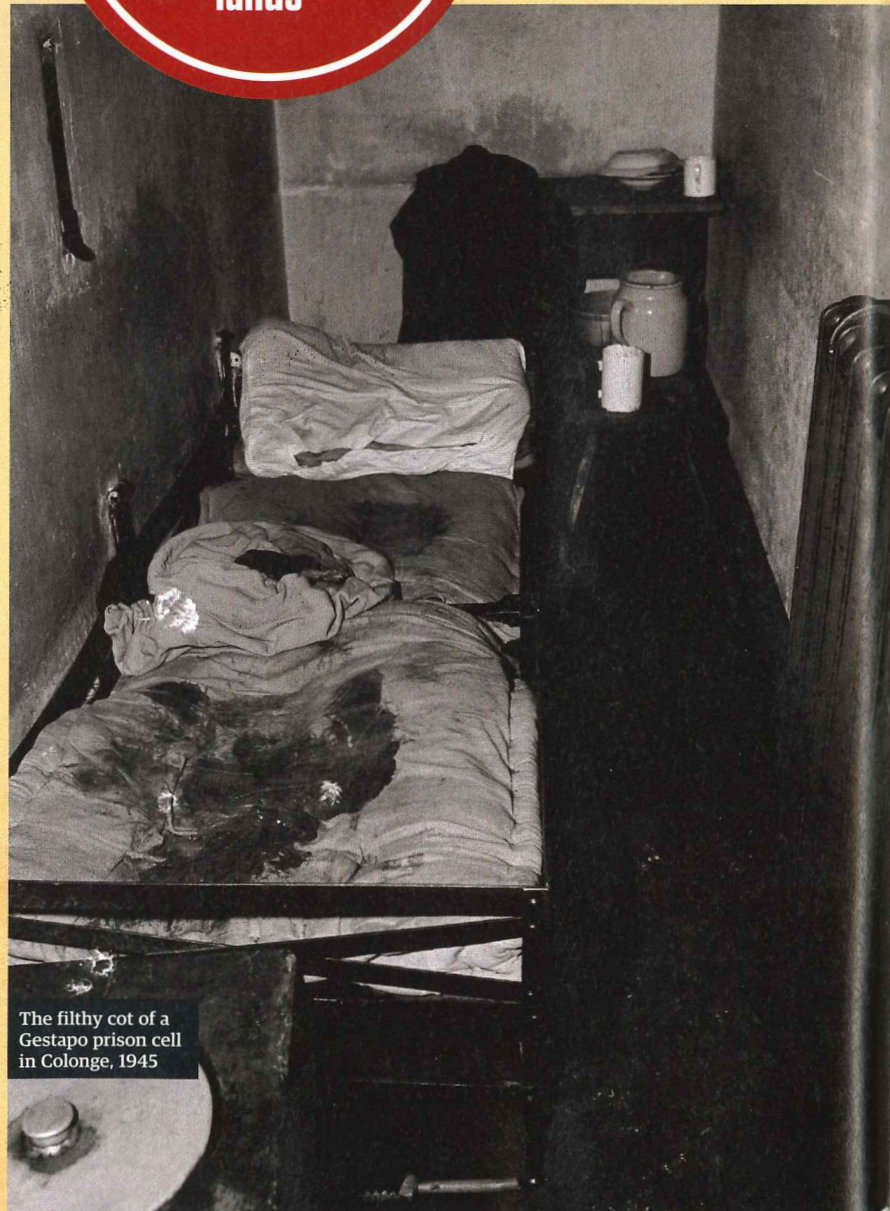
While members of the so-called Volksgemeinschaft might be treated more fairly, it seems there was tacit understanding that the courtesy of

kindness need not apply to certain officially undesirable groups. Detainees at the Gestapo central prison on Prinz-Albrecht Strasse in Berlin would be photographed as part of their admission - and often displayed the signs of maltreatment on their faces. As with other official actions - such as the planning and implementation of the Holocaust - the activities of the Gestapo would often be internally described using euphemisms. As such torture was referred to as 'enhanced interrogation' (verschärfte Vernehmung), to shield the perpetrators from the reality of their crimes and disguise the offences from any later scrutiny. A Gestapo memo dated 12 June 1942 explaining new regulations regarding torture techniques by secret police chief Heinrich

Müller outlined what was considered acceptable without further approval from senior officers. Reduction of rations, sleep deprivation, and blows with a stick (although any more than 20 would require a doctor to be present). In practice, the oversight of a superior officer was very rarely required.

"The Gestapo became a sharpened tool exported to other lands"

Gestapo in the House by German-Jewish artist Lea Grundig captures the anxiety of a raid



The filthy cot of a Gestapo prison cell in Colonge, 1945

THE GESTAPO IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Despite the intermittent official pandering to civility, the Nazis did little to publicly conceal the existence of their repressive apparatus. While the world continued to deal with Hitler's government as if it were a legitimate regime, there would later be disbelief when the same methods were introduced in an attempt to pacify populations in the wake of the Nazi onslaught. From an instrument of terror forged within Germany - the Gestapo became a sharpened tool exported to other lands as they were absorbed by the Nazis' expansionist advances.

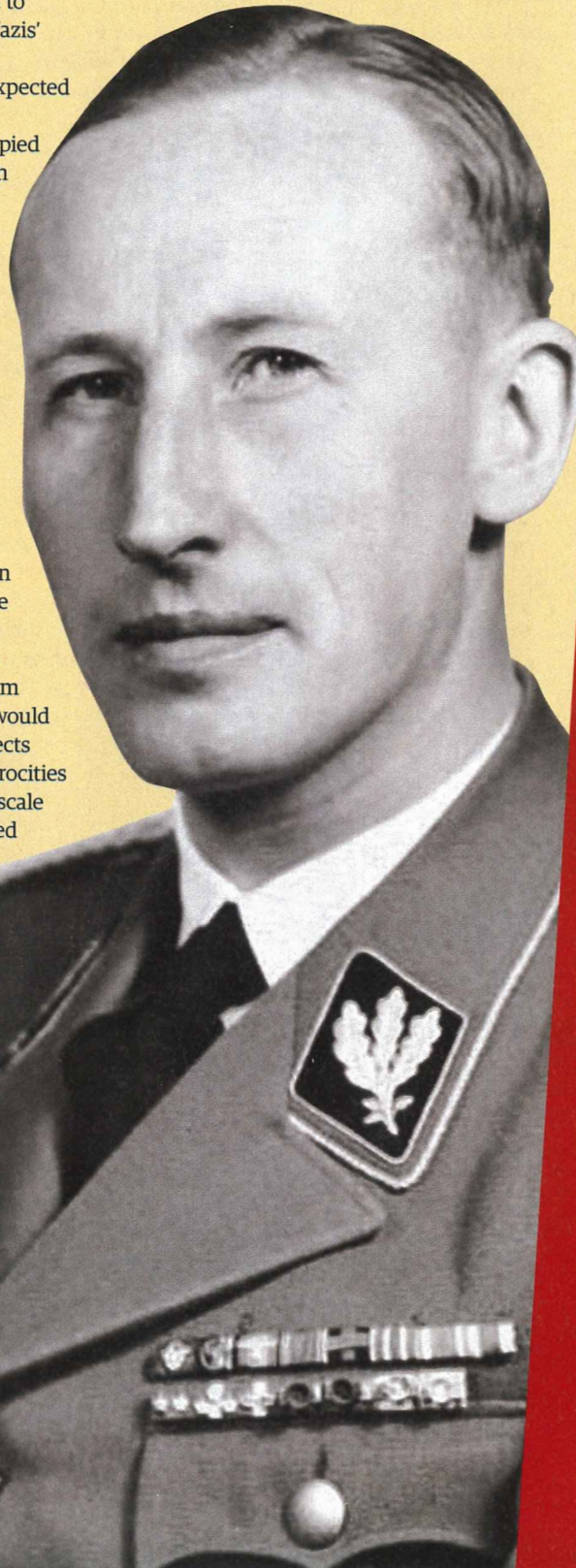
While the organisation may have been expected to maintain a level of respectability within Germany, the widening of its scope to occupied territories saw it operating more in line with the famous maxim of Roman Emperor Caligula, "I do not care if they love me, so long as they fear me." Gestapo forces would enter Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland at the same time as the fighting troops. Establishing authority in the newly conquered territories would be paramount.

Like in Germany, the Gestapo drew on informants in the local population - collecting confessions, gossip and denunciations - and were aided by local police forces. When France's turn came in 1940, however, the German military would insist that Himmler's terror troops remain in the rear - shocked as they were at the police commandos' behaviour in Poland.

While Gestapo officers were largely desk-bound in their early years, leaving to perform police duties and deal with suspects, they would be essential to the Nazi extermination projects carried out in Eastern Europe. The many atrocities carried out by the Nazi regime - the whole scale murder of Polish intelligentsia, the attempted eradication of European Jews - would not have been possible without the connivance and support of the Gestapo. With many officers involved in the Special Extermination Squads

(Einsatzgruppen) and roundup of racial enemies for execution, others formed the bureaucratic backbone of the operation. Systematic reprisals against the civilian populations of occupied countries would be carried out by Gestapo death squads and hostage taking was not uncommon.

Within weeks of the invasion of Poland in September 1939, Himmler and Heydrich sought to further centralise their control over police actions at home and in the occupied countries. The Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service) and Sicherheitspolizei (Security Police, the Gestapo and the regular police, the Kripo) would be merged



Reinhard Heydrich was chief of the Reich Main Security Office until his assassination in 1942



INSIDE DEPARTMENT IV

From 1941 the Gestapo (Department IV of the RSHA) was concerned with the following responsibilities

IV A - POLITICAL OPPONENTS

IV A 1: Communism

IV A 2: Sabotage

IV A 3: Liberalism and Emigrants

IV A 4: Assassinations

IV B - SECTS AND CHURCHES

IV B 1: Catholicism

IV B 2: Protestantism

IV B 3: Freemasonry

IV B 4: Evacuations and Jews

IV C - ADMIN AND PARTY AFFAIRS

IV C 1: Card Indexes and Visas

IV C 2: Protective Custody

IV C 3: Press and Literature

IV C 4: Party Issues

IV D - SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

IV D 1: Czechoslovakia

IV D 2: Poland

IV D 3: Enemy Alien Informants

IV D 4: Occupied Territories

IV E - SECURITY AND COUNTERINTELLIGENCE

IV E 1: Economic Espionage

IV E 2: Counterintelligence West

IV E 3: Counterintelligence North

IV E 4: Counterintelligence East

IV E 5: Counterintelligence South



THEY ALL TALK IN THE END

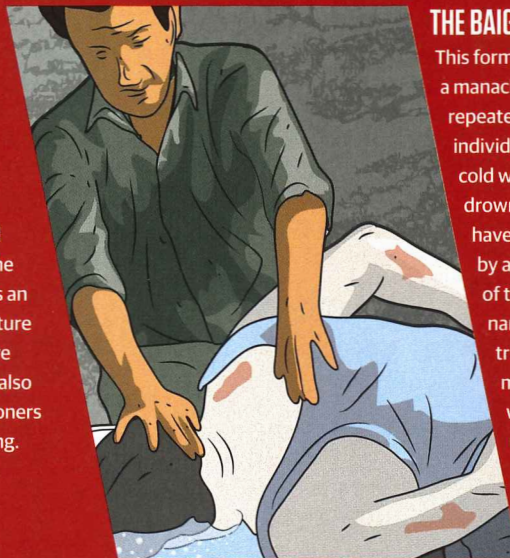
Six horrific methods by which the Gestapo obtained 'evidence'



FORCED STANDING

Prisoners brought in for questioning could be kept standing for hours on end in the corridors of Gestapo offices or locations chosen for interrogation – denied food and the use of the bathrooms. Useful as a clean method of torture that would not leave physical scars and also to 'soften up' prisoners before questioning.

Use: Officially sanctioned



THE BAIGNOIRE

This form of waterboarding a manacled prisoner by repeatedly plunging the individual into a bath of cold water until almost drowned was said to have been pioneered by a Belgian member of the French Gestapo named Masuy. While on trial in 1947 Masuy would maintain that his method was more humane than pulling fingernails.

Use: Not officially sanctioned but applied in special cases



THE STRAPPADO

A wooden post the prisoner could be lifted onto with his/her hands tied behind their back, the wrists balanced on a high nail. The whole body would then lean forwards with weight resting on the chest, forcing the dislocation of the shoulders, restricting breathing and causing immense pain. When no post was available officers could use trees or an implement attached to a wall.

Use: Sanctioned only with authorisation in special cases



SLEEP DEPRIVATION

Similar to forced standing, sleep deprivation could be used to make a prisoner more responsive to the demands and questions of an officer without leaving physical evidence of its application. The prisoner could be placed inside a brightly lit cell and constantly monitored by a guard so as not to be allowed to sleep – or subject to prolonged interrogation with different officers over a duration of days.

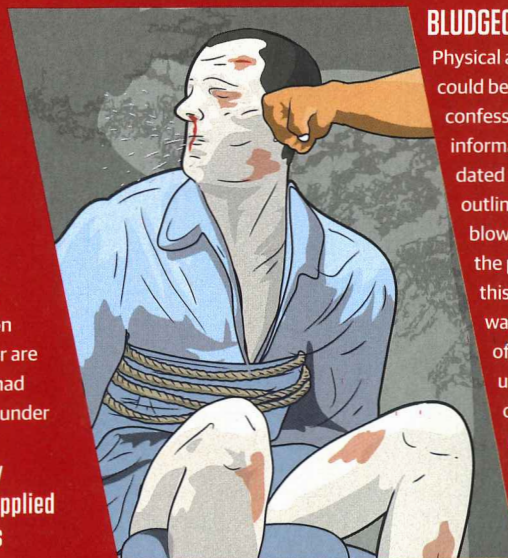
Use: Officially sanctioned



EXTRACTION OF TEETH AND FINGERNAILS

Gestapo officers could slowly remove fingernails, toenails and teeth with the promise of reducing further suffering if the prisoner confessed. A number of individuals interrogated after the July 1944 assassination attempt against Hitler are also known to have had metal spikes driven under their fingernails.

Use: Not officially sanctioned but applied in special cases



BLUDGEONING THE PRISONER

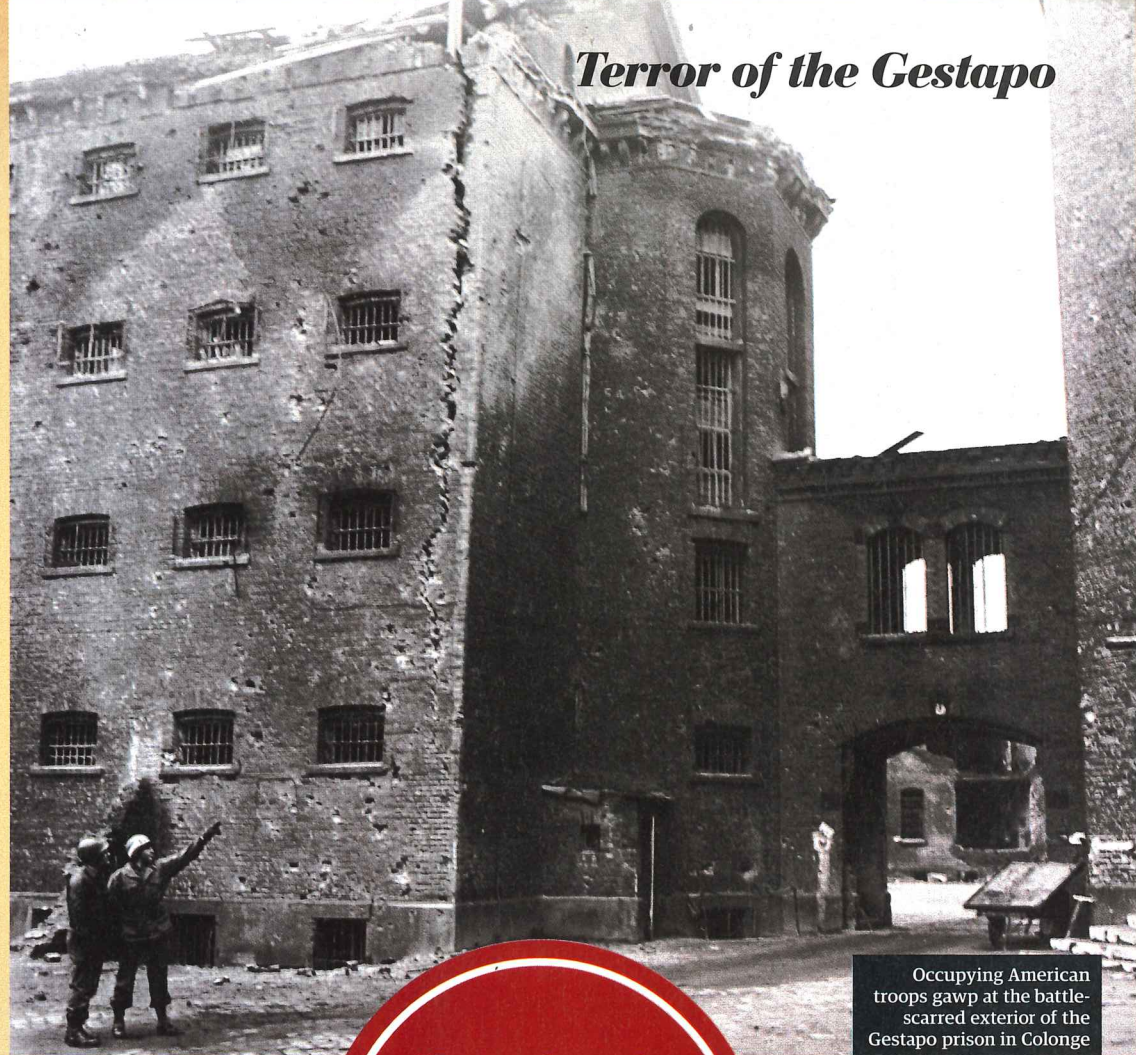
Physical acts against a prisoner could be used to elicit a confession or provide further information. A Gestapo memo dated June 1942 officially outlined that more than 20 blows with a stick would require the presence of a doctor. Despite this, violence against prisoners was not uncommon when the offender came from an officially undesirable group or when operations were carried out in occupied countries.

Use: Officially sanctioned but with limited application





Soviet soldiers inspect a Gestapo office



Occupying American troops gawp at the battle-scarred exterior of the Gestapo prison in Cologne

into the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (the Reich Main Security Office/RSHA), with its offices in a building on Prinz-Albrecht-Straße in central Berlin. The Gestapo would be from then included as Department IV - although because of the frequent changes in structure of the Nazi secret police and intelligence forces many of the tasks the organisation was assigned would intersect with other departments. Despite this the Gestapo remained the pivot on which the other pieces moved. It was thus not uncommon for Gestapo officers to also hold rank within the SS or SD while carrying out their duties - sometimes adopting uniforms whilst engaged in the east so as to not be confused for partisans.

Working under Gestapo chief, Heinrich Müller, in 1939 was a German-Austrian SS officer named Adolf Eichmann - an efficient and energetic organiser tasked with running the Central Office for Jewish Emigration. Following the establishment of the RSHA, Eichmann would be assigned to Department IV B4 - the Gestapo Office of Jewish Affairs - coordinating with police agencies and regional government officials to organise the deportation and extermination of millions of European Jews. Both Eichmann and Müller would also attend the infamous Wannsee Conference in January 1942 to formulate the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question", alongside RSHA chief Heydrich. When in September 1941, the chemical pesticide Zyklon B was introduced for the purpose of industrial killing at Auschwitz, it would be a Gestapo commission that would identify 600 Soviet prisoners as "fanatical

communists" - destined to become the first victims of the horrific method.

The progress of the Second World War only served to accelerate the brutality by which the Gestapo dealt with dissent - responding to the mounting chaos with increased security measures, public executions, and mass arrests. In 1941 Hitler issued the Night & Fog Decree (Nacht und Nebel) authorising anyone "endangering German security" to be disappeared without a trace.

Approximately 7,000 individuals would be arrested in western Europe and face special kangaroo courts, many executed and many more sent to concentration camps without their families or loved ones aware of their fate. A further illustration of the ruthlessness of the Gestapo's resolve came in 1944, when Heinrich Müller issued an injunction known as the "cartridge directive". This stipulated that Soviet POWs who had assisted in the identification of political commissars for the purpose of their execution should also be executed on the grounds that they were Geheimnisträger (bearers of secrets).

AN END WITH HORROR

Soon the restraint that the Gestapo offered in its early years when dealing with 'racial comrades' at home would melt away in the chaos of the end

"Approximately 7,000 individuals would be arrested in western Europe"

of the war. In September 1944, Gestapo officers were authorised to carry out summary executions of looters - previously only allowed for foreign cases but now applicable to German citizens. Defeatism and questioning the methods of the regime would also be more swiftly dealt with. In March 1945 when

a local fireman near Bochum spoke out against the Gestapo execution of three captured British airmen, he was himself executed. A fate that would befall thousands more German citizens at the hands of the Gestapo as the regime convulsed in its dying throes.

The existence of this secret political police organisation had always served to expose the major contradiction inherent in the National Socialist totalitarian system. Despite its projections of power, the success of the Nazi regime needed to be enforced, not only rooting out perceived enemies but simultaneously demanding total loyalty from the populace. Responding to even minor infractions as if they were a metastasizing cancer threatening to overwhelm the whole.

Concerned that without the suppression of dissent that the mask might fall - and the idea of the popularity and righteousness of the Nazi regime with it. In the bodies left behind and the minds irreparably scarred, the price paid as Hitler's terror corps sought to pacify first German society and the European continent was incredibly high.