

Schutzstaffel (SS) <<*SHOOTS shtah fuhl*,>> was a military group of Germany's Nazi Party. The Nazi Party (National Socialist German Workers' Party) rose to power under the leadership of Adolf Hitler. The Nazis formed the SS in 1925. During World War II (1939-1945), many SS units fought alongside the regular German army. Other SS units murdered millions of civilians, including those in concentration camps. *Schutzstaffel* is German for *protection squadron*.

The SS was a *paramilitary* organization—that is, an unofficial military group. At first, SS units served as bodyguards for Hitler and other Nazi leaders. In 1929, under the direction of Heinrich Himmler, the SS began a period of rapid expansion. By the mid-1930's, the SS had become a political and military force of more than 200,000 members. Responsibilities of the SS often included the enforcement of Nazi racial doctrine based largely on *anti-Semitism* (prejudice against Jews). Nazi leaders selected members of the SS according to their racial purity and loyalty to the Nazi Party.

After 1932, most SS troops wore all-black uniforms. Some units—known as the *Totenkopfverbände*, or *Death's Head Battalions*—wore skull-and-crossbones symbols. These units primarily ran concentration camps. During World War II, the organization's combat units—the *Waffen (Armed) SS*—wore the same gray uniforms as regular German soldiers. The *Waffen SS* gained a reputation for both professionalism and brutality on the battlefield.

Special SS task forces called *Einsatzgruppen* (Mission Groups) committed war crimes in Nazi-occupied areas of Europe. These forces acted mainly as death squads, killing large numbers of Polish and Soviet civilians and prisoners. *Einsatzgruppen* murdered more than 1 million people apart from those who died in concentration camps. After the war, more than 1,500 SS troops stood trial for war crimes.