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**“An Examination of the Development of SS Guard Behaviours and the Factors which Contributed
to their Actions in the Nazi Concentration Camp System”**

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

York St John University

School of Humanities

September 2022

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Abstract

The men of Heinrich Himmler's SS have long been recognised as the chief implementers of the Nazis' Final Solution to the Jewish Question in Europe. Their crimes were extensive, occurring whilst SS men served in different formations, in different places and affected different victims. In the concentration camps, SS guards developed alongside the system in which they worked from 1933-1945. Over this time, the Camp SS abused and killed enemies of the regime at will. Due to the camp system's fluidity, evolving in its purpose from protective custody prison network to slave labour enterprise and, in some instances, killing facility, addressing perpetrator behaviour is complex. Nonetheless, it is essential in improving our collective understanding of the SS' actions in the camps and a prerequisite for ensuring such crimes cannot be repeated in future. This thesis explores the journey of SS guards through the system's existence with the purpose of identifying the key factors which prompted them to display cruel behaviours. Supported by analyses of youth influences and of the supposed elite status of the SS, it maps out the development of the camp killers across the early, middle, and late periods of the camp system. Though in recent decades perpetrator histories have sought to identify the key catalysts for SS behaviour, there is a lack of consensus on the topic. This study demonstrates that as the camps grew increasingly independent, the units attached to them developed a resolve to act as they pleased. The camp guards and their officers became masters of their murderous craft and were poorly controlled by the SS leadership which allowed for vice and excess to thrive. The camp system ultimately became an unwieldy behemoth manned by autonomous killers who had more power over life in the camps than senior Nazis in Berlin.

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Introduction

Opting for an approach which minimises psychological diagnoses in favour of historical analysis, this study explores the central factors and events which motivated the concentration camp guards within Nazi Germany's *Schutzstaffel* (Protection Squadron, or SS) to carry out violent abuses and murder between 1933 and 1945. It seeks to build upon the current state of knowledge within the specialised field of perpetrator history pertaining to the Third Reich. Gaining traction in the 1990s, Nazi perpetrator history has helped to demystify the nature of Adolf Hitler's killers, rather than unhelpfully misdiagnosing them as uniquely evil aberrations as was the dominant strain of thought in the public mind in the early post-war period. Niels Weise aptly underlines that perpetrator research has demonstrated its necessity in recent years, particularly relating to the SS in the concentration camps.¹ Notwithstanding the heightened focus in recent decades, there is still a great deal that is unknown about the camp perpetrators and there is no adequate roadmap of the development of the SS perpetrators in the KL. Accepting the overwhelming normality and heterogeneity of men who joined the SS in the camps does not explain to historians why their behaviours radicalised considerably over time. Simply tying it to the evolution of the camps is also unsatisfactory in explaining perpetrator development. Rather, the key events and changes that shaped guards' actions must be more clearly emphasised to understand the conversion of initially violent bullies into merciless mass murderers. This study thus fills a troublesome gap in the understanding of concentration camp SS perpetrators' actions from 1933-1945. Whilst other historians, as will be discussed below, have engaged with the topic with varying success, this thesis represents a different approach to the matter. Engaging with the camp system from its first days to the end of the war, this study follows its history and explores its key changes with the central goal of interpreting their impact upon the SS. Such an examination reveals that control over the system and the men who served it was inconsistent, creating a plenitude of problems for the SS leadership which shall be expanded upon shortly. Prior to this, however, it is prudent to examine in some depth the historiography of the topic of Nazi perpetrators, their nature, and their motivations to injure and kill at the behest of their leaders.

¹ N. Weise, *Eicke: Eine SS-Karriere zwischen Nervenlinik, KZ-System und Waffen-SS* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2013), 23.

Historiography of Nazi Perpetrators

One of the very first authors to search for the true nature of Nazi killers was Hannah Arendt who, having witnessed *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Adolf Eichmann's 1961 trial in Jerusalem, commented, two years later, on the "banality of evil" she had observed.² This phrase underlined her assessment that evil did not manifest itself in aesthetically monstrous villains but, rather, everyday people. Eichmann, she stated, was "an average, 'normal' person, neither feeble-minded nor indoctrinated nor cynical", further adding that, in the courtroom, "everybody could see that this man was not a 'monster'".³ In spite of arranging the deportation of hundreds of thousands of innocents to Auschwitz-Birkenau's gas chambers, Eichmann was seen as a human, albeit an inherently amoral one. Arendt's view of the banal nature of Nazi evil, embodied by Eichmann, was well-respected in the field despite its empirical basis and focus upon one high-profile perpetrator. In recent years its influence has waned, and criticism has come from numerous sources. José Brunner points out that Arendt's diagnosis of perpetrators as ordinary men seeking to please superiors as opposed to fanatics and sadists is controversial.⁴ Tom Segev, who focuses upon the concentration camp commandants, concludes that the 'banality of evil' does not adequately fit these perpetrators. He adds, "it is not the banality of evil that characterises them, but rather inner identification with evil".⁵ The most convincing aspect of Segev's analysis is his deduction that camp brutality "itself increased by stages, and the commandants accompanied that development".⁶

Despite criticism of Arendt's argument from some historians, Stanley Milgram, known for his 1961 obedience experiment, asserted that "Arendt's conception of the banality of evil comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine".⁷ Milgram's own study, evidently influenced by Arendt to a significant degree, revealed the concerning willingness of participants to obey orders to give pretend shocks to other humans. He concluded that even democratic American society "cannot be counted on to insulate its citizens from brutality and inhumane treatment at the direction of malevolent authority".⁸ Essentially Milgram, who sought to understand Nazi perpetrators better, identified the potential for SS crimes to occur in any developed society. Ten years later, Philip Zimbardo created a mock prison environment at Stanford University, filling it with willing participants who would

² H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 252.

³ *Ibid.*, 26 and 54.

⁴ J. Brunner, "'Oh Those Crazy Cards Again': A History of the Debate on the Nazi Rorschachs, 1946-2001" *Political Psychology*, 22:2 (2001), 233-261, 235.

⁵ T. Segev, *Soldiers of Evil: The Commandants of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 214.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 217-218.

⁷ S. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

impersonate guards and prisoners. Zimbardo had to end the planned two-week experiment after six days on account of brutal behaviour from the guards. He later said:

Milgram showed us that the power of authority can induce total blind obedience to authority. My work looked at what happens when you put people in a 'total situation', where there are potent sociological values at work. In both cases, what you see is a rapid transformation of human behaviour.⁹

Essentially, Arendt, Milgram and Zimbardo agreed upon the ordinary nature of Holocaust perpetrators. The latter two worked to identify and display, with some success, the triggers that would push ordinary people to extraordinary cruelty.

As time moved on, historians focusing exclusively upon Nazi perpetrators sought to identify the causation for their crimes. This signified a move away from commemorative victim-oriented histories which, whilst important, lacked analytical examination of Nazi killers.¹⁰ In the early 1990s, Christopher Browning examined Reserve Police Battalion 101's role in Nazi murders in Poland. He made the exceptionally important point that due to human nature being a complex phenomenon, "the historian who attempts to 'explain' it is indulging in a certain arrogance".¹¹ He notes that this issue is especially important when making sweeping statements about large groups. Browning states, "when nearly 500 men are involved, to undertake any general explanation of their collective behaviour is even more hazardous".¹² Moreover, he believes that numerous factors like racism, careerism and obedience played varying roles in driving perpetrators but fundamentally considers the battalion to have been composed of ordinary men. Ultimately, he asks, "if the men of RPB 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?".¹³ Browning's determination to avoid simplifying the motivations of perpetrators, especially large groups, is commendable. If the figure of 500 warrants extreme caution, then 37,674, the number of SS men guarding the camps on 15 January 1945, a rise from 22,033 in mid-1939, must be handled even more delicately.¹⁴

⁹ P. Zimbardo, 'Recollections of a Social Psychologist's Career: An Interview with Philip Zimbardo', *Journal of Social Behaviour & Personality*, 14:1 (1999), 1-22, 6.

¹⁰ C. Dillon, *Dachau & the SS: A Schooling in Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

¹¹ C. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 188.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 159 and 189.

¹⁴ From K. Orth, 'The Concentration Camp Personnel' in J. Caplan & N. Wachsmann, *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany* (London: Routledge, 2010), 45-46.

In contrast to Browning, Daniel Goldhagen, writing in the mid-1990s, argued that previous publications failed to acknowledge that “Germans’ antisemitic beliefs about Jews were the central causal agent of the Holocaust”.¹⁵ Goldhagen is correct that antisemitism was an important catalyst which also eased the consciences of many Nazi German perpetrators as camp murders were carried out. However, this view stutters on two points; there were many non-German auxiliaries who killed Jews with enthusiasm, raising questions about the unique nature of German antisemitism; the perpetrators were often brutally cruel to non-Jewish prisoners as well. This study recognises the plaudits of Goldhagen’s work but is cautious not to be drawn into the pitfall of allowing the Holocaust to dominate the assessment of the perpetrators. Though the abuse of Nazi perpetrators, in this case the SS in the concentration camps, was overwhelmingly antisemitic in nature, it was not exclusive from the abuse of political enemies, ethnic foreigners, and other victim groups. Thus, Goldhagen’s argument is not sufficient for a thorough analysis of the SS’ abuse in camp environments. Around the same time, Wolfgang Sofksy wrote *The Order of Terror*, in which he discusses the concept of “absolute power” as the factor which governed perpetrator behaviour in the Nazi camps.¹⁶ Again, there is significant value in this assessment but, like Goldhagen’s eliminationist antisemitism argument, it overlooks significant aspects of perpetrator behaviour, such as the killers’ struggle against regulations which were meant to govern their actions.

In recent years, extreme assessments of perpetrators like Goldhagen’s have been pushed to the periphery. Moreover, Michael Wildt has critiqued Browning and Goldhagen works’ explicit use of the term ‘ordinary’ to describe the Nazi perpetrators that they examine. Wildt’s work focuses on the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Security Main Office, or RSHA), a subordinate organisation of the SS founded at the start of the war in 1939 to handle both internal and external enemies of Nazism. In his study, Wildt clarifies the importance of analysing different actors, institutions, intentions, conditions, and ideologies in examining the development of perpetrators.¹⁷ His research leads him to the conclusion that the men of the RSHA were often highly-educated and energetic zealots who worked proactively to contribute to the solving of the Jewish Question in the 1940s. Contrary to their desire to playdown their own ideological commitment after the war, Wildt asserts that the RSHA leaders were “neither pencil-pushers nor bureaucrats. They were not cogs in an anonymous machine of extermination. They developed the ideas for the mass murders, constructed the

¹⁵ D. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioner’s: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Abacus, 1997), 9.

¹⁶ W. Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 5-17.

¹⁷ M. Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 7-8.

apparatus to carry them out, and then operated the machines themselves".¹⁸ Wildt's emphasis upon drawing clear distinctions between the perpetrators of different crimes from different organisations within the Nazi state is an important one. The SS in the camps, like the RSHA, require analysis independent of the regime's other killers and, as the following study will show, they too showed zeal in carrying out murderous jobs. An important difference, however, was that the perpetrators in this study were further down the hierarchy than the RSHA men but were still capable of setting the tone for the management of the Third Reich's victims.

In the mid-2000s, German sociologist Harald Welzer examined the processes which turned overwhelmingly normal people into perpetrators of genocidal crimes, focusing mainly upon the Holocaust. One key conclusion he reached in his identification of causations was the Nazi state's shifting of a "single coordinate" of the country's social fabric. He calls this coordinate "social belonging"; its shifting "consists of the radical redefinition of who belongs to the universe of general liability". Those who continued to belong, the 'us' of Germany, were soon orientated against the 'them', most explicitly the Jewish people who were elevated to the status of "deadly world enemy".¹⁹ This forms part of the gradual process toward the horrors of the camps that this study examines. Welzer also identifies the importance of perpetrators taking the first step in the ever-radicalising handling of those perceived as enemies. He explains the process by writing that it is "undoubtedly something different" to cross the road to avoid Jewish acquaintances to moving into a home a Jewish family has been evicted from or to ordering Jewish deaths through signing medical forms, designing crematorium ovens, and shooting children and their families. Welzer stresses that "these are all qualitatively different stages, with varying degrees of difficulty to cross... it is important only for most of us to have transcended the first in order to be able to transcend the last".²⁰ Welzer underlines that as the perpetrators of the regime's crimes, and the population more broadly, crossed the first step of the intensifying treatment of the newly defined outsiders in the 1930s, the last step of the process still seemed entirely intolerable to many. He thus makes the comparison to Milgram's obedience study and how the participants were surprised and distressed at their own gradual escalation of action in delivering electric shocks.²¹ Ultimately concluding that it does not take much to transform ordinary people into mass murderers, Welzer places a great deal of importance upon the role played by the collective belonging offered by the 'us' and the irresponsibility for brutal

¹⁸ Ibid., 444.

¹⁹ H. Welzer, *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 2007), 248 and 253.

²⁰ Ibid., 257.

²¹ Ibid., 257-258.

crimes that was granted by a regime which ordered these actions to be undertaken.²² Welzer's emphasis on the centrality of the shifting of a single coordinate of social belonging is convincing given that concentration camp guards so frequently appeared to be motivated by resentment for what they perceived to be the alien 'other'. Yet, the eagerness of these men to engage in violent acts from the regime's earliest days supposes that, despite legal and operational restraints, not everyone struggled to radicalise their behaviour toward hated victims.

Guenter Lewy echoes Browning's reticence in overemphasising a single motivation for Nazi brutality. He does, however, highlight the importance of leadership, supposing that brutal leaders elicited equally brutal behaviours from their subordinates. Lewy notes wisely that the numerous motivations at play only tell us how people are likely to act, not how they must act, which, akin to Browning, warns against overly ambitious assertions of causality.²³ In the mid-2010s Nikolaus Wachsmann wrote an extensive volume on the history of the concentration camps, or the KL (derived from the German word '*Konzentrationslager*'), an abbreviation which shall be used in this study from here onward. *KL* is the most comprehensive monograph available on the history of the camp system and, despite focusing chiefly on the camps themselves, offers some valuable conclusions on the perpetrators. Wachsmann acknowledges the existence of monsters amongst the camp perpetrators but, due to them being few in number, emphasises that the unextraordinary common men posed the greatest danger.²⁴ He also points out that there was no "typical perpetrator", again warning against placing too much emphasis on monocausal violence.²⁵ Wachsmann asserts, like Segev, that perpetrators' journeys through the evolving KL were critical in inuring them to commit "acts that would have been unthinkable a little earlier".²⁶ However, Wachsmann does postulate that the reason for the camps' evolution and radicalisation was the regime's changes over time.²⁷ This is not inherently incorrect; Hitler's triggering of the war naturally made the regime alter from its peacetime state and the KL expanded and prepared for foreign prisoners in turn. However, this supposition suggests that the regime controlled the camps effectively, which as shall be discussed shortly, was not the case. At the same time, Christopher Dillon contributed with an examination of Dachau and its function of educating new SS men in the brutal ways of KL. His view that Dachau was

²² *Ibid.*, 268.

²³ G. Lewy, *Perpetrators: The World of the Holocaust Killers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 135-136.

²⁴ N. Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (London: Abacus, 2016), 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 626.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

incredibly important in moulding perpetrators is highly convincing.²⁸ Dillon's narrow focus upon Dachau, however, restricts the applicability of his conclusions to the wider system.

Filling a sizeable void in the Holocaust perpetrator historiography, Elissa Mailänder has recently researched the connection between female guards and violence concentrating on the Majdanek camp. Mailänder criticises previous histories of camp violence for focusing too heavily on the outcome of the acts rather than upon the acts themselves, arguing that it is necessary to remedy this to improve our collective understanding of the camp environment.²⁹ In the process of examining violence, Mailänder makes several statements that this study supports. For instance, Mailänder recognises that camp violence often went beyond what was expected both quantitatively and qualitatively and that male and female ground-level perpetrators built upon the orders that were given to them. This, she notes, was not always welcomed by the SS' policy makers.³⁰ Additionally, Mailänder draws convincing conclusions about the gender dynamic between male and female guards, with both sexes intensifying their violent behaviours when staff of the opposite gender were present. The men often resented the female staff as a result of them not having to rise through the ranks of an all-male system organised along paramilitary lines. Conversely, friendship and flirtation also existed, complicating the gender dynamics. Mailänder also asserts that both male and female Majdanek guards were mainly driven by personal needs and benefits, for the women, she specifies, this meant good pay, career opportunities and social advancement. Mailänder adds that male and female perpetrators experienced the camps primarily as a workplace and their own contributions as essential work that needed to be carried out to a high standard.³¹ This study will show, however, that whilst the male guards were indeed driven by personal concerns, many of them appeared to experience the camps as an environment in which they could act selfishly, prioritising fulfilling violent desires and securing their own gains ahead of the idea that they were doing essential work for the Third Reich. Furthermore, this thesis does not explore the development of female camp perpetrators partly due to the significant experiential differences of life and SS service for women which could not be explored here without taking away from the analysis of male experience. These differences will be discussed shortly.

Although not within the specific bounds of this study, Thomas Kühne's *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship*, an examination of the nature of comradeship in the Nazi *Wehrmacht*, provides some curious conclusions relating to German soldier relationships which serve as important context when

²⁸ Dillon, *Dachau*, 253.

²⁹ E. Mailänder, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942-1945* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2015), xi-xiii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xii-xiii and 278-279.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 276-279.

analysing the SS' own interpersonal culture, especially within the concentration camps. Kühne's work focuses upon the impact that a mythologised version of military comradeship in the Great War had upon post-war Germans and the way in which this was capitalised upon by the Nazis and corrupted to incorporate racial exclusivity as a central feature.³² Additionally, the othering of Nazi comradeship, which facilitated these racist ideals, could force conformity from those wishing to subscribe to it. Individuals who underwhelmed the collective but wished to be included could easily become the Other that a military group used to draw its component members closer together. Harsh ritual humiliations often occurred at their expense to the joy of the group.³³ One should bear in mind how such othering might influence unenthusiastic men working in the concentration camps; although Kühne does not consider this, if a guard in the camps did not want to be excluded, he would have to entertain the notion of becoming as hard and cruel as the group dynamic demanded. Furthermore, because of his assessing a discernibly different organisation to the SS, certain observations appear to suggest that the two military forces experienced comradeship differently. For instance, Kühne refers to 'horizontal' comradeship, that which saw the rank-and-file bond whilst developing antagonistic attitudes toward superiors, as much rarer than 'vertical' comradeship which saw soldiers connect to their platoon leaders in a hierarchical framework of loyalty.³⁴ As this study will show, based on their behaviours, it would appear that the reverse was generally true for SS guards in the camps apart from when particularly brutal and bold commandants and officers inspired their subordinates.

Though Kühne's focus is upon a different branch of the Third Reich's armed forces, his work builds upon a critically important observation of the SS made by Hans Buchheim in the 1960s. Buchheim notes the key difference between military 'comradeship' and military 'camaraderie' amongst the men within Heinrich Himmler's organisation.³⁵ He states:

'Comradeship' implies a sense of solidarity between men and a readiness to share each other's burdens; *Camaraderie*, on the other hand, implies that no store is set by individual qualities and men are simply prepared to make mutual concessions to each other's weaknesses. In the name of

³² T. Kühne, *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship: Hitler's Soldiers, Male Bonding and Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 294.

³³ *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

³⁵ Whilst interchangeable terms in the English language, '*Kameradschaft*' (comradeship) and '*Kameraderie*' (camaraderie) are not synonymous in German.

Cameraderie increasingly serious failings become acceptable, offences can be covered up, communal dereliction of duty can be concealed both from the authorities and the outside world.³⁶

Buchheim's argument that a negative version of comradeship which served as a catalyst for excess and vice existed is very convincing. Kühne's vertical and horizontal comradeship could easily become vertical or horizontal camaraderie with abusive individuals driving forbidden and illegal actions from their colleagues. Whilst this thesis does not specifically seek to define the nature of the typical relations between concentration camp personnel, it will be helpful to return to the ideas of both Kühne and Buchheim sporadically.

Adding to the Understanding of SS Perpetrators

The following chapters will show that the leadership of the SS, and by extension that of Nazi Germany, failed to control the KL as it grew through the 1930s and into the war years. Whilst *SS-Obergruppenführer* Theodor Eicke, the first chief of the office of the *Inspektion der Konzentrationslager* (Concentration Camp Inspectorate, or IKL), and Dachau's most important commandant, showed valuable strategic awareness in improving the KL in accordance with Himmler's vision for an SS dominion of punishment, other senior and mid-level SS leaders fell short. Weise, the author of Eicke's career biography, convincingly contends that a special relationship existed between the Reichsführer and Eicke which was of vast importance to Eicke's success.³⁷ The first IKL chief was more influential than other leaders in the camp system which owed a great deal to his unique cult of personality. The observation that his legacy in the KL endured and that his absence, driven by his move to the frontline with the *Waffen-SS* ('Armed SS'), was counterproductive for the system re-emerges across this study. *SS-Gruppenführer* Richard Glücks was the only other official head of the IKL, but *SS-Obergruppenführer* Oswald Pohl held executive power over the camps after March 1942. Though Pohl was more capable than the inept Glücks, the vacuum left by the charismatic Eicke was not filled. This thesis also argues that the commandants of individual camps often failed to manage their KL effectively. In poorly regulating the conduct of their staff, commandants were directly responsible for much of the abuse suffered by victims. Their neglect, which was motivated by different factors, for instance *SS-Standartenführer* Karl Koch was largely driven by greed at Buchenwald, encouraged autonomy of action from the rank-and-file beneath them.

³⁶ H. Krausnick, H. Buchheim, M. Broszat & H.A. Jacobsen, *The Anatomy of the SS State* (London: Collins, 1968), 343.

³⁷ Weise, *Eicke*, 9 and 27.

This study's main hypothesis builds upon the above argument that the KL had overwhelmingly weak leadership beyond Eicke. Despite SS guards' individuality leading them to SS service, and prisoner abuse, in the camps for varied reasons, they were unified and driven by their struggle against restrictions placed upon their conduct from above. Alf Lüdtke has written about the concept of *Eigen-Sinn*, a particularly difficult phrase to translate neatly but 'self-will', 'stubbornness' and 'unmanageability' are the most appropriate definitions. Lüdtke's focus has been on the labour of the German working class from the Wilhelmine era to the end of the Nazi period. Although Lüdtke's work is peripheral to this study, it is interesting that he identifies a resistance from German workers to efforts from their superiors to control them and their labour. He asserts that these workers tended to seek autonomy in the workplace, demonstrating their *Eigen-Sinn*.³⁸ Whilst this thesis solely examines the behaviour of the SS in the camps, a discernibly different environment to the factory floors of German industry that Lüdtke gives much attention to, and though camp perpetrators were not exclusively members of the working class, there is some overlap. Like the working-class labourers, the SS camp guards displayed their own stubbornness, particularly in the face of change in the KL, and demonstrated determination to retain control of their own work environment.

Moreover, despite Eugen Kogon, a survivor of Buchenwald turned historian, claiming that "the intellectual development of SS members all the way up to their highest leaders was far below the average", research shows that guards and officers in the KL frequently showed vocational creativity, shrewdness, and highly effective duplicity to increase their own freedom within the system.³⁹ Kogon's first-hand observation refers primarily to an SS deficit in regards to traditional concepts of intelligence, of academic performance and general knowledge, but the SS in the camps showed themselves capable of mastering a murderous cleverness that made them arbiters of life and death in the KL, especially during the war years. In this author's opinion, the power of the ground-level guards over the KL's daily operation is overlooked because their actions saw to the fulfilment of Hitler and Himmler's destructive goals through the early 1940s. The leadership sought the eradication of European Jewry and other ethnic and political enemies and the SS in the camps ensured it. However, as this study shows, at various points in the KL's existence, for instance when SS leaders opted to increase productivity and reduce the death toll in the camps in mid-1942, not including the deaths from the extermination process, guards resisted and maintained their deadly habits. Though the regime and its perpetrators sought the same eventual outcome, the ground-level

³⁸ See A. Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn: Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot Verlag, 2015)

³⁹ E. Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 293.

perpetrators were not merely obedient tools and often had the ability to dictate events pertaining to the camps more effectively than their superiors. The power of the guards – a different power to that which Sofsky describes as dominating the prisoners – in pushing against authority from above, and the abject failure of the SS leadership are thus central elements of this study.

Even though the SS guards showed a proficiency for manipulating their work environment and acting subversively, this was born principally out of negative traits that did not fit with the SS' supposedly elite status. Thus, a secondary objective of this thesis is to show that the quality of the SS men in the camps was far inferior to how Himmler framed them. Rather than being a racial, physical, and mental elite, the KL guard staff was made up of mediocre individuals who were, contrary to Himmler's view, extremely susceptible to adopting vices and engaging in forbidden activities which compromised their integrity. The extent of their shortcomings was such that the guards and some of their commandants, who were similarly prone to committing offences that breached their codes of conduct, should be seen as members of an unremarkably average organisation. Viewing the SS from this perspective makes it easier to understand this thesis' main hypothesis. In accepting that the SS in the KL were deeply flawed and unreliable people, their resistance to doing their duty with good discipline makes more sense. Although they became expert rulebreakers and abusers, the guards were fundamentally poor-quality units, and it was this lack of perceptible superiority that fuelled their descent into self-serving independent behaviour.

Another element of the following study is the consideration of the legacy left by early life influences upon the eventual perpetrators in the concentration camps. Adverse experiences in childhood are a known influence upon negative behaviours in later life and this thesis posits that men who served in the camps shared some of the same difficult formative experiences. Early twentieth century German school curricula and particularly dangerous youth groups like the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth, or HJ) had the capacity to militarise children and infuse them with xenophobic ideas. It is necessary to clarify the term 'militarise' in this context, which this study defines as the instilling of military values and interest in warfare participation in children. The experiences of schooling and youth groups were, particularly after 1933, reinforced by Nazi propaganda which was especially dangerous when being internalised by immature minds. Though the role of youth experience in leading Germans towards fascism has been contemplated by historians like Andrew Donson, this study opts to identify aspects of SS camp guard behaviour which showed the residual impact of caustic pedagogy. This is a difficult task since the limited number of testimonies from KL perpetrators has left the extent of education's influence upon their mindsets relatively unclear. However, through the following chapters, this thesis will consider aspects of perpetrator behaviour that may be viewed as having

been motivated by their experience of school, youth groups and propaganda as they developed into young men.

Research Methodology

The bulk of this study's archival documentation has been sourced from *The Wiener Library* in London. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, German archives became difficult to access through the study's critical research period due to repeated closures which frustrated attempts to incorporate a visit. The uncertainty surrounding foreign archives thus prompted a more thorough exploration of *The Wiener Library*. The intensive scouring of the archive over numerous research trips has yielded indispensable evidence which underpins this thesis. This represents a more complete and beneficial utilisation of this archive than would have been realistic had the pandemic not been a reality. Within the archive, two collections have been particularly important here; the War Crime Trials Collection; and the Eyewitness Testimonies.

The War Crime Trials Collection compiles a great deal of information on the perpetrators and their victims that was used in the post-war Nuremberg Trials. Speeches from Nazi leaders, newspaper clippings and correspondences are just some of the types of evidence available in this collection. Donald Bloxham has written at length on the value of the trials documents as historical resources. He refers to the cataloguing of such an extensive array of documents as a "uniquely valuable service to students of Nazism" but tempers this praise with the critique that the analyses made by the Allied courts with the use of said documents was far less helpful. He reasonably deduces that they got more wrong than they got right.⁴⁰ This study opts to utilise the documents themselves rather than the conclusions reached by the judiciary as a general rule partly for this reason. Another hindrance of the legal process was the preconceptions brought to the trials by the Allied prosecutors who overplayed the roles of some organisations like the SS whilst overlooking the criminal contributions of the German police. This contributed to similarly troublesome trends in the historiography of Nazi criminality in the decades after the war.⁴¹ In regard to the handling of the terrible ordeals of Holocaust victims, Bloxham bemoans the tendency of Anglo-American officials to distrust the testimony of Jews and Eastern Europeans and to suppress the vocalising of the Jewish plight. Nonetheless, one criticism levelled against the trials can be viewed as a strength; in Bloxham's opinion the process focused too much upon the perpetrators.⁴² Considering that perpetrator studies are still limited in the second decade of the 21st century, the Nuremberg Tribunal's focus upon the

⁴⁰ D. Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial: War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.

⁴¹ See *ibid.*, 12 and 185-200.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 224-225.

implementers of Nazi crimes is useful for researchers. Regardless of the numerous drawbacks, Bloxham favourably concludes that the 13 Nuremberg trials were the “greatest, most enduring attempts to investigate Nazism and its effects in something approaching a detached way”.⁴³ Furthermore, as the trial documents’ purpose was to incriminate the accused, seemingly mundane information that could teach historians more about the perpetrators, and that might also give context to some of the more shocking evidence used in court, is often hard to find. Overall, however, the documents’ value far outweigh their drawbacks and provide invaluable evidence to this study’s discussions.

The Eyewitness Testimonies from *The Wiener Library* have been immeasurably useful in the writing of the following chapters, offering hundreds of victims’ statements about their experiences in the KL. Unfortunately, due to their awareness of the illegality of their actions, few SS perpetrators have provided accounts of events inside the camps and even fewer have done so of their own volition, outside of the constraints of legal proceedings. Due to this, the most readily available, and more easily verifiable, primary source for understanding perpetrator behaviour in the camps is victim testimony. To understand the abusers, the perpetrator historian must listen intently to the abused. However, these documents suffer from their own range of issues. Firstly, some victims have failures of memory, unsurprising given their terrible experiences, which manifest themselves in different ways. For instance, some forget names of places and people, others misdate events or fail to remember them at all. A particularly relevant issue relating to memory, though not one that this author has encountered, is the misplacing of SS perpetrators in testimonies. Dr Josef Mengele, of Auschwitz infamy, found his way into the testimonies of victims who could not possibly have met him.⁴⁴ Though failing memory or simply misidentifying perpetrators could account for this, one should not overlook the possibility that victims purposefully referenced known SS criminals who they did not encounter to ensure their prosecution. After all, the victims surely feared Nazi tormentors escaping justice.

This leads directly onto a second issue present in victim testimonies: anger. Some victims have made divisive efforts to forgive, or more commonly become apathetic towards, SS abusers. However, there is naturally an entirely justified vein of hatred running through the testimonies of many victims of the KL. There thus exist affidavits in which the author identifies the SS as monstrous, evil beings incapable of humanity. These documents fit with early views on the subject wherein the SS guards were perceived as mentally broken psychopaths, but they are problematic for those studying the

⁴³ Ibid., 223.

⁴⁴ Wachsmann, *KL*, 21.

perpetrators. To understand the killers, their humanity must be examined and measured which renders especially hateful accounts less informative than others in which the victim records events more objectively. Untameable loathing for those who killed some victims' entire families is more than understandable, but when this dominates survivors' testimonies it is imperative that the historian be cautious.

Thirdly, these written accounts were composed by individuals from different nations and vastly diverse walks of life. As such, victims who experienced the same events could feasibly interpret them differently. Equally, one cannot expect all accounts to be eloquently composed, yet it would be unfair to overlook the writing of less educated victims. Few testimonies accurately estimate the number of fatalities in the camps, the tendency has been to miscalculate at the higher end. This is an inevitable by-product of normal people, under immense emotional strain, trying their best to accurately document the suffering around them. As such, figures given in victim testimonies, should be considered carefully before being accepted.

Despite the many drawbacks associated with using victim testimonies, they offer, based upon the limitations of their perpetrator counterparts, essential insights into the daily behaviours of the KL perpetrators and their mindsets. Besides the infrastructure and the SS staff, the victims were the only other constant in the camps, and they allow historians to view the KL's evolution and its impact upon its guards from the ground-level. Simply by recollecting beatings that they or their fellows received, they have taught readers about catalysts for SS abuses and in penning down occasional conversations with their captors they show the mood and thoughts of the guards at various points in time. Without extensively utilising victim testimonies, a personal interaction with the SS camp guards is not possible.

To supplement the above research, several digital resources have been used. Harvard Law School possesses over one million pages of documents relating to the Nuremberg Trials, of which, as of 2016, they had digitised two thirds. This is of similar value to *The Wiener Library's* collection on the trials but considerably more accessible due to its digitisation. Supplementing the above-mentioned Eyewitness Testimonies collection, this study uses survivor testimony from the Visual History Archive of the *University of Southern California's* Shoah Foundation. This is a compilation of video testimony, largely recorded in the 1990s, which can only be accessed from affiliated institutions. The Visual History Archive is a valuable resource because, unlike the generally brief written victim accounts of the Eyewitness Testimonies collection at *The Wiener Library*, the video accounts are comprehensive. Some of these filmed interviews have been uniquely informative to the arguments in this study. Other digital resources have been used to a lesser degree. The *Center for Jewish History* has made

available an extensive amount of victim testimonies in conjunction with the *Leo Baeck Institut* whilst the University of London and Nikolaus Wachsmann have created *The Nazi Concentration Camps Website* which compiles helpful documents on the KL. Through online archiving, newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Manchester Guardian* have provided old issues which contain useful information on the KL and the trials over subsequent decades. Several other digital document compilations have also been utilised to a lesser extent through the following chapters.

Some essential primary evidence is only available in printed publications. Several books that are used here are collections of victim testimonies and thus the same strengths and limitations as the Eyewitness Testimonies collection apply to these. Lynn Smith's *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust* is one such example which appears frequently in this thesis. Some victims like Bruno Heilig, Bendikt Kautsky and Olga Lengyel have authored long memoirs which have been published on their own. These are particularly valuable accounts because, in fully fleshing out their explanations of their experiences, they allow for a more comprehensive understanding of their time in the KL and of their interactions with SS guards. However, the published memoirs of perpetrators require more scrutiny. Based upon the variation between each perpetrator's duties and crimes, their testimonies should be considered on a case-by-case basis. The most important example to raise here is the memoir of Auschwitz-Birkenau commandant *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Rudolf Höss. Höss wrote his autobiographical version of events across the KL after he had been captured at the war's end and was in a Polish prison cell. As the highest profile SS perpetrator to have written extensively on crimes that he ordered and oversaw, Höss' words naturally require more caution before use. It must be supposed that, as a convinced Nazi, Höss' view of the KL's necessity skewed his interpretation of events and, equally, as a proudly diligent worker, he sought, where possible, to absolve himself, not from criminality, but from ineffectiveness.

However, two pertinent facts tip the scales in favour of Höss' memoir being a uniquely vital asset; firstly, whilst his fiercely dedicated nature arguably prompted him to emphasise his contribution to the KL above his failings, it also drove him to analyse the contributions of those around him. Whilst some captured Nazis opted to blame dead or missing colleagues for crimes, Höss' criticisms are motivated by frustration at the incompetence of other SS men and the harm they inflicted upon the KL. Such an industrious character as Höss could not help but bemoan the failings of those around him and, as such, due to his residual dedication to the KL, apparent in his writing, his memoir tends not to succumb to blame dodging. This leads to the second point; as a man who was aware that he faced no prospect of surviving his Polish incarceration, Höss was writing as a condemned man. His words are not dressed in typical Nazi euphemism, he speaks matter-of-factly, aware that his complicity in killing hundreds of thousands at Auschwitz-Birkenau was not secret. Hence, Höss does

not choose to point fingers at others to save himself, he accepts his fate and subsequently authors an invaluable source of knowledge on the camps. Whilst it is impossible to corroborate some of what Höss wrote, his personality and his circumstances make his account generally convincing, despite inevitable drawbacks associated with the author's zealous beliefs. A limited number of other perpetrator testimonies are used to a lesser degree in this thesis, and they have each been scrutinised similarly.

Definitions and Terminology

Prior to moving on, it is useful to clarify some decisions taken, and terminology used, in this study. Firstly, the analysis of concentration camp personnel opts to exclude females on account of their constituting a minority of the perpetrators and not being granted full SS status. Female camp guards were only granted auxiliary titles, such as *SS-Helferin* (literally 'female helper'), rather than mirroring their male colleagues in the reception of SS ranks. When the male guard population reached 37,674 in 1945, the female figure was 3,508. Whilst numerous female helpers earned infamy for their brutality, such as Ilse Koch at Buchenwald and Irma Grese at Auschwitz-Birkenau, considering their development in this study, when female school curricula and pathways into the KL were significantly different to their male counterparts, is beyond the remit of this study. Nonetheless, the undertaking of a female-centric version of this study, following the same themes, would be beneficial in the future.

Furthermore, this study also utilises temporal divisions to break the KL's history down into distinct stages which need to be defined before moving forward. Others, like Kogon, have also viewed the camp system as having clear periods. Kogon's first period is identified by action taken against individual enemies of the Nazis until Autumn 1938, the second by the organised liquidation campaigns beginning at this time, and the third period starting after 1942 with the systematic extermination of the Jews, chiefly in the East.⁴⁵ This study has chosen different dates for the first two periods, though this has much to do with Kogon's differing focus upon the history of the Holocaust. This thesis, meanwhile, seeks only to understand the development of the SS perpetrators and their behaviours in the KL. As such, the dates used in this study correspond more with changes in the experience of the guards themselves rather than that of their victims. Thus, the early period of the KL is defined as starting when the SS' acquired control of the camps in 1933 until the start of the Second World War. In his memoirs, Höss claimed that, in September 1939, "the war came, and with it the great turning point in the history of the concentration camps" which endorses the view that

⁴⁵ Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 169.

the KL experienced extensive change at this time.⁴⁶ The middle period therefore ran from September 1939 until March 1942 and was marked by intensifying guard behaviours and extreme violence against Poles and other Nazi enemies who were brought into the camp world. As forms of violence tend to bleed into one another, it is not surprising that the camp persecution of these minorities occurred at the same as the Nazi war machine was brutally pushing through central and eastern Europe. The end date for the middle period can be viewed with more scrutiny due to the popular view that the Wannsee Conference of 20 January 1942, where senior SS officers agreed to the undertaking of the Final Solution, marked the start of the deadliest period of Nazi terror. Whilst this is a logical supposition – although the piecemeal implementation of the Final Solution had in fact started in the preceding year – Himmler’s incorporation of the KL under the *SS- Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt* (SS Main Economic and Administrative Office, or WVHA) in March 1942 had a greater impact upon the KL’s purpose and operation. Therefore, the final period of the KL, up to Germany’s surrender, saw a reorientation of priorities in which SS managers sought to convert the camps into economic assets.

In regard to terminology, ‘Camp SS’ is used as an umbrella phrase for any male SS individuals working inside the KL from 1933-1945. The necessity for this comes from the plethora of different SS units which made up the guard staff inside the camps. Though, following its creation in 1934, guards were largely members of the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* (Death’s Head Units, or SS-TV), by the war years injured members of the *Waffen-SS* and other miscellaneous troops filtered into the guard ranks. Therefore, referring to camp perpetrators as SS-TV would risk misidentifying them. Instead, ‘Camp SS’ helpfully allows the KL guards and commandant staff to be referred to without overtly distinguishing between individuals’ specific units. It is necessary to include commandants and their staff in this study because whilst they were more senior than their subordinates, their central job was to protect the camps and ensure the continued incarceration of Nazi enemies. As such they were essentially high-ranking guards who influenced and were influenced by their underlings. The Camp SS should thus be defined as including all full SS members in the KL from the commandant below. Another conundrum comes in the form of identifying the ranks of some SS figures referred to in subsequent chapters. At times, details of rank are either missing altogether or it is unclear which rank they held at a specific juncture. As such, the term ‘SS man’ is used to describe these people without misidentifying their status but this should not be confused with ‘*SS-Mann*’, a rank equivalent to private. Furthermore, there are some chapter specific issues with terminology which will be examined when outlining the structure of the thesis ahead.

⁴⁶ R. Höss, trans. C. FitzGibbon, *Commandant of Auschwitz* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), 83.

Chapter Structure

Though the chapters of this thesis orbit around the Camp SS, its focal subject, the first chapter focuses less upon the KL, choosing to address some important background influences which SS perpetrators experienced in their lives. This is where the main discussion of youth factors will take place with the examination of both schooling and the HJ necessary in underlining the potential indoctrination that many KL guards would have been subjected to. The chief objective of the interaction with these issues is to determine how pervasive dangerous ideas were in these environments. Due to the impossibility of making concrete statements about the effect of these influences, this chapter seeks to show the conditions from which future perpetrators emerged. Another significant factor that must be considered here is the influence that the difficulties of the interwar period had upon those who might later end up in the SS. Though these challenges were experienced differently by various generations of Germans, the study should explore how social obstacles like militarised politics and poverty might alter individuals' development. This chapter is also supported by research into the nature of Nazi propaganda which reinforced the unpleasant ideas that youths had been exposed to in schools and extracurricular groups. Due to the wide scope of this chapter, the examination of propaganda, which could justify a whole study in its own, must be concise. As such the discussion of various mediums of propaganda and key examples opts for breadth over depth. As this chapter deals chiefly with background information, it relies upon less archival research than subsequent chapters.

Following the discussion of background influences upon Camp SS perpetrators, Chapter Two addresses the nature of SS members within the organisation more broadly, though retaining primary focus upon the men serving in the camps. The analysis of the KL guards' 'elite' status is conducted here and assesses their quality across different areas such as recruitment and adherence to SS ideology. It is important to peripherally consider other parts of the SS here in order to deduce whether the conclusions reached about the KL staff are representative of the wider organisation. The topic of this chapter, and its placement early in the structure of the thesis, is important so that Chapters Three to Six can be approached with an awareness of the organisational and individual issues that the Camp SS faced through the KL's history. It must be acknowledged that this chapter will not consider the SS' participation in the planned killings of the Holocaust in the debate over their elite status. This is because these were ordered murders and as such were not in violation of their duty to Himmler. Despite the undebatable immorality and criminality of these crimes, the focus for this chapter must be upon aspects of SS service that had not been planned for.

The third chapter of this thesis analyses the pre-war KL and its guards from when the SS took charge of Dachau concentration camp in May 1933 through to the start of the Second World War in September 1939. Interacting with the early camps is crucial in understanding the camp system, and by extension its guards, because, as Sandra Mette aptly puts it, “they tested the structures that were later used in all concentration camps”.⁴⁷ Of principal importance to this chapter is the role played by Eicke in centralising the camp system after his highly successful tenure as commandant at Dachau as well as the nature of the supposed ‘school’ environment that was created in the camp to induct guards into the spirit of intolerance. Eicke, as this chapter shows, was particularly adept at seducing his subordinates with his ideology which sought to create a loyal fraternity of young men who would defend Germany from its internal enemies. Therefore, it is prudent to explore how he built up the SS’ KL experiment into a web of symbiotic camps across the country which formed the basis of Himmler’s prison network until 1945. Whilst this thesis, and Chapter Three especially, refer to the creation of a uniformed camp system, it should not be interpreted as an unwaveringly homogenous system. Survivor testimonies show that despite Eicke’s centralisation, individual camps had their own methods and preoccupations; for instance, one camp might be fixated with cleanliness whilst others might obsess over prisoner singing or saluting.⁴⁸ Rather than being identical, the camps became unified by one man’s administrative ideals and service regulations which, despite their fostering of individual personality, allowed them to function in keeping with the same overarching ideology. Furthermore, without understanding Eicke’s contribution and value to the system or his unique relationship with the guard staff in the camps, it would be very difficult to identify where his successors deviated and, arguably, mismanaged the KL and its staff. This chapter argues that, although he is known to historians as an important cog in the KL machine, Eicke was in fact far more indispensable to the development of the Camp SS than has been previously asserted.

Following on from Chapter Three, the final three chapters of the study deal with the Camp SS during the Second World War. The first of these, Chapter Four, addresses the changes that were brought to the KL by the advent of war from September 1939. These changes were numerous and caused a radical departure from the established norm of KL operation from the pre-war years. With the motivational Eicke departing for the front with his SS-TV troops, the KL came under new leadership which had to contend with overcrowding, disease, and chaotic expansion of the system. These problems were deadly for the SS’ prisoners and require examination in order to understand the link between them and the evolving behaviour of the camp guards. The most significant change to KL

⁴⁷ S. Mette, ‘Schloss Lichtenburg: Konzentrationslager für Männer von 1933 bis 1937’ in S. Hördler & S. Jacobeit (eds.), *Lichtenburg: Ein deutsches Konzentrationslager* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2009), 164.

⁴⁸ P.M Neurath, *The Society of Terror: Inside the Dachau and Buchenwald Concentration Camps* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2005), 15.

operation from September 1939 was the introduction of capital punishment. Camp SS abusers, who in the pre-war years were largely kept in check by the restraints placed upon the system, were now in an environment where killing was normalised. With death all around them, much of which was caused by neglect and apathy as well as by executions, many SS guards acclimatised to the new KL and began to push boundaries and act increasingly arbitrarily. Murderers emerged in great numbers and some banded together to form gangs within their camps. Rather than suppressing this change in the behaviour of the guards, the leadership dithered and thus began the IKL's drift toward impotency with the guards becoming free to act as they pleased.

Chapter Five deals primarily with Pohl's planned reorientation of the KL from its longstanding punitive function toward economic productivity. Himmler charged Pohl with increasing the camps' contribution to the war effort and decreasing the KL's extremely high mortality rate. In 1942, 70,000 out of 136,000 new incoming prisoners died before the year's end which was problematic when the camps sought to improve labour efficiency.⁴⁹ Pohl's changes, which equated to a planned reformation within the camp world, are imperative to examine in a study of the SS perpetrators. This is because his struggle against the familiar showcased both the KL leadership's shortcomings and, critically, the stubbornness of the rank-and-file who begrudged being ordered to change their priorities. This chapter's exploration of Pohl's efforts to soften SS handling of prisoners and the pervasiveness of the resistance he faced reveals, perhaps more than any other chapter, the influence that the guards had over camp management. The power of the guards' recalcitrance which majorly undermined the KL's redirection flows into this thesis' wider discussion of their uncooperative nature.

Furthermore, in his attempt to convert the KL's purpose, Pohl oversaw the prisoners' development into slaves. Using the word 'slave' to describe the prisoners in the KL requires qualification. Sofsky does not endorse the term arguing that the SS "defined the status of the prisoners by decree and violence. For that reason, the prisoners had neither a value nor a price. They were not traded as commodities or sold".⁵⁰ Supporting this, though referring exclusively to Jews, Goldhagen says "in no sense did Germans treat Jewish 'workers' in keeping with the common understanding of what a 'worker' is, or...what a 'slave' is".⁵¹ Both arguments are unconvincing. Contrary to Sofsky's assertion, the SS did 'loan' many prisoners out to external companies who paid an agreed price for each slave they acquired. Willi Seifert and Emil Holub, both Buchenwald survivors, accurately referred to this

⁴⁹ M.T. Allen, 'The Banality of Evil Reconsidered: SS Mid-Level Managers of Extermination Through Work', *Central European History*: 30:2 (1997), 253-294, 284.

⁵⁰ Sofsky, *Order of Terror*, 172.

⁵¹ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 318.

operation as the “slave trade of the SS” and a “profitable slave trade” respectively.⁵² Thus, the slaves’ value was whatever the SS charged for them. Goldhagen’s view suggests a slave must be treated with a certain degree of care but whilst this fits with the modern African slave trade, where slaves were maintained for their owner’s benefit, antique slavery, like that of the SS’, frequently showed an abject lack of care for the victims’ survival. Contrary to Goldhagen, Marc Buggeln has observed that the deployment of KL prisoners in war industries did indeed qualify as a “form of slavery”.⁵³ The inmates often referred to themselves as slaves, even in the early camp years; whilst Bruno Heilig compared Dachau prisoners’ experience to that of the rowing of galley-slaves, his comrade Israel Burstyn exclaimed “Egypt!” as the prisoners hauled heavy rocks through the camp.⁵⁴ Thinking of his time labouring in Mackenrode, a subcamp of Mittelbau-Dora in 1944, Aimé Bonifas remarked that “we were only slaves, and we were expected to follow only one directive: ‘shut up and suffer’”.⁵⁵ Though prisoners of the earlier years from 1933 to 1941 based their self-conception upon their terrible treatment, the suitability of the term ‘slave’ increased significantly after 1942 when the SS began to use inmates as economic units to be relied upon to boost the ailing war economy. As such, this study views the terms ‘prisoner’ and ‘slave’ as being largely interchangeable only after Pohl’s acquisition of the camp system.

The final examination of the KL and its guards covers the evacuation period over the last year of the war. Since evacuations of some camps occurred whilst productivity was still the major focus of others, this phase of the KL’s timeline should be viewed as a subperiod of the final production-focused stage of the camps rather than an independent period. In this desperate time, the SS emptied camps that were closest to the approaching Allies and retreated, with their prisoners, deeper into the Reich. This phase of the KL has not been studied extensively but *The Death Marches* by Daniel Blatman is an especially impressive volume on the subject. Despite Blatman’s title, the term ‘death march’ is a difficult one to use without carefully defining it beforehand. By solely arguing that the SS conducted a series of death marches, one would subject the victims of the most cruel and deadly evacuations to a great injustice. There were evacuations that were more carefully executed than others; for example, as Blatman notes himself, Natweiler-Struthof prisoners were evacuated with little bloodshed in autumn 1944.⁵⁶ Thus, referring to this evacuation as a death

⁵² Document 13 – Willi Seiffert, “Nazi War Profiteers” and Document 49 – Emil Holub, ‘The SS Slave Trade’ in D.A. Hackett (ed. and trans.), *The Buchenwald Report* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 130 and 191.

⁵³ M. Buggeln, ‘Were the Concentration Camp Prisoners Slaves?: The Possibilities and Limits of Comparative History and Global Historical Perspectives’, *International Review of Social History*, 53:1 (2008), 101-129, 127.

⁵⁴ B. Heilig, *Men Crucified* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1941), 38-39 and 52.

⁵⁵ A. Bonifas, *Prisoner 20-801* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 83.

⁵⁶ D. Blatman, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 72.

march would serve to obscure the true horror of the evacuations wherein a great number of prisoners died. While it would be very difficult to create a flawless algorithm for defining a death march in contrast to a less deadly, but surely difficult, evacuation, this chapter endeavours to use the term sparingly. Rather, it seems wiser to generally refer to evacuations as such unless it is apparent that a large number of evacuees perished on their journeys or if the SS' conducting of the evacuation showed signs of trying to maximise suffering. This imperfect method helps to clarify, when the term 'death march' is used, which of the evacuations were especially cruelly handled by the SS. Moreover, this chapter's purpose is to show the final evolution of the Camp SS and how, after years of freedom to abuse and kill with little fear of repercussion, they coped in the face of defeat and the potential threat of punishment for their actions. One of the central discussions in this chapter is of the leadership's failure to direct the evacuations which encouraged the lower ranks to handle them as they saw fit, or, in other cases, to abandon their duty altogether. This ties directly to the study's main objectives of showing the SS leadership's weakness and the guard's tendency to act independently of their superiors.

**Chapter One – ‘Background Factors Contributing to the Personal Development of SS
Concentration Camp Guards’**

Introduction

The following chapter focuses upon several aspects of German life in the early twentieth century, and during the Third Reich in particular, which played a role in making a significant number of Germans amenable to the nationalism and antisemitism of the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (National Socialist German Workers’ Party, or NSDAP). This examination of background factors will place heavy emphasis on influences upon young German males across Wilhelmine, Weimar and Nazi Germany since youths from these periods eventually made up a great number of the KL staff between 1933 and 1945. In August 1936 the average age of Camp SS guards was 23.2, in September 1937 it was 22.9 and in December 1939 it was 20.7; the broader SS average age in December 1939 was 28.7.¹ The surprising youth of many SS guards prompts this investigation of factors which drove young men into KL service. As this study’s introduction explained, studying male experience must be prioritised on account of the heavy gender imbalance within the KL guard staff. Moreover, as the SS newspaper, *Das Schwarze Korps* (*The Black Corps*), accurately told readers in 1936, males and females were raised with different priorities in Germany, especially under the Nazis. *Das Schwarze Korps* wrote that “male youth are educated toward masculinity, while the aim of educating girls is to emphasise the maternal, the feminine”.² The palpably different youth experiences of female Germans validates the decision to specialise upon males. It is still important, however, to consider the indoctrination of the broader German population, including females, because, as well as needing direct perpetrators, the crimes of the KL required a wider support base to facilitate the existence of the concentration camps.

The first section of this chapter is dedicated to creating a clearer understanding of the nature of the education of German youths. The opening part of this will interact with the schooling of youths from the *Kaiserreich* to the Third Reich, concentrating chiefly upon the militarising elements and xenophobia within classrooms which was sustained across the periods in question. This study postulates that it was the existence of these elements which instilled young males with a heightened

¹ From *Bundesarchiv* (BAB), Berlin, NSD 41/37, Statistische Jahrbücher der Schutzstaffel der NSDAP 1937 and 1938 in C. Dillon, *Dachau & the SS: A Schooling in Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 55.

² Document 162 – *Das Schwarze Korps*, 5 March 1936, “...Unzucht in der Soldatenzeit”, 8, in A. Rabinbach & S.L. Gilman, *The Third Reich Sourcebook* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 356-358.

desire to join military units, such as the SS, and made them attractive recruits for these organisations. Some individuals who joined the SS, such as senior intelligence officer SS-*Brigadeführer* Walter Schellenberg who was born in 1910, reinforce the idea that youth experience was critical in the development of future SS men claiming that “it seemed as though from my earliest youth various influences had been at work to turn me toward this particular field of service for my country and for my people”.³ As a high level of education was not a prerequisite for SS service the following section will mainly examine primary and secondary schooling. Andrea Riedle has shown that although the overwhelming majority of the Camp SS in Sachsenhausen finished primary school, a much smaller number in fact completed secondary school.⁴ However, there was a minority of SS men, chiefly amongst the leadership, such as *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler and the policy-setters in the RSHA, who had experience of higher education making a brief interaction with university education useful to this study.⁵ Assessing the role of youth organisations in the education of children in the early twentieth century is also essential to this chapter. The most crucial youth group to this study is the *Hitlerjugend* (HJ) which was inextricably linked to the values of the NSDAP and taught children both military skills and hatred of Germany’s enemies, chiefly Jews. Gerhard Rempel has examined the SS’ interest in bringing HJ members into their organisation upon reaching manhood, an organisational link which warrants studying the HJ’s activities intently. Rempel has emphasised the reciprocated affection between the organisations stating that the SS saw valuable manpower in the HJ while dedicated members of the latter “preferred the equally young and dynamic SS” over alternative career options.⁶

Particularly after Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, the HJ formed a two-pronged attack with the Nazi school system to mould young males into tools for the regime. This dual assault on the minds of Germany’s children was a strategy planned by the government. A report from the German delegation at the Fourth International Conference on Public Instruction in Geneva from 1935 underlines the three forces that were intended to form the “foundations for the reforms in German

³ W. Schellenberg, *Hitler’s Secret Service* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1971), 19.

⁴ Andrea Riedle, *Die Angehörigen des Kommandanturstabs im KZ Sachsenhausen: Sozialstruktur, Dienstwege und biografische Studien* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2011), 106-108. Riedle’s conclusion is based upon a sample of 230 SS men at Sachsenhausen, about a quarter of the roughly 1,000 SS men who served in the camp interior. For information on Riedle’s sample selection see 11-12. Riedle also underlines that barring certain specific roles like camp doctor and camp architect, there were generally no specific education requirements for positions in the camp, 109.

⁵ See M. Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 37-55, for information on the education of leaders in the RSHA. Wildt shows that two-thirds of leaders he investigated had a degree and almost one-third had a doctoral degree.

⁶ G. Rempel, *Hitler’s Children: The Hitler Youth and the SS* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 2-4.

education, namely the school, the youth organisation and the family. They are all three recognised as natural and indispensable factors in the education of boys and girls, and it is the aim of German educational reform to guarantee equally the importance of these three factors as educational forces.”⁷ In practice, under the Nazis, family was neglected as an element of education, but this source reveals the Nazi view that the youth organisation was as indispensable to education as the classroom. Lisa Pine has critiqued early literature on education in Nazi Germany for considering schooling and youth groups separately. Rightly, Pine has argued that an approach which encompasses both aspects of education is essential to better understanding its nature within the Third Reich.⁸ However, this understanding is improved further by considering the key features of the education systems that preceded the Nazi era. The first section will thus show that the combined effect of schooling, across the three early twentieth century periods, and HJ activities was one which had the potential to create a vast body of militarised and antisemitic German males.

Following on from youth experiences, there will be a concise supplementary exploration of the most significant aspects of life in the Weimar Republic which could drive support for the Nazis and catalyse later involvement with the SS. Due to the literature on the period concentrating chiefly on the *Sturmabteilung* (Storm Detachment, or SA), the dominant Nazi paramilitary outfit in the 1920s, this organisation’s efforts will supplant the SS here. Equally, Theodore Abel’s social study in the early 1930s investigating the reasoning for supporting the NSDAP reveals SA mindsets in particular.⁹ This discussion is significant because whilst education was hugely influential, the environment from which future camp perpetrators emerged also moulded their outlook. Such a consideration is also relevant to males from numerous generations who lived through the Weimar period and were still young enough to serve in different capacities in the camp system from 1933 to 1945. A key point of discussion in this section is the socioeconomic impact of German hyperinflation and the Great Depression which started in 1923 and 1929 respectively. From 1932, 600,000 people in Berlin alone, and six million nationwide were collecting unemployment payments showing the vast extent of financial difficulty in this period. As Peter Merkl emphasises, most of this unemployment affected younger Germans, born after 1900, and chiefly males, therefore this interaction is essential for

⁷ German Delegation at Fourth International Conference on Public Instruction, ‘The Development of German Education – 1934-35’, *Monatshefte für Deutschen Unterricht*, 27:7 (1935), 281-285, 281.

⁸ L. Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 2.

⁹ See T. Abel, *Why Hitler Came into Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983). See xiii-xx for Thomas Childers’ foreword which aptly problematises the study and its findings while recognising its status as a “primary source of great significance”. For the collation of many of the Nazi testimonies Abel received during his study, see *Online Archive of California* (OAC), Inventory of the Theodore Fred Abel papers (contributed by Hoover Institution (HI), Library and Archives, where individual testimonies can be traced), [Abel \(Theodore F.\) papers \(cdlib.org\)](https://cdlib.org/collections/abel-theodore-f-papers/) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

considering the radicalising potential of poverty.¹⁰ In her study of SS marriage and family life, Amy Carney supports the view that the Depression had a detrimental impact on the young generation of future SS men who doubted their chances of achieving financial security.¹¹ Michael Wildt similarly contends that “mistrust of the guiding institutions of civil society” resulting from the economic collapse drove this generation to seek to build a new order with a true sense of community.¹² Also important to this section is a necessary interaction with the highly politicised paramilitary activity of the Weimar years, with particular attention given to the later 1920s and the role of the SA. With ruinous hardship pushing many younger German men to despair, the SA competed with other paramilitary outfits to offer an outlet for their frustration as well as a means of belonging in a Germany which was deeply divided. This analysis will thus show how the Nazi Brownshirts were able to successfully attract many men to the Hitlerite cause prior to 1933.

The chapter will also discuss the impact of media upon the population of the Third Reich. This section identifies the degree to which the National Socialist propaganda machine, utilising an unprecedented dissemination of state ideology through numerous mediums, was successful in one of its chief aims of rallying the German people against opponents of the regime. Jeffrey Herf considers Nazi propaganda to be the reason why antisemitism led to the effort to eliminate European Jewry between 1941 and 1945. Propaganda, he says, caused the evolution of antisemitism from a centuries-old pattern of persecution into a rationale for mass murder.¹³ This section will thus show that Herf’s assessment of the power of Nazi media as the catalyst for genocide has a great deal of validity. Supporting Herf’s contention, Kurt Möbius, an SS camp guard sentenced after the war for crimes at the Chelmno extermination camp, claimed that he “believed all the propaganda that Jews were criminals and subhuman... the thought that one should oppose or evade the order to take part in the extermination of the Jews never entered my head”.¹⁴ This chapter recognises, however, that although crucial to the perpetration of the Holocaust, the wider population who embraced Nazi propaganda did not kill the Jews and other victims of the camps directly. Nor were the Camp SS

¹⁰ P.H. Merkl, *The Making of a Stormtrooper* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 4-7. Merkl shows that 22.8 percent of the unemployed were aged 18-24. Among white-collar workers this figure reached 32.1 percent. Merkl’s figures are from *Statistisches Jahrbuch des Deutschen Reiches 1934*. Merkl also asserts that males were chiefly affected since cheaper female labour prompted employers to take on women. He adds that German Labour Minister Friedrich Syrup claimed that one million males and 400,000 females under the age of 25 were unemployed at the beginning of 1933, supporting Merkl’s view that there was a gender imbalance in the unemployment figures.

¹¹ A. Carney, *Marriage and Fatherhood in the Nazi SS* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 174-175.

¹² Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation*, 428-429.

¹³ J. Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), vii.

¹⁴ Kurt Möbius on the guilt of the Jews and his own lack of blame in E. Klee, W. Dressen & V. Riess (eds.), *“The Good Old Days”: The Holocaust Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 220-221.

killers fuelled exclusively by media hatred. Propaganda was one of several key background influences and, when studying the direct perpetrators, must be considered in conjunction with other background factors as well.

Before 1933, Nazi propaganda was limited in its ability to permeate all areas of society. However, once Hitler became Chancellor, the state machinery allowed the Nazis to use avenues of distribution that were previously inaccessible to them.¹⁵ Some of these avenues proved more effective than others as the chapter will show. This section will look at three of the most valuable mediums of NSDAP propaganda: speeches, newspapers, and cinema. Each had its own merits for transmitting different content and for reaching different audiences, and, together, through the impressive centralisation of the media, these channels supported each other in what they aimed to achieve. This analysis cannot be exhaustive due to the broad scope of this chapter, but the selection of examples used will suffice to underscore the insidious content of Nazi propaganda. Overall, the following chapter will ultimately show that the early life experiences of the SS men who served in the KL were largely tainted by military, political and racial themes. As they were growing up, and indeed once they were adults, these same men lived in a society which was under constant bombardment from a politicised media industry that was unlike anything that had come before it. Thus, before considering the role of the SS and the camps in influencing camp guard behaviours, this chapter will demonstrate that background factors and propaganda played significant roles in shaping these guards and the broader German population.

Schooling

The increased focus upon military values in German schools in the lead up to, and during, the First World War has been considered by some historians as a key catalyst for young men joining the far-right after 1918. Andrew Donson identifies senior SS figures born between 1900, the birth year of the last soldiers conscripted for the war effort, and 1908, the birth year of the youngest schoolboys in 1914, to argue in favour of the critical impact that this period had upon youths. Heinrich Himmler (1900), Rudolf Höss (1900), and Reinhard Heydrich (1906) were amongst the senior SS officers whose journey to service in the Third Reich began here.¹⁶ Donson's hypothesis is that this generation of youths were embittered by receiving an education which sanctified sacrifice for Germany, whilst the youths themselves had little or no opportunity to fight. Statistical support for the importance of the war youth generation, defined by Christopher Dillon as those born between 1901 and 1910, to

¹⁵ For a recent appraisal of the numerous mediums of Nazi propaganda see, for instance, N. O'Shaughnessy, 'Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi Brand', *Journal of Public Affairs*, 9:1 (2009), 55-76.

¹⁶ A. Donson, 'Why Did German Youth Become Fascists? Nationalist Males Born from 1900 to 1908 in War and Revolution', *Social History*, 31:3 (2006), 337-358, 337.

the study of the Camp SS can be seen in the number of Dachau's leadership personnel who were members of this generation. From 1933 to 1939, the war youth generation outnumbered the front generation, those born no later than 1900, and the post-war generation within both Dachau's commandant staff and its block leader staff.¹⁷

Moreover, Katharine Kennedy has shown that many German children received an education which gave them the belief that warfare was a necessary part of their duty to Germany and was inherently heroic. Kennedy found that the reading books in Wilhelmine Prussian territories hailed the civilising nature of the German people, despite the presence of large Polish populations in these areas. Children read that "through German diligence" Prussia had "flourished and achieved great prosperity" because the Teutonic Knights had Germanised the eastern lands.¹⁸ The avoidance of discussing the continued Polish presence in these places highlights that there were xenophobic tones to the education system of Wilhelmine Germany. This was intensified in 1914 by the *Kriegspädagogik* (War Pedagogy) Movement which urged teachers to enthuse about the First World War through the glorification of military heroes and the destructive potential of weaponry.¹⁹ Nationalism within the teaching profession was also heightened by the *Burgfrieden* (literally 'castle peace'), the agreed cessation of party politics for the duration of the war.²⁰ The War Pedagogy Movement and the *Burgfrieden* combined effectively to mobilise enthusiasm for victory across all areas of education.

Germany's reception to the movement and subsequent implementation of pro-war pedagogy was varied. Indications of the success of a pro-war education system in the *Kaiserreich* can be seen in the rise in popularity of youth war literature and wartime 'penny dreadfuls'. Between 1914 and 1918, the number of new titles being released with the war as a main theme increased significantly. A 1916 survey subsequently revealed that of a sample of 50 12-year-old schoolboys from Munich, 46 percent asserted war books were their favourite, showing the impact of this new literature trend.²¹ An excerpt from one typically graphic German example read: "like wild devils our Styrians and Tyrolers cut and jabbed, a deafening cry filled the air, and we hit with rifle butts so madly that the Serbians'

¹⁷ For the respective percentages of the war youth generation within the Dachau commandant staff and its block leaders see Table 3.1 and Table 3.3 in Dillon, *Dachau*, on 95 and 127.

¹⁸ From Ferdinand Hirts *Deutsches Lesebuch. Ausgabe B: für mehrklassige evangelische Schulen. Ergänzende Beigabe, Ost- und Westpreussen*. Breslau, 1904: 40; *Lehrplan für die Volksschulen von Königsberg i. Pr.* Königsberg, 1892: 34, in K. Kennedy, 'Eastern Borderlands in German Schoolbooks, 1890-1945', *Paedagogica Historica*, 43:1 (2007), 29-43, 30-31.

¹⁹ Donson, 'German Youth', 339.

²⁰ Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 9.

²¹ Donson, 'German Youth', 339-345.

skulls shattered”.²² Whilst the war also served as the central theme of French education after 1914, as well as dominating much of children’s literature, the tone was markedly different.²³ For instance, a Paris headmaster told his students that “the duty of schoolchildren is to be obedient, hardworking, to prepare a sound future for themselves... This is how they can serve the nation for which their elders are fighting with such heroism”.²⁴ In this example, emphasis was placed upon the responsibilities of the child and that of the adult being distinctly different. These children were not expected to take on the worry of the war themselves. Furthermore, the French framed the war itself as a necessary defensive undertaking, in which they were retaliating against Germany antagonism. A British youth publication, *The Boy’s Own Paper*, taught its readers that the war constituted a righteous defence of Belgium and Britain herself. Unlike much German youth literature, *The Boy’s Own Paper* acknowledged moments of benevolence between opposing combatants in the war, emphasising the existence of solidarity between the soldiers and the presence of humanity in warfare.²⁵ Whilst French and British youth literature endeavoured to paint their respective countries as pacifist, German literature tended to take pride in ascribing violent acts to their soldiers.²⁶

Further evidence for militarisation within the classroom can be found within the *Schulaufsätze* (war compositions of schoolchildren), which also point to young males reacting positively to war pedagogy. These compositions show the unfiltered thoughts of students as teachers gave them freedom of choice over the content of their writing, fitting with the trend in the reformed German education system of the early twentieth century. Thus, by selecting the war as the topic for their compositions, as many did, schoolchildren have left behind written indications of their personal feelings. Donson recovered 327 written compositions from male schoolchildren, revealing that the majority contained patriotic and pro-war themes. More than one-fifth of these compositions were graphically violent.²⁷ One schoolboy lamented being too young to fight, writing: “if I were 18 years old, I would join the infantry... I would most like assault attacks... I would plunge into everything that came in my way with my bayonet”.²⁸ Another emphasised specifically the violence he would like to see and participate in on the battlefield: “I only wish that I could be a soldier. Then I would like to

²² From ‘Ein Bajonettangriff’, *Für die Kinderwelt*, XII (1915/16), 12-15, in *ibid.*, 345-346.

²³ See S. Audoin-Rouzeau, *Children and the Primary Schools of France, 1914-1918* in J. Horne (ed.), *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 39-52.

²⁴ Quoted by Madame Hollebecque, *La jeunesse scolaire de France et la guerre* (Paris: Didier, 1916), 91 in Audoin-Rouzeau in Horne, *State, Society and Mobilization*, 39.

²⁵ F. Loparco, ‘The First World War on The Boy’s Own Paper Magazine (1914-1915)’, *Rivista di Storia dell’Educazione*, 2015, 73-80, 79.

²⁶ Donson, ‘German Youth’, 346.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 348-349.

²⁸ From Müller, ‘Ich stieße alles nieder!’ in O. Karstädt (ed.), *Kinderaug und Kinderaufsatz im Weltkrieg* (Osterwieck, 1916), 53 in *ibid.*, 349.

stand across from the English, whose skulls I would smash with my rifle butt so that they would lose their hearing and sight".²⁹ These war compositions show that violent fantasy was not just part of the lives of these youths, but that it was appropriate to indulge these daydreams in an academic setting. The subsequent disappointment at not being able to join the war effort was one of the driving factors that pushed youths towards radical movements in post-1918 Germany. Around half of the members of the Nazi Party and the SA who had joined prior to 1933 had missed out on action in the Great War due to being too young.³⁰ The popularity of pro-war literature can be seen as a result of the War Pedagogy Movement's increasingly militaristic education. In turn this often-graphic literature contributed to students subscribing to their militarised schooling and to their creation of violent compositions.

Despite hitherto receiving very little academic attention, the subject of Music has recently been examined by Kennedy to deduce its function in teaching children about military life and death. Music was also highly valued in youth organisations, as will be discussed later, and thus its contribution to education was seen both within schools and in extracurricular groups. Whilst most songs taught in Wilhelmine, and later Weimar period, schools were non-military, especially for the lower grades of the primary school, up to one-quarter of songs generally referred to warfare. There were four 'canonical' songs which emerged across many of the regional Wilhelmine Music curricula; *Hinaus in die Ferne* (*Out into the Distance*), *Die Wacht am Rhein* (*The Watch on the Rhine*), *Reiters Morgenlied* (*Cavalryman's Morning Song*) and *Ich hatt' einen Kameraden* (*I had a Comrade*). Despite being unable to establish how receptive children in schools were to these songs, Kennedy strengthens her argument for the value of these songs by showing that German soldiers subsequently carried these songs with them into both the First and Second World Wars.³¹ First World War postcards from the front were sometimes annotated with the lyrics to these songs, with one example showing a joyful group of German soldiers beneath the words, '*Die Wacht am Rhein*', highlighting that the soldiers appeared to hold military songs that had been taught in nineteenth and twentieth century schools in high regard whilst at war.³² Taken on their own, war songs within Music do not necessarily amount to the militarising of children in schools. What these songs highlight, however, is that military

²⁹ From an untitled piece in W. Stern (ed.), *Jugendliches Seelenleben und Krieg* (Leipzig, 1915), 91, in *ibid.*, 349.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 337.

³¹ K. Kennedy, 'Singing about Soldiers in German Schools, from 1890 to 1945', *Paedagogica Historica*, 52:1-2 (2016), 76-91, 76-81.

³² *Universität Osnabrück*, Historische Bildpostkarten Sammlung Prof. Dr. Sabine Giesbrecht, 'Die Wacht am Rhein. - Durch Hunderttausend zuckt es schnell', November 1915, <http://www.bildpostkarten.uni-osnabrueck.de/displayimage.php?pos=-688> [Accessed 2 June 2023]

themes were pervasive within the Wilhelmine school curricula, exposing children to risky content in subjects that one might expect to be safe from concepts of warfare.

Furthermore, Konrad Jarausch has examined German universities in the Great War period and his research is helpful for seeing the broader militarisation of education. Although less than two percent of German 19-to-23-year-olds were in higher education in 1914, half of these were enrolled in the military that same year; by 1918 two-thirds of these students were in the military.³³ The subsequent result of this was that one-fifth of German higher education students died in the war, with no other social group suffering a higher mortality rate.³⁴ Whilst students across Europe volunteered in droves, the German higher academic environment often showed particular reverence for German military history, with the student centennial celebrations of the victory over Napoleon at Leipzig in 1913 showing this shortly before the war. In fact, within the realm of academia it was not uncommon for calling cards to prioritise military status, such as the held position of 'reserve lieutenant', above the academic title of the individual, underlining how students and their professors related closely to the military. The army and the navy made concerted efforts to agitate university professors into toughening their pro-military attitude within classrooms and this, combined with increasingly militaristic foreign political articles emerging in the student press, helped to cultivate a pro-warfare mindset in students.

The significance of the German student contribution to the First World War can be seen in the right-wing exploitation of their heavy loss of life at Langemarck in 1917 at commemorations over subsequent decades.³⁵ In 1938, an NSDAP propagandist emphatically claimed: "Langemarck was the birth hour of *völkisch* (folkish) Germany, of National Socialism".³⁶ Emphasising the sacrifice of this generation of German youth was an example of the Nazi drive to encourage the next generation of young people to dedicate their lives to Hitler and Germany. Furthermore, the sacrifice of German students in the First World War was certainly encouraged by their education and it often made their return to civilian life difficult. This caused the students to experience disillusionment with Weimar life, comparable to the bitterness felt by the schoolboys who were too young to fight. Thus, the various *Freikorps* (volunteer corps) offered military alternatives to the struggles of normal life after the war and a plausible route into Nazi paramilitary groups in later years. Whilst the average age of

³³ 1914 figures from H.G. Herrlitz and H. Titze, eds., *Datenhandbuch zur deutschen Universitätsgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1985) and 1918 figures from F. Schulze and P. Ssymank, *Das deutsche Studentum von den ältesten Zeiten bis zur Gegenwart*, 4th ed., (Munich, 1932), 453, both in K.H Jarausch, 'German Students in the First World War', *Central European History*, 17:4 (1984), 310-330, 311-318.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 318.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 314-317.

³⁶ Quote from G. Kaufmann, *Langemarck: Das Opfer der Jugend on allen Fronten* (Stuttgart, 1938), 103, in *Ibid.*, 328.

guard troop officers at Dachau was low, men born before 1900 constituted 27 percent of the total in 1934 and they still made up 15 percent of the total by 1938.³⁷ One should therefore be aware that this generation of students, militarised in their universities and convinced to go to war, were still relevant by the 1930s when the SS sought senior staff, and medical professionals, in the camps and connected offices. It is certainly clear that the German university reflected the trend of the lower academic institutions, showing that the Wilhelmine period left a legacy of a nationalistic and militaristic education system from top to bottom.

When the Weimar Republic was established, its leaders attempted to replace the nationalistic and militaristic textbooks from the Kaiser's Germany. However, many of them, particularly for the subjects of History and Geography, maintained their style from the Wilhelmine period. This was largely caused by weak support for the Weimar Republic which meant that, despite hopes of liberalising education, its leaders had to accept change would come slowly.³⁸ Furthermore, such efforts to dilute the jingoistic tones of education were stifled by the German detestation of the Treaty of Versailles. The impact upon education was that reading books heightened children's awareness of the new German diaspora in the recently annexed territories. One example of a History textbook which emphasised the detriment of the Treaty of Versailles was Bernhard Kumsteller's publication for the Weimar primary schools which called the treaty "the most destructive blow ever struck to Germandom".³⁹ Other History and Geography textbooks contained tables and maps which emphasised the severity of the situation Germany found itself in, with the figures of Germans "languishing" under foreign rule underlined with emotive emphasis.⁴⁰

Mathematics also exploited the opportunity to rally the nation's youth against the dishonour of the Versailles treaty by presenting arithmetic problems which required children to calculate the loss of land, increased population density and decrease in resource production. Though one might suggest that the bitterness transmitted through Weimar education was limited to being informative, if impassioned, the barely masked racial discrimination in some textbooks showed otherwise. The warnings of "slavification" of the Germans lost to the "intolerance and oppression" of the Poles could be read about in several primary school readers.⁴¹ Kennedy asserts that the Weimar era's

³⁷ See table 2.3 in Dillon, *Dachau*, 79.

³⁸ Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 10-11.

³⁹ From B. Kumsteller, *Geschichtsbuch für die deutsche Jugend. für Volksschulen*, Teil 4 (Leipzig, 1932), 30-31, in Kennedy, 'Eastern Borderlands', 33.

⁴⁰ From *Merkbuch zum Geschichts-Unterricht an den Oberklassen der Volkshauptschulen des Regierungsbezirkes Oberbayern mit Ausnahme Münchens* (Munich, 1919), back cover, 30, in *ibid.*, 33.

⁴¹ The following works are included amongst these readers; A. Bogen and A. Brinkmann, *Arbeitsbuch für den Sachunterricht in den Schulen an Ruhr und Rhein* (Breslau: Ferdinand Hirt Verlag, 1925), 73-76; B. Kumsteller, *Geschichtsbuch für die deutsche Jugend. für Volksschulen*, Teil 3 (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer Verlag, 1930), 46-47;

efforts at creating an attachment to the Germans under foreign rule and teaching of resentment for the Treaty of Versailles did not guarantee a shift towards the aggression of Nazism but it did not preclude it either.⁴² However, because the militarism and xenophobia of the Kaiser's education system were not effectively suppressed during the Weimar years, the Nazis grew in popularity in a period where education was still antagonistic towards foreign peoples. The anti-Versailles sentiments which emerged in schools contributed to the politicising of youths which the Nazis could exploit, even prior to 1933, through the HJ. The Nazi utilisation of Weimar schoolbooks for several years after they came to power shows that this literature was nationalistic enough to be accepted, at least in the short term, by Hitler. As such, it must be said that the Weimar Republic's teaching of the damage of the Treaty of Versailles, and its broader failure to liberalise education, very much contributed to the shift towards Nazi aggression.

Upon the succession of Adolf Hitler to the chancellorship in 1933, new reading books and a reformed, more centralised, curriculum became National Socialist priorities but took time to implement. A great deal of continuity was seen between the Weimar and Nazi education systems, but one significant difference was the Nazi resentment of academics and the studying of subjects they deemed too 'intellectual'. Reich Student Leader Gustav Adolf Scheel, blaming medical companies for offering youths incentives to study medicine, made the following comments about a rise in scholarly students at universities during the war: "the younger generation has developed a proclivity towards intellectual professions which is disproportionate in a most unhealthy manner... the decrease of students of a subject which is of just the same war-importance as medicine, namely engineering, is remarkable".⁴³ The Nazis, as Scheel exemplifies, valued most practical subjects that sought to minimise intellectuality as best as they could. To some degree this was ironic since the most commonly studied university subject amongst the leaders of the RSHA was Law followed by German Studies and History.⁴⁴ However, noted psychiatrist and former member of both the HJ and SA, Dr Heinrich Gross, highlighted why it was difficult to introduce rapid change in education. Writing in 1934 in the *Nationalsozialistische Monatshefte* (*National Socialist Monthly*), Gross stated that hitherto the NSDAP had been focused primarily on fighting the "harmful post-war regime". In doing this the party's propaganda "could and had to stress only the most important basic ideas" leaving the education of the masses for a "more quiet future". However, as that time came, the Nazi

R. Lüpcke, *Ferdinand Hirts Tatsachen- und Arbeitshefte. Ausgabe A.* (Breslau: Ferdinand Hirt Verlag, 1929), 45, in *ibid.*, 33-34.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴³ *Harvard Law School*, Nuremberg Trials Project, Letter to Dr Handloser, with a memorandum concerning the education of medical officers, 28 September 1943, 3, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Letter to Dr. Handloser, with a memorandum concerning the education of medical officers \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed 2 June]

⁴⁴ Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation*, 38.

state “faced the new task of schooling and educating all the willing, newly won, friends” and so “racial thinking necessarily played a decisive part, because herein lies basically the deepest revolutionary nature of the new spirit”.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, as mentioned above, continued use of Weimar textbooks was not overly detrimental because of their frequent containing of nationalistic and militaristic views.⁴⁶

Hitler himself signalled the tonal shift he wished to bring into education by asserting in *Mein Kampf* that: “The curriculum must be built up... so that when a young man leaves school he is not a half-pacifist, democrat or something else, but a whole German”.⁴⁷ Furthermore, according to Hitler, a child must be fully integrated into the *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community) and its Nazi ideas: “[a child’s] whole education... must give him the conviction that he is absolutely superior to others”.⁴⁸ Therefore, whilst the Nazis felt school subjects had grown too soft under the Weimar system, they would be completely reorganised to place greater importance upon military values, obedience and a fiercer love for Germany. Gregory Wegner has used a 1935 piece in Julius Streicher’s newspaper, *Der Stürmer* (*The Stormer*), and a 1939 book by Ernst Dobers to show some of the extreme teaching themes recommended to teachers. *Der Stürmer*’s article included suggestions of ‘Communism, a Jewish Creation’ and ‘The Hell of Soviet Russia’, whilst Dobers recommended teaching a large topic covering Jewish ‘Secret Manipulations’ and the ‘Takeover by the Jews’.⁴⁹ It is not feasible to estimate the exact pedagogical reaction to these proposed curriculum topics, but the suggestions alone show the Nazi intentions for schools to marry the perceived threats from the Soviet Union and World Jewry together. As will be seen below, the vicious antisemitism that was so prevalent in Nazi classrooms suggests that Dobers’ suggestions were appropriate for teachers to utilise.

Within the sciences, Biology, and the new subject *Rassenkunde* (Racial Studies), to which Dr Gross referred in 1934, the Nazi regime was able to disseminate its ideas of the perfect German. Both subjects channelled Hitler’s sentiment from *Mein Kampf* that “no boy and no girl must leave school without having been led to an ultimate realisation of the necessity and essence of blood purity”.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ *The Wiener Library* (WL), London, 1655/22, Dr H. Gross excerpt from article ‘Ein Jahr Rassenpolitische Erziehung’, *Nationalsozialistische Monatshefte*, No. 54, 1934, 833-834.

⁴⁶ From H. Schallenger, *Untersuchungen zum Geschichtsbild der Wilhelmischen Ära und der Weimarer Zeit* (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1964), 69-79 and 127-139 in G.P. Wegner, *Anti-Semitism and Schooling Under the Third Reich* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2002), 28.

⁴⁷ A. Hitler, trans. R. Manheim, *Mein Kampf* (London: Pimlico, 2011), 387.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 374.

⁴⁹ From ‘Teaching Themes for Anti-Semitic Instruction’, *Der Stürmer*, 1935 and E. Dobers, *Die Judenfrage: Stoff und Behandlung in der Schule*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Klinkhardt, 1939), in Wegner, *Anti-Semitism and Schooling*, 42 and 31.

⁵⁰ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 389.

Through indoctrinating pupils with the image of the perfect Aryan, these classes fuelled antisemitism and, through the explanation of the need for sterilisation of inferior beings, spread a disregard for the disabled through incessant othering. This increased with the emergence of the new Nazi curriculum in 1938.⁵¹ Secondary school students were warned of the Jew's hatred for anything different in an incendiary Biology schoolbook introduced to classrooms in 1942. It also explained that Asiatic features were increasingly present amongst Jews which were "so repulsive to us as Germans". Additionally, the book made references to the necessity to remove Jews from Germany society, stressing that "the history of the Jews demonstrates that they serve no purpose in the building of a nation". Moreover, it argued that there were rarely heroic deeds amongst their people "but there is plenty of murder, treachery, cowardly betrayal, and boundless cruelty... the Jews have always been the number one criminals in all times".⁵² Framing the Jews as the antithesis of the morally upstanding German whilst the Final Solution was underway had the purpose of making German youth unsympathetic to the Jews' misfortune. It is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of this Biology pedagogy but, as will be seen shortly, antisemitic behaviours from schoolchildren and the active role played by some of the HJ in the Final Solution suggests that youths had been receptive to teachings which underlined the Jew's biological and social incompatibility with the righteous German.

Physics was more awkward to politicise but through focusing on warfare, Erich Günther, the author of the Physics school handbook claimed to have the aim "of awakening not only the ability to bear arms but also the will to do so" amongst pupils.⁵³ Chemistry borrowed from the anger at the Treaty of Versailles shown in Weimar Mathematics, rallying students to see the devastating impact upon Germany's natural resource pool, though it also championed the works of German chemists in the field, again highlighting the regime's educative bias.⁵⁴ Mathematics itself, also carried on the Versailles theme from the Weimar period with problems addressing the reduced living space in German territories. More overtly pro-war conundrums were put to students too, however, with one example challenging students to calculate the remaining fuel left in a Stuka after it bombed Warsaw,

⁵¹ Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 42-43.

⁵² Document 106 – O. Steche, E. Stengel & M. Wagner (eds.), *Lehrbuch der Biologie für Oberschulen und Gymnasien*, Fifth-Grade Edition (Leipzig: Quelle und Meyer, 1942), 3:32, in Rabinbach & Gilman, *Third Reich Sourcebook*, 250-251.

⁵³ From E. Günther, 'Die Bedeutung des Physikunterrichts für die Erziehung zur Wehrhaftigkeit', *Unterrichtsblätter für Mathematik und Naturwissenschaften*, Vol. 45 (1939), 231, in Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 44-45.

⁵⁴ From K. Götz and W. Jansen, 'Der Chemieunterricht im NS-Staat. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Chemiedidaktik', *Gesellschaft Deutscher Chemiker, Fachgruppe Geschichte der Chemie Mitteilung*, Vol. 4 (1990), 31 in *ibid.*, 47.

“the centre of international Jewry”, on its “crusade”.⁵⁵ The sciences and Mathematics undoubtedly provided an opportune medium through which warfare and racial hatred could be transmitted to students.

Continuity from the Weimar system was also evident in the subjects of Geography and History, though the increasingly familiar Nazi influence injected more zeal into the extant militarisation of the subjects. Geography emphasised the urgent need for German expansion, describing the populace as ‘*Volk ohne Raum*’ (‘people without space’).⁵⁶ Geography educators were directed to enhance their students’ view of the Nordic race’s superiority where possible, so that they may benefit from “cultural-geographical reflections” to draw firm conclusions about the righteousness of subjugating inferior races in the colonies.⁵⁷ Even though Weimar History books contained nationalist themes, the Nazis sought to replace them with more extreme ideas. During the wait for new books, the *Nationalsozialistische Lehrerbund* (National Socialist Teachers League, or NSLB) was reminded by the Nazi newspaper, *Völkischer Beobachter* (*Folkish Observer*), that “it is the duty of every History teacher to teach with his National Socialist-trained conviction, even if new teaching material is not yet available”.⁵⁸ Teachers, in turn, passionately encouraged reverence of the *Führerprinzip*, (leadership principle), the idea that obeying one’s superiors was of paramount importance in German life. This principle was especially crucial to military organisations and will endure as a key concept throughout this study. In the classroom, historical German leaders, such as Frederick the Great, were used to illustrate heroic leadership as well as impressive achievements. Comparisons were drawn to Hitler and his accomplishments with the intention of inspiring reverence of the *Führerprinzip* amongst German youths.⁵⁹ The HJ also reinforced this historical reverence by carrying out “paroles for the day”, praising German heroes of the past such as Heinrich the Lion, Franz von Sickingen, and Manfred von Richthofen.⁶⁰ This exemplified the way in which the HJ supplemented the lessons of Nazi classrooms. The extent to which students and HJ members accepted these teachings is very hard to quantify, but Donald McGranahan’s 1945 study comparing attitudes of samples of U.S and German youths gives some indication. Seeking to contrast the opinions of American and German youths, the study asked participants to name the greatest man in world history. The German sample’s top ten responses were all world or military leaders whilst the U.S.

⁵⁵ P. Neumann, *The Black March: An SS Man’s Account of the Bloody War on the Russian Front* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985), 17.

⁵⁶ Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 48.

⁵⁷ Wegner, *Anti-Semitism and Schooling*, 119.

⁵⁸ From BAB, NS 12/327, ‘Wandel des geschichtlichen Weltbildes’, *Völkischer Beobachter*, in Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 50.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶⁰ WL, 1655/70, Kulturamt der Reichsjugendführung, ed., *Freude, Zucht, Glaube* (Potsdam: Ludwig Voggenreiter publishing house, 1937), partial trans., 120.

sample's responses included explorers and inventors. Frederick the Great and Hitler were the third and fourth most frequent German responses which suggests that the heavy emphasis upon the greatness of these men in Third Reich schools was effective.⁶¹

A 1934 History curriculum suggestion from the NSLB showed how teachers could create direct links between a "content area" and its "relationship to Jews", with one module tying "Germany's youth forward! The victory of faith" to the "final struggle against the Jews".⁶² In this instance the aim was to directly charge the students with the responsibility for solving the Jewish problem as they reached adulthood. Once the Third Reich readers were introduced to History classes, the picture they painted of the past was heavily distorted through the lens of Nazism. *Geschichte als national politische Erziehung (History as National Political Education)* condemned the French Revolution's Judaeo-Mediterranean instigators for exterminating Aryan aristocrats and perpetuated the longstanding *Dolchstoßlegende* ('stab-in-the-back' myth), claiming Jews had betrayed Germany in the Great War.⁶³ Dietrich Klagges' History book for secondary schools, *Volk und Führer (People and Leader)*, attacked the Jewish people and praised historical precedents for the segregation of Jews in Germany. Klagges wrote that the Jews were:

Forced to live in their own neighbourhoods (in the ghetto) and to dress in a fashion that rendered them recognisable as Jews on sight... the Jews were able to seize control of loan-sharking and usury, things they had long since mastered... their ruthless, insatiable greed made them so detestable that they were driven out of many German cities during the Middle Ages".⁶⁴

This 1942 schoolbook, tried to convince youths that the Nazi handling of Jews had been entirely justified and that the Jewish obsession with profit was habitual, warranting their expulsion from German society. Like the 1942 Biology book mentioned above, this History volume's references to the righteousness of segregating and ousting Jews, at a time when their extermination was underway in the SS camps, shows that the regime highly prioritised ensuring that schoolchildren would understand and, ideally, support the terrible treatment of the Jewish people in Nazi Germany.

⁶¹ D.V. McGranahan, 'A Comparison of Social Attitudes Among American and German Youth', *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 41:3 (1946), 245-258, 252.

⁶² From "Teaching Plans on State Policy" from *Der Nationalsozialistische Erzieher*, Number 42 (1934), cited in Herring, Jochen, et al., *Schüleralltag im Nationalsozialismus* (Dortmund: Pädagogische Arbeitsstelle, 1984), 269 in Wegner, *Anti-Semitism and Schooling*, 124-125.

⁶³ From Prof. Dietrich, *Geschichte als national politische Erziehung* (1937), in Neumann, *The Black March*, 17-18.

⁶⁴ Document 104 – D. Klagges, *Volk und Führer: Deutsche Geschichte für Schulen* (Frankfurt am Main: Diesterweg, 1942), 187-188 in Rabinbach & Gilman, *Third Reich Sourcebook*, 249-250.

Despite the above linking the Nazification of subjects and the indoctrination of youths, sometimes the topic of education was not the cause of antisemitic outbursts in classrooms. At times, an enthusiastically political teacher could have a great influence on pupils. Abraham Grossman, a Jew born in Güstrow in 1925, was 11 years old when his Art teacher, who had previously come to class in an SA uniform, attacked him. Revolted by the smell of Grossman's lunch, the teacher, named Krüger, physically kicked him into the hallway causing him injury.⁶⁵ In this situation, the trigger of the spread of antisemitism was not the school subject of Art but an emboldened pro-Nazi teacher. Similarly, although pertaining to the education of girls, Jewish pupil Eva Brewster's testimony revealed that her French teacher tried to humiliate the class's Jews. On one occasion she requested they each bring a family tree to the class. Unaware of whose family tree she was looking at, the teacher announced:

Now children, there's a family tree any German child could be proud to have... this child's ancestors have been living in Berlin since the 13th century and look at that one of her ancestors was the physician to Fred the Great and another one is the famous composer Meyerbeer!... whose is it?

The teacher was so infuriated to learn it was Brewster's she immediately left the class and demanded the principal expel the Jews. She subsequently tried to show the children that Jews could be identified with scientific measurements and inadvertently classified a blonde Jewish girl as an Aryan, again drawing her ire. She thus expelled Jews from her French classes.⁶⁶ Again, the school subject could be less important than a teacher's personality in influencing youths.

The desired effect of antisemitic lessons was to have young children identify and alienate the perceived Jewish threat. After his teacher physically expelled him from the classroom as an odorous nuisance unworthy of kindness, Grossman's classmates followed their tutor's example and waited outside the school for him and chased him home singing antisemitic verses before waiting in front of his house the next morning to chase him again.⁶⁷ Another boy, a 10-year-old serving in the HJ, reportedly received quick promotion within the organisation due to his uncanny ability to identify Jews attempting to move incognito without wearing a Star of David.⁶⁸ Dangerous ideological instruction also prompted other children to physical displays of hate; whilst attending his Jewish school in Hamburg after the Nazi takeover, Harry Stiefel experienced Aryan children throwing eggs

⁶⁵ *University of Southern California (USC), Shoah Foundation, Visual History Archive (VHA), Testimony of Abraham Grossman, segment 13-18, [Abraham Grossmann - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]*

⁶⁶ *USC, Shoah Foundation, VHA, Testimony of Eva Brewster, segment 29-33, [Eva Brewster - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]*

⁶⁷ *USC, Shoah Foundation, VHA, Abraham Grossman, segment 13-18.*

⁶⁸ *Neumann, [The Black March](#), 11.*

and tomatoes over the wall at the students.⁶⁹ On his commute from school in 1933, Eugene Katz was subjected to a violent assault where antisemitic schoolmates pushed him through the glass of a train window.⁷⁰ Later, when German Jew Fred Pelican was caught by the SS trying to escape the country in November 1938, children between eight and 12 years old swarmed his group spitting at them and screaming “stinking yids, perish *Yuda*” showing that their vitriol could be displayed against adults just as easily.⁷¹ These examples indicate that children were receptive to politicised teaching and were eager to put their tuition into action outside of the classroom.

Early twentieth century German schooling, therefore, was saturated with nationalistic thought across almost all subjects and from the primary level through to the university. The intentions of Wilhelmine schoolbooks which praised the righteous Germanising of foreign lands were not the same as Third Reich publications which vilified the Jews, yet both had the effect of teaching children that Germans were superior to other peoples. The overlapping tones across these three periods help to explain why the Camp SS comprised men who were educated in each of the decades after 1900 in the lead up to the 1940s. Schooling was, especially under the Nazi regime, tantamount to a daily barrage of patriotism and xenophobia; it would require young individuals to be highly resilient to be able to completely ignore the messages that they were exposed to over several years. Undoubtedly, German schooling in the decades leading up to the Second World War, when the KL reached its murderous peak, disseminated dangerous ideas which risked indoctrinating children with traits and beliefs which made them ideal for the SS and other Nazi organisations.

The Hitlerjugend

Before the First World War the *Wandervogel* (Wandering Bird) youth groups had been the most notable organisations offering extracurricular activities to children. Largely oppositionist, particularly to Wilhelmine authoritarianism and militarism as well as the heavy drinking and flag-waving of student fraternities, these groups promoted individuality and celebration of country life.⁷²

Wandervogel groups are peripheral to this study due to their seemingly innocuous aims and values regarding youth activities. Whilst this has on occasion been disputed, the influence of these groups in comparison to that of the later HJ, for example, was limited.⁷³ The interwar period saw vast

⁶⁹ USC, Shoah Foundation, VHA, Testimony of Harry Stiefel, segment 10, [Harry Stiefel - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](#) [Accessed 4 April 2023]

⁷⁰ USC, Shoah Foundation, VHA, Testimony of Eugene Katz, segment 51, [Eugene Katz - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](#) [Accessed 4 April 2023]

⁷¹ F. Pelican, *From Dachau to Dunkirk*, (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1993), 6.

⁷² H.J. Hahn, *Education and Society in Germany* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 39.

⁷³ M. Tyldesley, ‘The German Youth Movement and National Socialism: Some Views from Britain’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41:1 (2006), 21-34, 27-28 – Tyldesley acknowledges that Rolf Gardiner disputes this by arguing that the *Wandervogel* had discernible political goals which were not pacifist.

variety between youth groups, with right-wing, Communist, *völkisch*, and religious groups coexisting. However, it was the HJ, operating from 1923 to 1945, which became the dominant youth organisation in Germany as Nazi influence grew. The organisation's reach was initially limited, with just 1,200 members in its first year of existence, and no enforcement of membership until 1939, but the subsequent growth of the HJ was imperative to indoctrinating millions of German children over two decades.⁷⁴ As the HJ came to dominate the youth group scene, it is unsurprising that Himmler later referenced its importance as a scouting tool for the SS. He said, "we accept young men of 18 years of age. We know them already from the Hitler Youth, have studied them already a few years, so that we are sure to only get the best".⁷⁵ Despite the Reichsführer's bluster, it is important to highlight that not all HJ boys were led to the SS and, equally, HJ membership was not universal amongst the SS. In fact, Riedle's study on the members of the Sachsenhausen SS showed that roughly one in five men had been in the HJ.⁷⁶ Riedle's low membership figures should not prompt an underestimation of the HJ's centrality to the matter at hand; the presence of vociferously National Socialist men in the KL, who had experienced the HJ, could impact other guards such was the nature of social interaction amongst the perpetrators of camp crimes.

The establishment of the HJ was essentially a renaming of the *Grossdeutsche Jugendbewegung* (Greater German Youth Movement), which was the principle component of the new organisation.⁷⁷ The words of Baldur von Schirach, the longest serving *Reichsjugendführer* (Hitler Youth Leader), spoken at the establishment of the National Socialist European Youth League in 1942 help to clarify the main motivations and aims of the HJ: "the Hitler Youth is not an organisation founded by the State for the Youth, but an organisation founded by Youth for the State. It is a voluntary contribution by the rising generation of the Reich towards the building up of the nation and its militant development".⁷⁸ Schirach's emphasis upon the independence expected of the HJ's members, underlined the NSDAP's high expectations of Germany's youth. His reference to the value of volunteering was a sentiment shared by the SS and the wider Nazi movement. Most important, however, was Schirach's emphasis that the German children were key to the country's military

⁷⁴ 1923 HJ membership figures from Rempel, *Hitler's Children*, 266.

⁷⁵ Document PS-1992 (A) – Speech by Heinrich Himmler at National Political Course for the Armed Forces, "Nature and Task of the SS and Police", 15-23 January 1937 in International Military Tribunal (IMT), *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression – Vol. IV* (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1946), 619.

⁷⁶ Riedle, *Angehörigen des Kommandanturstabs im KZ Sachsenhausen*, 80. The true figure may in fact be higher, based upon Riedle's limited access to biographical information and examination of a minority of camp staff. Other camps' staff were also not included for any potential comparison. As such, Riedle's sample does have limitations, but it is safe to state that HJ membership was by no means universal in the Camp SS.

⁷⁷ From *Bundesarchiv* (BAK), Koblenz, Sammlung Schumacher, Gruppe VIII, No. 239 in P.D. Stachura, *Nazi Youth in the Weimar Republic* (Santa Barbara, CA: Clio Press Inc., 1975), 23.

⁷⁸ WL, 793/4, Baldur von Schirach speaks at the foundation of the European Youth League in Vienna, 14 September 1942.

resurgence. This confession, from a figure who led the HJ for nine years, is invaluable in evidencing that the HJ was designed to play a key role in militarily indoctrinating young men.

Examining the activities of the HJ is crucial to understanding the methods that the leaders used to imbue members with military mindsets and National Socialist ideology. Like the education system, the HJ used song as a central activity in their training of children. Music has been described as a tool for ‘numbing’ the minds of the HJ, through its repetition and chant-like nature, encouraging obedience in a similar way to sports.⁷⁹ Akin to Music in schools, the songs used by the HJ often carried themes of dedication to the German *Volks* and the fatherland. The HJ’s ability to mobilise youth nationalism through encouraging boys to see themselves as young soldiers allowed the organisation to stand apart from the larger body of seemingly inert right-wing youth groups.⁸⁰ In 1939, as the world was poised to go to war, the HJ published a songbook which drilled into its members the importance of obedience and devotion:

Devotion to the Fatherland, this we hold dear,

Devotion will suffice, we have no one to fear,

We have no one to fear!...

Our devotion comes to life in you and me, in all of thee, by night and by day,

And wherever we may perish, the seeds of faith are sown in the clay.⁸¹

Another example of HJ emphasis upon sacrifice through song reads as follows:

He who wants to live should also fight!

To be more than appeared to be.

God is mighty in all powerful men.

Only he who has learnt to obey, can later command.

It is the power of the mind which wins victories.

⁷⁹ From H. Rumpf in W. Klafki, ed., *Verführung, Distanzierung, Ernüchterung: Kindheit und Jugend im Nationalsozialismus* (Weinheim, 1988), p. 231 and M. Cranz, *Ich, ein Deutscher* (Dülmen, 1987), 61 in M.H. Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 32.

⁸⁰ Stachura, *Nazi Youth*, 46.

⁸¹ Document 109 – H. Baumann, “Und haben wir die Treue” in *Der Reichsjugendbewegung* (ed.), *Unser Liederbuch: Lieder der Hitler-Jugend* (Munich: Verlag Franz Eher Nachfolger GmbH, 1939), 66, in Rabinach & Gilman, *Third Reich Sourcebook*, 253.

He who loves his nation, proves it only through sacrifice.⁸²

Sacrifice for Germany was, as has been mentioned already, seen as one of the highest and most coveted honours that the individual was encouraged to seek. The latter example above also alluded to the *Führerprinzip* mentioned earlier. In teaching German males, from a young age, to revere the sanctity of orders and not to challenge superiors, the HJ made vast numbers of youths highly compliant. These young males were thus primed for service within the military when they were older, with the SS particularly obsessive about securing complete obedience from its men to ensure their orders for cruelty and murder would be adhered to in the KL system and elsewhere.

Sacrifice also tied into the glory of volunteerism, something which Hitler had emphasised the value of in *Mein Kampf*, particularly in relation to those who had made the ultimate sacrifice for Germany in the Great War:

Just sum up all the hundreds of thousands of individual cases in which again and again the watchword was: *volunteers* to the front, *volunteer* patrols, *volunteer* dispatch carriers,... *volunteers* for storm battalions, etc. – again and again through four and a half years, on thousands of occasions, volunteers and more volunteers – and always you see the same result: the beardless youth or the mature man, both filled with fervent love of their fatherlands, with great personal courage or the highest consciousness of duty, *they* stepped forward.⁸³

The SS were keen to wear the badge of volunteerism with pride and the *Inspektor der Konzentrationslager* (Inspector of Concentration Camps), Theodor Eicke, emphasised in his monthly orders to the Camp SS in June 1937 that “officers and NCOs should always bear in mind that our men have volunteered to come to us in good faith, in the first flush of youth, and with great excitement... These young men willingly subordinate themselves and enter full of expectations into the school of obedience”.⁸⁴ Eicke’s words invoke thoughts of young and naïve men, fresh from the HJ and fully aware of their responsibility to volunteer in defence of Germany. The SS were keen to provide the opportunity to those who they deemed worthy. *Waffen-SS* officer Peter Neumann’s memoirs include an account of his swearing-in ceremony in March 1938, which gives further credence to the value of song to the HJ. Whilst describing the “impressive, sonorous and vibrant” notes of the *Horst Wessel Lied* (*Horst Wessel Song*, the co-national anthem of Nazi Germany) playing, Neumann recalled clenching his HJ-dagger and repeating the oath of “*Treue bis auf dem Tod*” (“faithful unto death”),

⁸² WL, 1655/70, Kulturamt der Reichsjugendführung, ed., *Freude, Zucht, Glaube*, 122.

⁸³ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 473.

⁸⁴ From *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* (IFZ), Munich, MA 293, IKL Befehlsblatt, 1 July 1937, s. 2550154, in Dillon, *Dachau*, 54.

which was etched upon it.⁸⁵ Neumann illustrated the music's evolution into the "stirring" *Deutsch mein Bruder* (*My German Brother*) followed by the "booming" *Deutschlandlied* (*Song of Germany*, Nazi Germany's other national anthem), before being met by silence. Neumann's feelings towards his HJ section leader Klauss Ranke breaking the silence shows the fervour that could be aroused by music:

It seems to me that Ranke has committed sacrilege, that he has destroyed a magnificent and eternal dream, a dream which has carried us on a blare of trumpets and a clangour of brass to the supreme heights of those glorious deeds performed by our fathers and grandfathers on the Marne and at Sedan: a dream in which we saw before our eyes the heroic charge of the "Uhlans of Death", lances levelled as they hurled themselves upon the foe.⁸⁶

One might forgive the sentimentality of a 17-year-old youth, however, towards the end of the war boys of this age were on active military duty and fighting at the frontlines. A notable example of this was the youthful 12th SS panzer division *Hitler-Jugend*.⁸⁷ Thus the HJ's sentimental impact on a young man, should not be dismissed too quickly. Neumann's passionate remembrance of German sacrifice and semi-mythical reverence of the great Uhlans certainly shows that the HJ were very proficient in rallying their members through music.

In addition, Physical Education was central to the Third Reich school curriculum, second only to German in cumulative weekly timetabled hours for school grades five to eight, but it was most effectively utilised by the HJ.⁸⁸ Swimming, boxing, fencing, football and athletic events were common physical activities in the HJ, yet, as Michael Kater has pointed out, even these sports had militarising functions.⁸⁹ Some HJ members appeared to sound dejected when recounting their sport sessions due to being drilled fiercely, leaving them feeling broken and more vulnerable. This treatment was not exclusive to the HJ; military organisations have often used hazing, at times in the form of harsh physical drills, to induct rookies into the collective. It is alarming, however, that the HJ was not an outright military organisation but, rather, a youth club, albeit one with an intense focus upon military values. One HJ member complained that in their physical drills they "had to run for hours, crawl through filth and hop up and down". Another pondered on reflection: "Did we feel degraded, drilled, demeaned?" emphasising that he did not realise, at the time, that he was being

⁸⁵ Neumann, *The Black March*, 7-9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸⁷ Stachura, *Nazi Youth*, 202.

⁸⁸ Wegner, *Anti-Semitism and Schooling*, 191 – See Appendix 1 showing the *Volksschule* curriculum, 1939.

⁸⁹ Kater, *Hitler Youth*, 30.

readied “for a war”.⁹⁰ This negative connection between the HJ and physical training was observed by a *Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands* (Social Democratic Party of Germany, or Sopade) report in 1938. The report noted that “young people are starting to feel particularly burdened by the lack of freedom and the mindless drills practiced” within Nazi organisations.⁹¹ It is important to note that Sopade viewed the Nazi regime extremely negatively which influenced their perception of the reactions of youth to National Socialism. Nonetheless, in this case the report supports other evidence that members were troubled by the hazing experienced within the HJ. This was not terribly problematic, however, as the Nazis did not specifically need youths to enjoy their physical drilling, just to participate, be obedient and to lose their individuality as they were inducted into the collective.

Kater is correct to relate sports and military for multiple reasons. Firstly, the HJ used mass-physical drills regularly during their camps over school holiday periods. These exercises sometimes consisted of mock battles wherein great German victories would be re-enacted with hard physical contact, accompanied by the singing of war songs.⁹² Secondly, tied to the first point, fitness tests, mock battles and shooting-practice were part of the HJ’s pre-military training which played a pivotal role in enabling the HJ to be used for military purposes. A key example of this was the *HJ-Streifendienst* (HJ-Patrol Units), Himmler’s junior police detachment which recruited 16-to-18-year-old HJ members to work with the *Geheime Staatspolizei* (Secret State Police, or Gestapo) in monitoring German youth.⁹³ Thirdly, sports had a historic tradition of value to the German military with the SS also prizing physical excellence. A 1935 push by the SS to increase the number of sports badges held by its men, earned for proficiency within a sporting discipline, showed that sports and military were intertwined.⁹⁴ Neumann recalled memories of his HJ unit singing in victory after their Sedan Day mock battle, celebrating Prussia’s victory over Napoleon III in 1870. He sang with his comrades about readying grenades for battle and chanted that the Bolshevik menace should face them, supporting the conclusion that militarised sport instilled a hunger for fighting in youths.⁹⁵ Neumann’s testimony suggests that whilst physical drilling for the purpose of hazing was demoralising and had a negative

⁹⁰ R.R. Ringler, *Illusion einer Jugend: Lieder, Fahnen und das bittere Ende: Hitlerjugend in Österreich: Ein Erlebnisbericht* (St. Pölten, 1977), 78 (first quote); B. Otto, “Wussten wir auch nicht, wohin es geht...”: *Erinnerungen, 1927-1947* (Munich, 2000), 77 (second quote), in *ibid.*, 31.

⁹¹ Document 108 – Reports on German Youth, *Deutschland-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands*, 1938 (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Petra Nettelbeck, 1980), 5:1390, in Rabinbach & Gilman, *Third Reich Sourcebook*, 252.

⁹² Neumann, *The Black March*, 39-40.

⁹³ Kater, *Hitler Youth*, 61.

⁹⁴ B. Bahro, ‘Can Sport Form a National-Socialist Elite? The Example of SS Sports’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 31:12 (2014), 1462-1477, 1465.

⁹⁵ Neumann, *The Black March*, 40 – Neumann also discusses singing marching music in a mock military parade.

impact upon HJ members, once the physical activity was tied to a more positively received theme, like warfare, it became more enjoyable.

Measuring precisely how dangerous the HJ's teachings were, and when they were indeed at their most vociferous is a challenging task. Whilst the HJ consistently held the same values, its confidence was certainly boosted, along with its reach, when the Nazis took power in 1933. It is useful to illustrate some examples of the impact that the HJ had upon youths in the years when the KL system was operating. At Buchenwald, in 1942, Dutch inmate, Galt van Ramshorst, remembered being sent to work in a sand quarry in Klein Obringen. On their daily march, he said that the prisoners "were greeted there with stones thrown by Hitler Youths. It grew worse day by day, so that some of the prisoners took their own lives".⁹⁶ Whilst dangerous, stone throwing may be seen as an intrinsically childish pastime, reflecting the young age of the culprits. Yet, the act shows that the HJ were intending to cause harm, even though the violence was purposely checked in its destructive potential. This cautious violence was, in places, superseded by outright deadly force on the part of the HJ by the late war, particularly in the evacuation period which will be covered in Chapter Six. For instance, in 1945, outside the town of Gardelegen in Saxony, an SS-facilitated massacre of KL prisoners took place with the HJ amongst the perpetrators. One of the few survivors, a Hungarian musician recorded only as Gaza, identified some of the killers as Nazi boys who killed whilst laughing.⁹⁷ The presence of these HJ members demonstrates the propensity of the HJ to emulate SS behaviours and to enjoy doing it.

There is also no doubt that the HJ continued to be manipulated by adults, especially at the end of the war when they became a valuable source of manpower. During another of the evacuation period massacres, at Palmnicken (Yantarny today) in East Prussia, one local HJ youth, Martin Bergau, testified to the coercion he and his fellow HJ members experienced at the hands of the local mayor, Kurt Friedrichs. When the SS brought KL prisoners into town, Friedrichs called several HJ boys to his office where he poured them each a glass of schnapps. The centrality of alcohol to the SS and their crimes is considered in greater depth in Chapter Two, but the mayor's use of alcohol here mirrored the way in which SS men would numb themselves in preparation for perpetrating their crimes. It seems that Friedrichs wished to make the HJ boys in his office more pliable with hard liquor. He proceeded to introduce the HJ to two SS men and told them that they had been selected as part of a special unit which required "real men". Friedrichs then dismissed the young recruits, telling them

⁹⁶ Document 46 – Galt van Ramshorst, "Death Details in Buchenwald", in D. A. Hackett (ed. and trans.), *The Buchenwald Report* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 186-187.

⁹⁷ *The New York Times*, "Nazi Boys Burn 700 'Slaves'", 18 April 1945, 8, [TimesMachine: April 18, 1945 - NYTimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/1945/04/18/archives/nazi-boys-burn-700-slaves.html) [Accessed 12 January 2023]

that that “the two gentlemen will familiarise you with your task”.⁹⁸ The mayor’s handling of these youths clearly had the purpose of instilling a sense of maturity, of convincing the HJ that they were individuals of importance and that they were carrying out an essential job within the war effort. Using the SS men as part of his act showed Friedrichs’ awareness that the HJ would likely see the opportunity to work with the SS as an appealing prospect. The HJ members of Palmnicken also had access to an ordnance depot which was a “veritable bonanza for gun collectors”. Bergau remembered that “the boys had all kinds of weapons. Our pockets were also stuffed with various sorts of grenades”.⁹⁹ These boys were mentally empowered by Friedrichs and had access to extensive munitions, leaving the KL prisoners in Palmnicken in great danger from the HJ. Subsequently, the SS used the HJ as auxiliaries to help them execute camp evacuees. Bergau felt annoyance at one of his former school friends beating a woman for moving out of the execution line after Bergau had permitted her to move up the line to find her daughter. Three other HJ teens moved amongst the bodies of those that the SS had shot, delivering a *coup de grâce* to any survivors.¹⁰⁰ The young SS helpers at Palmnicken, and of the HJ more broadly, should be seen both as victims and perpetrators; they were the products of a harsh, dehumanising organisation, and education system, which sought to remove their individuality, but, equally, they made the choice to embrace their task at Palmnicken and carry it out effectively.

In summary, the HJ had a militarising and politicising effect upon the millions of German youths who passed through the organisation for two decades after 1923. The Nazi youth group had effectively made up for the lack of National Socialist thought in Weimar schooling and had formed an invaluable partnership with schools during the Hitler years in Germany. Whilst during the war many HJ members should have been too young to have any realistic prospects of joining the military before 1945, their training in the organisation made them useful helpers for the armed forces, including the SS. The *Führerprinzip* underpinned a great deal of the HJ’s activities which contributed significantly to the creation of a vast pool of compliant young Germans. This emphasis upon complete obedience left the HJ boys very vulnerable to orders from adults who wished to exploit them. As Mayor Friedrichs showed, imbuing indoctrinated teens with a manufactured status of importance, and introducing them to SS role models was incredibly dangerous and ultimately led to the participation of youths in the mass murder of KL prisoners. The extreme training and instruction given by the HJ was certainly at least partly responsible for much anguish and suffering in the Third Reich.

⁹⁸ M. Bergau, *Todesmarsch zur Bernsteinküste: Das Massaker an Juden im ostpreußischen Palmnicken im Januar 1945* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), 46, present author’s trans..

⁹⁹ Document 033/3563 – Testimony of Martin Bergau, from *Yad Vashem Archives*, in S. Krakowski, ‘Massacre of Jewish Prisoners on the Samland Peninsula – Documents’, *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. XXIV, 349-387, 352-353.

¹⁰⁰ Bergau, *Todesmarsch*, 47-48.

Moreover, based upon the nature of HJ service and eventual crimes against KL prisoners, it must be supposed that many camp guards who had passed through the youth group were moulded for SS service by the violence and intolerance they had developed in the HJ.

Experience of the Weimar Years

The problems experienced under the Weimar Republic between 1919 and 1933 are far too diverse to convey in a study which seeks to briefly illustrate that civil unrest from the period could push individuals towards Nazism. For instance, enduring bitterness at the defeat of 1918, discussed above in relation to the education of youth and resentment of the much-maligned Weimar government were common issues. However, the extended period of economic uncertainty, exacerbated by hyperinflation and the global Great Depression, was a major factor pushing young men, who statistically were most affected, to desperation. In the 600 testimonies received by Theodore Abel in his study of reasons for joining the Nazis, threat to economic values in daily lives was the most frequently recurring theme.¹⁰¹ One aspect of Weimar financial hardship, and obviously a deeper problem for families on a personal level, was the absence of fathers as providers in family homes.¹⁰² The main cause of this was the loss of millions of German workers through injury or death in the Great War. Statistics suggest that almost two million German workers were lost from dying in combat, or going missing at the front, whilst over four million were injured with many surely unable to work again.¹⁰³ However, as Paul Moore postulates, in relation to the case of Werner Schäfer, the future SA commandant of Oranienburg concentration camp, if a father returned from a military posting in 1918, and failed to find alternative gainful employment, on top of experiencing the national loss of prestige, a family could endure loss of livelihood and loss of identity and purpose for head of the household.¹⁰⁴ The resulting lack of financial stability put added pressure on young men

¹⁰¹ Abel, *Why Hitler Came into Power*, 121. Abel adds that in 20 percent of the responses he received from Nazis participating in his study, inflation and its effects are noted as a major personal crisis in the life of the individual. Moreover, Abel stresses that his younger participants were particularly hard hit with 21 percent of those aged 20 to 40 being unemployed for more than a year during the economic crisis, 121-122.

¹⁰² See Merkl, *Making of a Stormtrooper*, 204 and A. Wackerfuss, *Stormtrooper Families: Homosexuality and Community in the Early Nazi Movement* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2015), 143-145. Andrew Donson's *Youth in the Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism and Authority in Germany, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) also considers the impact of absent fathers but focuses on its earlier impact on children during the First World War itself.

¹⁰³ According to the British Government's War Office, the German press reported 1,600,000 dead, 203,000 missing, 618,000 lost as prisoners of war and 4,064,000 wounded amongst their military war losses up to 1 November 1918. The War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War: 1914-1920* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1922), 355. Note that these figures do not include civilian losses which were also high; it has been calculated that the enemy naval blockade alone caused 763,000 deaths. C.P. Vincent, *The Politics of Hunger: The Allied Blockade of Germany, 1915-1919* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985), 145.

¹⁰⁴ P. Moore, "The Truth about the Concentration Camps": Werner Schäfer's *Anti-Brown Book* and the Transnational Debate on Early Nazi Terror', *German History*, 34:4 (2016), 579-607, 582.

to become earners through the 1920s which prevented some, like Schäfer, who wished to dedicate himself to academic study, from achieving their goals and aggravating their demoralisation.¹⁰⁵ Others who merely sought steady wages, such as Werner Petersohn, endured “often repeated periods of unemployment” due to inflation.¹⁰⁶ The crippled economy precluded these men from attaining secure income which compounded their discontentment which competing political parties could exploit.

As Andrew Wackerfuss has shown, the Nazis, through the SA, were very proactive in providing social support to unemployed men who would serve in their paramilitary ranks. *SA Heime* (SA Hostels) were one aspect of their social service plan which also offered food through kitchens and health insurance. The Nazis welcomed men in need, aware, as Wackerfuss identifies, that dependency bred loyalty.¹⁰⁷ Although the hostels and kitchens drew people to the SA for practical benefits, they were made to feel part of the SA’s masculine community from the inside. In Hamburg, the SA opened its first *Heim* in 1930 and its first kitchen in 1931 and by 1932 it reportedly had 28 *Heime* operating, showing the Nazi success which dwarfed efforts from the Social Democrats and the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (German Communist Party, KPD).¹⁰⁸ That 2,600 of Hamburg’s 4,500 stormtroopers were unemployed in 1932 suggests that SA support schemes did effectively bring those without financial security into the Nazi fold.¹⁰⁹ The SA also created *Arbeitsstürme* (‘Work Storms’) which allowed unemployed members to offer their labour services on the private job market, showing further proactivity in the face of the German financial crisis.¹¹⁰ It is perhaps unsurprising that when Petersohn, politically inactive previously, had access to Nazi Party meetings from 1929, he remarked that they gave him the impression that National Socialism “encompasses a national bond that could not be thought of in a more unique way”. He became a fighter for the cause and was financially supported by fellow NSDAP members who owned businesses.¹¹¹ For many like Petersohn, the Nazis and their SA provided hope and solidarity as well as some respite from the pains of poverty, highlighting why men flocked to the cause in the 1920s.

The political extremism and paramilitary violence of the Weimar period should also be considered here for their influence on potential future SS members. Bruce Campbell has examined the value of

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 583.

¹⁰⁶ HI, Abel papers, No. 67, Werner Petersohn, [Werner Petersohn – Works – Digital Collections \(hoover.org\)](https://www.hoover.org/werner-petersohn-works-digital-collections) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

¹⁰⁷ Wackerfuss, *Stormtrooper Families*, 149. See 149-163 for more information on the *SA Heime* and other social assistance efforts from the Weimar period NSDAP.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 152-153 and 156.

¹⁰⁹ D. Siemens, *Stormtroopers: A New History of Hitler’s Brownshirts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 55.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹¹¹ HI, Abel papers, No. 67, Werner Petersohn.

SA *Lebensläufe* (literally ‘curriculum vitae’, but more autobiographical in format) as a resource for identifying why men were drawn to the Nazi movement.¹¹² He finds that most *Lebensläufe* showed traumatic experience of interwar crises like the economic disaster, but that antisemitism and, more commonly, anti-Marxism attracted people to the SA.¹¹³ In the interwar years, both the Nazis and the KPD sought to recruit the same disillusioned young men but distrust of socialism was widespread and furthered by the Spartacist Uprising and the short-lived revolutionary People’s State of Bavaria in 1918-1919.¹¹⁴ Whilst the well-documented battles of the *Freikorps* units in the early Weimar years set the stage for paramilitary violence, it was the SA who most effectively offered German men a way to battle militarised Communists in the later 1920s.¹¹⁵ They set themselves apart as a proactive nationalist organisation willing to fight the ostensibly Soviet-infiltrated KPD by fully embracing the paramilitary tactics of the decade. Conflict was frequent and often required police intervention as was seen with Berlin’s *Blutmai* (‘Blood May’) of 1929 and Altona’s ‘Bloody Sunday’ in 1932, both of which saw deaths from both sides.¹¹⁶ Former Communist fighter Friedrich Kell left the *Rotfrontkämpferbund* (Red Front Fighters’ League) because he did not agree with directives from the USSR. When he began attending other parties’ rallies, he stated that he “became more and more dissatisfied with myself and the world until I also attended the meetings of the NSDAP”. He soon joined the Nazis, bringing other disillusioned Communists with him where he claimed, “we rubbed shoulders with our good old SA to clear out the Red pigsty”.¹¹⁷ Of course, not all Communist members changed allegiance and men could go in the other direction, but Kell’s testimony underlines how the Nazi cause could appeal to demoralised men seeking to act in the defence of a vulnerable nation. It just so happened that defending Germany became increasingly synonymous with defeating communism for those who sympathised with the Nazis.

Reasons for drifting to the Nazi cause during the Weimar period were, as stated above, diverse. Hitler’s appeal as a potential saviour of Germany was certainly an important factor, though not

¹¹² B. Campbell, ‘Autobiographies of Violence: The SA in its Own Words’, *Central European History*, 46:2 (2013), 217-237.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 222-228.

¹¹⁴ See E. Waldman, *The Spartacist Uprising of 1919 and the Crisis of the German Socialist Movement: A Study of the Relation of Political Theory and Party Practice* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1958) and Dillon, Dachau, 14-22 for information on the revolution in Bavaria. Note that Kurt Eisner, the figurehead of the Bavarian revolution, was Jewish as were several of the other senior figures. Russians were also amongst their number, Dillon, Dachau, 18.

¹¹⁵ See N. Jones, *A Brief History of the Birth of the Nazis: How the Freikorps Blazed a Trail for Hitler* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004). Klaus Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies Vol. I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987) is recommended as a study which considers the masculinity of *Freikorps* officers and how their anti-female sentiments tied into their racism and anti-Communism.

¹¹⁶ Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 52-53.

¹¹⁷ HI, Abel papers, No. 493, Friedrich Wilhelm Kell, [Friedrich W. Kell – Works – Digital Collections \(hoover.org\)](https://www.hoover.org/friedrich-w-kell-works-digital-collections) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

pervasive, as Ian Kershaw identifies.¹¹⁸ Desire to belong, the need to affirm masculinity and, by the early 1930s, tactical positioning on what appeared to be the winning side could bring unsettled Weimar men to the NSDAP and its paramilitary arms.¹¹⁹ The above has merely considered two of the more central catalysts for joining: the crippling economic crisis and the Nazi effort to combat its effects, and the far-reaching street violence of the period which coaxed men toward the staunchly anti-Communist SA. This short discussion has merely sought to convey that, in conjunction with educative influences discussed above in relation to youths, Weimar instability was also a potent contributor in swelling the Nazi ranks. Though men of military service age might have joined the SA as active street fighters, others who simply fostered growing sympathy for the Nazis are important to this consideration. From 1933, those who had joined the cause in earlier years, including the *Alte Kämpfer* ('Old Fighters' who joined before 1930), could feasibly journey into the SS, and in some cases serve in the concentration camps. Of course, it is not possible to make quantitative statements on journeys from disgruntled Weimar civilians to members of the Camp SS, but this section highlights that the experience of the Weimar Republic is worth bearing in mind as a developmental step toward perpetration of crimes in the Nazi camps.

Oral Propaganda

Having shown the impact of education upon German youths and the negative influence of the Weimar years upon German men more broadly, it is important to consider how the Third Reich's media also contributed to the indoctrination of the population as the crimes of the KL were unfolding. Speeches were an important element of Nazi propaganda which must be considered here, despite Randall Bytwerk highlighting that oral propaganda has traditionally been neglected when analysing key mediums for sharing NSDAP ideology.¹²⁰ Speeches and rallies were energetic, and they had the potential to induct the audience into National Socialism through participation. Their effectiveness was such that the Nazis felt the need to capitalise on the audience's post-speech euphoria with other propaganda mediums to prevent the listeners' anticipated deflation.¹²¹ Nicholas O'Shaughnessy has rightly emphasised the role of oral propaganda, especially rallies, in impressing

¹¹⁸ See I. Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 13-47 for an appraisal of Hitler's image in the Weimar era, Kershaw notes that Hitler's personality was one of many factors pulling Germans toward the NSDAP but that, without contemporary opinion surveys, it is impossible to quantify the importance of this and other motivations for joining the party, 40.

¹¹⁹ For an examination of the role of masculinity in Weimar paramilitary activity and the establishment of the SA, see Wackerfuss, *Stormtrooper Families*, 51-57.

¹²⁰ R.L. Bytwerk, 'The Argument for Genocide in Nazi Propaganda', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 91:1 (2005), 37-62, 37.

¹²¹ D.E. Showalter, 'Letters to "Der Stürmer": The Mobilisation of Hostility in the Weimar Republic', *Modern Judaism*, 3:2 (1983), 173-187, 173.

the less committed with magnificent organisation and pageantry.¹²² The subsequent comedown from a speech or rally should not lead to critique, for it was the high, and the crescendo of excitement, that made them valuable tools through which the regime could share radical ideology.

The power of spoken propaganda is especially clear in the content delivered by a multitude of expert orators during the Third Reich's existence. Otto Dietrich of the Reich Propaganda Ministry's press directives encouraged speakers to cover sensitive topics that could not be printed in newspapers.¹²³ This allowed for the discussion of violence against Germany's enemies, with the Jews again drawing the greatest focus, which the Nazis preferred to keep out of written sources that could find their way abroad. Unsurprisingly, Hitler was unconstrained by press directives, rather his whims shaped them. Thus, the Führer's speeches were unique in their freedom, and they were also far reaching. From 1927 to 1933, Hitler made 455 public appearances with an estimated cumulative attendance of over 4.5 million.¹²⁴ Doubtless, many in attendance were present at numerous Hitler appearances but this figure does not account for this, nonetheless, unique attendees likely still counted in the millions. Upon becoming Chancellor, Hitler's audience grew exponentially, with restaurants and pubs playing the Führer's voice through the radio and public loudspeakers ringing out on the streets.¹²⁵ Those who could not attend Hitler's appearances in person, and those who did not wish to, were still able to hear his messages around Germany.

A speech of immense significance was given by Hitler on 30 January 1939. In this speech the Führer promised Germany that "should the international Jewry of finance succeed, both within and beyond Europe, in plunging mankind into yet another world war, then the result will not be a Bolshevisation of the earth and the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe".¹²⁶ This incendiary speech, foreshadowing the terror of the concentration and extermination camps, was heard by millions of Germans. Herf has endeavoured to dispel the traditional notion that Hitler and his fellow speakers spoke euphemistically, hiding the true intent of their actions from the audience. He has argued that Nazi orators spoke in a "perversely honest manner" regarding their evolving policies relating to the Jews.¹²⁷ The January 1939 speech is useful evidence in supporting Herf's viewpoint; Hitler began to refer to his January speech as having occurred on 1 September 1939, the

¹²² O'Shaughnessy, 'Selling Hitler', 69.

¹²³ Bytwerk, 'Argument for Genocide', 50.

¹²⁴ P. Selb & S. Munzert, 'Examining a Most Likely Case for Strong Campaign Effects: Hitler's Speeches and the Rise of the Nazi Party, 1927-1933', *American Political Science Review*, 112:4 (2018), 1050-1067, 1050. This estimate was informed by attendance figures from German police reports and press releases.

¹²⁵ Bytwerk, 'Argument for Genocide', 48.

¹²⁶ Speech by Adolf Hitler, 30 January 1939 in M. Domarus, *Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations: 1932-1945, Vol. III, The Years 1939 to 1940* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997), 1449.

¹²⁷ J. Herf, 'The "Jewish War": Goebbels and the Antisemitic Campaigns of the Nazi Propaganda Ministry', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 19:1 (2005), 51-80, 54.

first day of the Second World War, because this allowed his speech to take on a more sinister significance. Had his speech been made in wartime then the promise of defensive annihilation had an altogether more weighted sincerity than had it been made months earlier when the restraints of peace would limit Hitler's actions.¹²⁸ Nonetheless, a *Sicherheitsdienst* (Security Service, or SD) report from 1942, following one of Hitler's repetitions of his prophecy of destruction, showed that whilst some Germans had interpreted this as his guarantee of the destruction of European Jewry, this was not representative of the larger audience. According to the report, most people reacted with interest to the summary of the military situation in the East, suggesting the Jewish Question was of lesser import to the audience than the war itself.¹²⁹ It should be noted, though, that despite the public's greater interest in statements on the war, the public clearly paid attention when the Jews were mentioned, and it did not escape their notice.¹³⁰

Other examples of rousing speeches from key figures include Hermann Göring's September 1935 speech focusing on the inequality of the races. He claimed that "God has created the races. He did not want equality and... we have never acknowledged such an idea and therefore must reject it also, as a matter of principle, in our laws".¹³¹ Whilst certainly unpleasant, Göring's 1935 speech above was less potent than one of his later speeches from the Berlin Sportpalast in October 1942. Warning the German people of their future annihilation should they lose the war, Göring framed it as a question of "whether the German and Aryan survive or if the Jew will rule the world".¹³² The applause received highlighted that those in attendance were receptive to Göring's 'us or them' argument and likely understood, after several years of hearing the same theme, what it implied. Göring had spoken rather mildly and indirectly, by Nazi standards, which can be seen when one considers a far more virulent speech by the leader of the Labour Front, Robert Ley, in December 1939. Ley was an important figure on the political scene as his organisation had over 20 million members. In his speech he warned that in defeat "the German people, man, woman, and child would be exterminated... The Jew would be wading in blood. Funeral pyres would be built on which the Jews would burn us... We want to prevent this. Hence it should be rather the Jews who fry, rather they

¹²⁸ Bytwerk, 'Argument for Genocide', 39.

¹²⁹ SD Report No. 256, 2 February 1942, in H. Boberach (ed.), *Meldungen aus dem Reich: Auswahl aus den geheimen Lageberichten des Sicherheitsdienstes der SS 1939-1944* (Neuwied: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1965), 216-220, present author's trans..

¹³⁰ Bytwerk, 'Argument for Genocide', 49.

¹³¹ WL, 1655/35, Speech by Hermann Göring on the "God-willed inequality of the races", 15 September 1935, from G. Ruhle, *Das Dritte Reich - Dokumentarische Darstellung des Aufbaues der Nation - Das Dritte Jahr* (Berlin: Hummel Verlag, 1936), 257.

¹³² From W. Roller & S. Höschel, *Judenverfolgung und jüdisches Leben unter den Bedingungen der nationalsozialistischen Gewaltherrschaft, vol. 1, Tondokumente und Rundfunksendungen, 1930-1946* (Potsdam: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 1996), Hermann Göring, 4 October 1942, "Ansprache auf einer Feier zum Erntedankfest im Berliner Sportpalast", 217, in Herf, 'The "Jewish War"', 57.

who should burn, they who should starve, they who should be exterminated.”¹³³ An energetic applause and shouts of “Sieg Heil” met Ley in 1939, establishing that the audience agreed emphatically with this destructive prophesising.

Also, in May 1942, just a few months after the Wannsee Conference in January that year, which saw high-ranking SS officials agree on the implementation of the Final Solution, Amsterdam played host to Ley who delivered another rousing speech about the fate of the Jews. The transcript from the speech, which was played across German radio, revealed that the audience were clearly in support of a policy of extermination. The radio transcript, including the audience’s reactions, reads as follows: “The Jew is the great danger to humanity. If we do not succeed in exterminating him, then we will lose the war. It is not enough to take him someplace. That would be as if one wanted to lock up a louse somewhere in a cage [audience laughter]... You have to exterminate [them for what] they have done to humanity... [speaker interrupted by ongoing applause].”¹³⁴ It is important to be cautious when quantifying the positive reception to these speeches; despite evidence that the audience agreed with the messages, it is highly probable that many attended because they were already sympathetic to the Nazi cause.

The small sample of Nazi speeches used here have shown that speakers signposted their intentions to subject the Jewish enemy to severe mistreatment and murder. Even if some audience members failed to realise the sincerity of Nazi speakers, they themselves did not tend to mask their true plans. Herf’s conclusion is thus validated; the assumption that the Nazis spoke through euphemism is incorrect. In fact, Herf observed that people’s lack of reaction to antisemitic elements of speeches, shown by the SD reports, was a result of the over-labouring of the point from propagandists. In other words, the extraordinary had become ordinary through perpetual reiteration.¹³⁵ Crucially, in making the abhorrent and ghastly become banal, Nazi propagandists helped to make the Holocaust feasible. After all, if the Nazis created a fanatical zealous core of implementers, such as the SS, and disseminated enough antisemitism to create an indifference amongst much of the broader population, the disappearance of the Jews from society could be ensured by the effectively mobilised minority whilst the greater number turned their attention away.

¹³³ From Roller & Höschel, *Judenverfolgung und jüdisches Leben*, Robert Ley, Ende 1939, “Ansprache vor deutschen Arbeitern in Lodz”, 158, in *ibid.*, 57.

¹³⁴ From Roller & Höschel, *Judenverfolgung und jüdisches Leben*, Robert Ley, 10 May 1942, “Ansprache auf einer gemeinsamen Kundgebung der NSDAP und der NSB in Heerlen” 210, in Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 155.

¹³⁵ Herf, ‘The “Jewish War”’, 67.

The Printed Press

Unlike the bombastic occasion of speeches and rallies, newspapers played a key role as a ground-level propaganda instrument. Reich Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, believed in their central role in educating the population. He said that “the task of the press cannot be merely to inform; rather, the press has, above and beyond that, the much greater task of instructing”.¹³⁶ The variety of Nazi newspapers was one of their strengths with each publication resonating with different sections of the population. The *Völkischer Beobachter*, for instance, appealed to a broader audience than Julius Streicher’s graphically antisemitic *Der Stürmer*, whose targeted readership included the most vehemently racist National Socialists. The *Völkischer Beobachter*, was bought by the NSDAP in 1920 and became the Nazi movement’s official newspaper. The Nazis continued to utilise the paper’s *völkisch* contributors’ sentiments to fan the flames of mistrust in the Weimar period. The *völkisch* tone of the paper was of great significance, as Samuel Koehne’s work has recently addressed.¹³⁷ In perpetuating the value of the *Volk* (people) and of its essential unity, which the paper’s readers expected, and warning of threats to the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the fearmongering of the *Völkischer Beobachter* found fertile ground. The paper’s report on the Yule period of 1921 contained words from Hitler which concerned his anxiety that materialism had invaded German hearts but that this could be rectified. Should the spirit of idealism reconquer people’s hearts, Hitler stated that, “they [can] do away with the plague of egoism, with the Jewish-mammonistic spirit of usury, and with this race itself”. The article concluded by framing Hitler’s warning against infectious Jewish decadence as him planting the banner of faith in Germany’s revival.¹³⁸ Taken out of context, this incitement of hatred, and others like it within the paper, do not reveal a great deal until one considers the subsequent success of the publication. The *Völkischer Beobachter*’s circulation increased from less than 10,000 subscribers when the Nazis acquired the paper in 1920, up to 100,000 by 1931, bringing it into the top one percent, in size, of all German newspapers.¹³⁹ It should be said that the *Völkischer Beobachter* never secured subscriptions from more than 25 percent of the Nazi Party’s members.¹⁴⁰ One factor contributing to this was the sharing of copies of the

¹³⁶ Document 204 – Joseph Goebbels speech delivered to members of the press, 15 March 1933, in Rabinbach & Gilman, *Third Reich Sourcebook*, 455-457, from H. Heiber, *Goebbels-Reden*, vol. I, 1931-1939 (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1971), 90, 94, 95, 106-107. Trans. in D. Welch, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda* (London: Routledge, 1993), 136-145.

¹³⁷ See S. Koehne, ‘Were the National Socialists a *Völkisch* Party? Paganism, Christianity, and the Nazi Christmas’, *Central European History*, 47:4 (2014), 760-790, for an overview of the prominence of *völkisch* ideas in the newly acquired Nazi *Völkischer Beobachter*.

¹³⁸ From *Völkischer Beobachter* – No. 3 (11 January 1922) in *ibid.*, 783-784.

¹³⁹ R.V. Layton Jr., ‘The *Völkischer Beobachter*, 1920-1933: The Nazi Party Newspaper in the Weimar Era’, *Central European History*, 3:4 (1970), 353-383, 362.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 362. This is based upon figures from H. Volz, *Daten der Geschichte der NSDAP* (Berlin, 1937), 13.

newspaper; military units, youth groups and workplaces could acquire one copy which would be read by numerous individuals. The exponential growth of the *Völkischer Beobachter* under Nazi ownership points to the fact that the paper was warmly received and its political, and often hateful, messages reached millions of people daily.

Streicher's more radical *Der Stürmer* followed a similar trajectory to the *Völkischer Beobachter*. The paper's production began in 1923, initially as a four-page publication and it expanded into a 16-page illustrated tabloid with its sales hitting 500,000 copies per week at its peak.¹⁴¹ The paper's popularity spawned several, generally short-lived, imitators like *Der Streiter (The Fighter)* and *Die Stürmfahne (The Storm Flag)*.¹⁴² The existence of popularity-driven imitations, as well as revisionist histories by individuals including Dennis Showalter, have helped to dispel the notion that Streicher and *Der Stürmer's* opinions had little impact on their contemporaries. Showalter argues that there has been a tradition, in the historiography on the topic, of dismissing the significance of reader correspondence by labelling it the product of fanatics and crackpots.¹⁴³ The reality of the relationship Streicher created with his readers was very different and his influence was viewed positively by high-ranking Nazis. Himmler, for instance, praised Streicher's unique Jew-baiting ability and credited his influence in teaching the people about the dangers of this foe. He was quoted in the paper as saying, "it will be said that Julius Streicher and his weekly newspaper the *Der Stürmer* were responsible for a good part of the education about the enemy of mankind".¹⁴⁴ Himmler's warmth toward Streicher likely enabled the latter to access the KL as a high-profile visitor. In 1937, for instance, he visited Dachau and tormented inmates with his facetious humour, enquiring whether their wives were busying themselves with SA men, whether the prisoners developed sexual relationships, and why long-term prisoners were still alive. Inmate Karl Röder remembered Streicher being "childishly happy about the whoops of laughter" that his comments provoked from his entourage.¹⁴⁵

Streicher's ability to consistently tie the everyday woes and grievances of his readers to the Jewish archenemy influenced the lives and beliefs of average people. The paper's growth in sales, despite the harshly antisemitic line, evidences the fact that Streicher's attribution of even the most banal problems to the omnipotent Jewish threat resonated with many Germans. Thus, despite the vicious

¹⁴¹ M. Bryant, 'Streicher, Fips & *Der Stürmer*', *History Today*, 58:8 (2008), 60-62, 60.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁴³ Showalter, 'Letters to "*Der Stürmer*"', 174 – Showalter refers to E. Davidson, *The Trial of the Germans* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1966), 44-45, as an instance of a historian dismissing the significance of *Der Stürmer's* readership.

¹⁴⁴ From *Der Stürmer* – No. 14 (1937) in R.L. Bytwerk, *Julius Streicher: Nazi Editor of the Notorious Anti-Semitic Newspaper Der Stürmer* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), 171.

¹⁴⁵ K. Röder, *Nachtwache: 10 Jahre KZ Dachau und Flossenbürg* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1985), 334-336.

nature of *Der Stürmer's* content, the correspondence the editor received was overwhelmingly sent by unextraordinary people. An example of the kind of reader correspondence *Der Stürmer* thrived upon can be seen in this anecdote sent in by a commuter of an Ulm-Munich train who had witnessed a "Jew" peeling a banana next to a young girl whilst making innuendos towards her. Upon reaching their destination the man encouraged the girl to accompanying him home to see the source of his banana metaphors. The letter's writer reported that he was so appalled he threatened the "Jew", intimidating him into exiting the train's compartment.¹⁴⁶ The correspondent, whilst clearly in tune with Streicher's antisemitic rhetoric, does not come across as an unhinged radical. Letters with a similar theme came from writers who sounded equally sane, if somewhat antisocial. One pedestrian pondered what had happened to the gentle girl who had followed a "Jew" from his car into his home, while a Bamberg train passenger complained to *Der Stürmer* of the obviously insidious intentions of a "Jewish" couple offering a vacationer accommodation in their home whilst they visited the town.¹⁴⁷

Two things are worth stressing from the *Der Stürmer* correspondences discussed here; firstly, they are each sexually themed; secondly, the perceived antagonists are described as Jewish by the complainants. The sexual theme was one of four main recurring topics in *Der Stürmer's* correspondence according to Showalter. The other three were marketplace gripes, changing social norms, and outright antisemitism which was not motivated by another grievance. Streicher was able to use his weekly publication to marry the first three themes to the Jewish problem, the letters above showing that this had success. The fact that the enemy in each scenario, and in many more of Streicher's readers' letters, was perceived to be Jewish is of utmost importance. The German Jews, like most Jews in western nations, were largely well assimilated helping Streicher, and other propagandists, to blame an enemy which could hardly be seen. Therefore the "Jews" in the letters to *Der Stürmer*, were often proclaimed as such based on their behaviour, which, to the correspondents, was damning evidence. In short, letters to the paper show that readers had attached everyday problems to the Jewish question and that their anxiety regarding an invisible, assimilated enemy led them to decrying anyone who fit Streicher's bill as a Jew.¹⁴⁸ *Der Stürmer* was also infamous for its pillory columns, wherein it denounced individual Jews and *Judenknechte* ('Jewish-lackeys', non-Jews accused of Jewish sympathy) by name. Appearances were of great importance in the Third Reich,

¹⁴⁶ From BAK, *Nachlass Streicher*, AL 42, Letter from 20 April 1926, in Showalter, 'Letters to "*Der Stürmer*"', 180.

¹⁴⁷ Letters from *Der Stürmer* – No. 22 (1926), No. 47 (1927) in *ibid.*, 180.

¹⁴⁸ The section on the main themes of *Der Stürmer's* correspondence and the emphasis upon the importance of letter writers' perception that the antagonists of their anecdotes were Jewish come from Showalter. *Ibid.*, 177-181.

and one would have had to display significant bravery to ignore these condemnations. If they wished to protect their own reputation, readers of *Der Stürmer* had to acknowledge that shunned individuals were to be avoided at all costs. Heeding the messages of the pillory columns equalled an internalisation of Streicher's views, even if readers were not zealous Nazis. Once these people were on the antisemitic path, consciously or not, it was hard to apply the brakes. Accurately, Bytwerk asserts that Streicher did not need to make all the Germans vehement Jew-haters, it was more than sufficient to sow suspicion and break bonds between the Jews and broader German society.¹⁴⁹ Once this had occurred widely, the direct perpetrators could deport the shunned victims and carry out their violent acts in the Nazi KL.

Der Stürmer also managed to reach children with its ideology. *Der Giftpilz (The Poisonous Mushroom)* was a book for children published by *Der Stürmer* in 1938, using the same illustrator as the newspaper, Philipp 'Fips' Rupprecht.¹⁵⁰ The artwork of 'Fips' was amongst the most inflammatory that came out of the Third Reich's media, earning him a 10-year prison sentence in 1945. By employing 'Fips' as the illustrator of a children's book, *Der Stürmer's* menacing intent was revealed from the book's inception. *Der Giftpilz'* author Ernst Hiemer created a tool for indoctrination which ultimately worked in tandem with the Nazi education system. Within its pages are instructive fictional stories including one of children learning about Jews within school, designed to encourage the readers to absorb the same information the schoolchildren were being taught. Instructed by his teacher to recount to his classmates the day's revelations, "Little Karl" takes the teacher's pointer and goes to the blackboard. "The Jew's nose is bent at its tip. It looks like the number six", Karl explains, then proceeds to describe ugly Jewish facial features. Once Karl has finished, the teacher gets the class to recite a verse which reads: "if we shall be free of the Jew – and again will be happy and glad, then the youth must struggle with us – to subdue the Jew devil". *Der Giftpilz'* illustration accompanying this classroom story shows Karl pointing to insulting caricatures of a Jew on the blackboard for his classmates.¹⁵¹ Whilst Karl's story set a dangerous precedent, encouraging children to shame and denounce strangers based upon arbitrary physical measurements, the content and its message was, arguably, not beyond the comprehension of children.¹⁵² The earlier example of a 10-year-old HJ member who developed a penchant for

¹⁴⁹ Bytwerk, *Julius Streicher*, 177-178.

¹⁵⁰ *Der Giftpilz* is the most well-known of three antisemitic children's books published by *Der Stürmer*. The other two were Elvira Bauer's *Trau keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid und keinem Jud auf seinem Eid (Trust No Fox on his Green Heath and No Jew on his Oath)* (1936) and Ernst Hiemer's *Der Pudelmopsdackelpinscher (The Poodle-Pug-Dachshund-Pinscher)* (1940).

¹⁵¹ E. Hiemer, *Der Giftpilz* (Nuremberg: Stürmer-Verlag, 1938), 6-9, present author's trans..

¹⁵² Despite this, *Der Giftpilz* does contain other stories and illustrations with more mature themes including predatory sexual behaviour, usuary and fifth column activities designed to usher youths into adult mindsets. For example, see *ibid.*, 30, 33, 41 and 55.

identifying supposedly hidden Jews, and similarly eager youths, were encouraged in their offensive behaviour by works like this propaganda-heavy children's book.

Irrespective of how perilous it was to give children access to Streicher's main paper, and *Der Giftpilz*, children did enjoy the publications of *Der Stürmer*. A letter from children in a National Socialist youth hostel read: "the children of the "National Socialist Youth Home" in Pomerania want to send you a greeting. We read your reports with great interest every week. *Der Stürmer* is, and remains, a welcome guest in our house... We cut out the pictures from *Der Stürmer* and nail them to a special table in our day room. The boys and girls can get to know the Jews in their appearance".¹⁵³ That many youths respected *Der Stürmer* is extremely important to bear in mind, considering that this paper published articles advocating genocide even before the Second World War. One such example comes from an article in May 1939 demanding that "the Jews in Russia must be killed. They must be exterminated root and branch".¹⁵⁴ Another issue from the same month contained an article proclaiming that "the world will only then be saved when Jewry is completely eradicated".¹⁵⁵ Streicher's publishing house's targeting of all age groups with its material helped it to play a central role in printed Nazi propaganda. There were those amongst the Nazi supporters who viewed Streicher's brand of fanaticism, and Fips' crude artwork, as repugnant which is important to bear in mind when measuring *Der Stürmer's* effectiveness. One thing that should not be dismissed, however, is that these publications supplemented the Nazifying education process in Germany effectively. Youths who were amenable to the NSDAP's ideology had their increasingly radical sentiments validated by Streicher. Equally, males who had struggled with the difficulties of the Weimar period were consistently given a scapegoat for Germany's misfortune by *Der Stürmer* which could prompt closer allegiance to the Nazi movement.

Beyond the *Völkischer Beobachter* and *Der Stürmer* there were some other notable contributions to the Nazi propaganda machine from the printed press. For example, the aforementioned SS newspaper, *Das Schwarze Korps*, was a formidable publication which Heinz Höhne has referred to as the "most widely feared organ" of the Nazi press.¹⁵⁶ *Das Schwarze Korps* appeared weekly and its annual sales increased significantly from 189,317, in 1937, up to 750,000 at its highest point during the war years.¹⁵⁷ Whilst this pales in comparison to both of the major papers considered earlier, the figure of 750,000 still indicates that the publication had a reliable readership. The paper's crucial success came from its ability to secure its readers trust through exposing problems within the Nazi

¹⁵³ WL, 1655/49, Letter to the editor of *Der Stürmer* from children in a National Socialist youth hostel.

¹⁵⁴ WL, 1655/112, *Der Stürmer*, No. 18, May 1939, 3.

¹⁵⁵ WL, 1655/115, *Der Stürmer*, No. 21, May 1939, 9.

¹⁵⁶ H. Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's SS* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 220.

¹⁵⁷ From J. Wulf, *Die SS* (unpublished sourced), 108-109 in *ibid.*, 221.

regime as well as outside of it. *Das Schwarze Korps* criticised the criminality of *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, stating that “the Jewish question is one of our people’s most burning problems; it will not be solved by terror on the streets”.¹⁵⁸ Hitler had remained curiously silent at the time of *Kristallnacht*, permitting the criticism of the generally unpopular event to hit Goebbels and other advisers.¹⁵⁹ *Das Schwarze Korps* strategically followed suit in distancing itself from the event making itself more appealing to those rejecting anarchy on the streets. It also warned the SS’ police units to be careful with their use of the terminology of “enemy of the state” arguing that “over-savage persecution can do more harm than good”.¹⁶⁰ This is not to say, however, that *Das Schwarze Korps* was in any way softer than the other papers discussed here. Though it tended to forego brash antagonism, the publication foreshadowed the crimes of the Holocaust years before the genocidal activities began. In late 1938, D’Alquen’s newspaper wrote, in relation to the Jewish Question, that “the agenda has been set. And what it is: complete elimination, absolute segregation!”.¹⁶¹

Moreover, due to its encouragement of smarter persecution of enemies, *Das Schwarze Korps* was favoured by the SD who considered themselves more intellectual National Socialists.¹⁶² Despite naturally targeting the men of the SS as its audience, on its first-year anniversary the paper printed a piece on a housewife from Lichterfelde who had claimed she picked her copy up when she did her weekly food shopping.¹⁶³ Moore illustrates the significance of this by stating that either the paper genuinely appealed to the wider public or that the paper’s editors considered housewives, and other civilians, to be part of their desired audience.¹⁶⁴ Antisemites who considered themselves more intellectual than the brutish brownshirts found the SS newspaper to be an upstanding publication; the paper’s steady sales support the idea that it struck a chord with consumers, reaching those who supported action on the Jewish Question but preferred a newspaper with less rabble-rousing tendencies than *Der Stürmer*.

Whilst the SS newspaper reached fewer people, another publication which was consistently seen by millions of Germans was *Parole der Woche* (*Slogan of the Week*), a wall newspaper distributed by the central propaganda office. *Unser Wille und Weg* (*Our Will and Way*), the internal newsletter for Nazi propagandists, said in 1940 that “*Parole der Woche* has today become an essential propaganda

¹⁵⁸ *Das Schwarze Korps*, 5 June 1935 & 22 April 1937 in *ibid.*, 222.

¹⁵⁹ Kershaw, *The ‘Hitler Myth’*, 238-239.

¹⁶⁰ *Das Schwarze Korps*, 18 February 1937 in Höhne, *Order of the Death’s Head*, 222.

¹⁶¹ Document 98 – *Das Schwarze Korps*, 24 November 1938, “Juden was nun?”, 1 in Rabinbach & Gilman, *Third Reich Sourcebook*, 236-237.

¹⁶² Höhne, *Order of the Death’s Head*, 221.

¹⁶³ ‘Zum einjährigen Bestehen des “Schwarzen Korps”’, *Das Schwarze Korp*, 13 March 1936, 2 – in P. Moore, “‘And What Concentration Camps Those Were!’: Foreign Concentration Camps in Nazi Propaganda, 1933-39”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 45:3 (2010), 649-674, 658.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 658.

method for the movement".¹⁶⁵ Each week tens of thousands of copies were printed and placed around public places in Germany, the newspaper's job being to summarise that week's sentiments from the regime.¹⁶⁶ 17 of the first 36 issues in 1939 featured antisemitism, although the anti-British sentiment became a central focus until late 1941.¹⁶⁷ Nonetheless, when *Parole der Woche* channelled the regime's obsession over the Jewish enemy, particularly the Judaeo-Bolshevik danger during Operation Barbarossa, commuting Germans could not have missed the antisemitic messages on walls across the country. The combination of three facts ensured that *Parole der Woche* was seen by a vast audience; firstly, there were only 25 motor vehicles per 1,000 German people in 1939; secondly, only in New York and Paris did more people ride street cars than in Berlin; thirdly, the publication was an unmissable 100 centimetres high and 212 centimetres wide.¹⁶⁸

The resonance of *Parole der Woche's* weekly message is awkward to determine, the lack of readership figures making estimates speculative. Nonetheless, *Unser Wille und Weg* argued that "it is clear that where the newspaper is visible and well-placed, it does not lack impact. Often one can see groups of people carefully reading it, which is why it was created".¹⁶⁹ It might be supposed that because this was an internal newsletter, not a piece of propaganda itself, the assessment was candid and *Parole der Woche* was in fact well received when it was used correctly. The nature of this publication, as a slogan for the week, prioritising concision, made the political message easier to remember. The edition of 1 July 1942 was emblazoned with the Star of David badge that Jews had been ordered to wear in public and, later, in the camps as means of identification. "The cat does not release the mouse" was the issue's title and slogan, with the words "whoever bears this symbol is an enemy of our people" highly visible beneath.¹⁷⁰ A brief glance upon this paper was sufficient to gauge its meaning; thousands of copies spread around urban Germany served as a reassurance to the convinced and a menacing reminder to the apolitical that Jews deserved no kindness whatsoever.

¹⁶⁵ Calvin University, German Propaganda Archive, *Unser Wille und Weg*, January 1940, 6-8, trans. R.L. Bytwerk, [The "Parole der Woche" \(calvin.edu\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

¹⁶⁶ The exact figure of copies printed and posted around Germany is disputed. Bytwerk, 'Argument for Genocide', 40, lists the figure at 70,000 based on information from "Die Arbeit der Partei-Propaganda im Kriege," *Unser Wille und Weg* (1941), 11 which claimed that eight million copies had been printed since the beginning of the war. Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 14, gives the figure of 125,000.

¹⁶⁷ Bytwerk, 'Argument for Genocide', 40.

¹⁶⁸ Motor vehicle statistics come from "Bestand an Kraftwagen" and "Bestand an Krafrädern", *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich, 1941-1942* (Berlin: Statistisches Reichsamtsamt, 1942), 109 and streetcar statistics from "Personenverkehr der Straßenbahnen in Großstädten", *Statistisches Jahrbuch*, 110, both in Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 29-30.

¹⁶⁹ Calvin University, German Propaganda Archive, *Unser Wille und Weg*, January 1940, 6-8.

¹⁷⁰ *Lebendiges Museum Online*, Propagandaplakat aus der Reihe "Parole der Woche", 1 July 1942, "Die Katze lässt das Mäusen nicht!", present author's trans., [LeMO Objekt - "Die Katze lässt das Mäusen nicht!", 1942 \(dhm.de\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

Clearly, therefore, the National Socialist press had remarkable depth and offered products to suit Germany's varied consumer base. In turn, the Nazis had access to a multi-faceted tool for reaching the people with their ideology. Publications like the *Völkischer Beobachter* were available for those who preferred to avoid the radical tone of *Der Stürmer*. Likewise, the zealous Nazis in the population could read the news from Streicher's publishing house knowing that it would incite them to anger. There is no way of determining how many people embraced the hateful antisemitism that appeared in the printed propaganda, but its persistence and ubiquity likely contributed to the indoctrination of many within the population. The most vulnerable within Germany, the youth, were targeted with intent and it must be concluded that in being exposed to explicit content, their journey toward radical xenophobia and hatred, which could lead them to groups like the SS, was accelerated by the printed press.

Cinema

Cinema was another invaluable apparatus for disseminating the Nazi regime's sentiments in an exciting, digestible, and often subtle way. Through the big screen the Nazis could change or ignite existing opinions with the use of stereotypes.¹⁷¹ Hitler was adamant that the "receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous...all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these".¹⁷² This made film an excellent vehicle for sharing the regime's views. Goebbels showed his own belief that films were excellent tools of propaganda, even praising a Soviet offering, Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*. He believed that the 1925 silent film was "a marvellous film without equal in the cinema" adding that "anyone who had no firm political conviction could become a Bolshevik as a result of this film".¹⁷³ Goebbels thus oversaw a film industry which was designed to deliver numerous politicised pictures of similar quality to *Battleship Potemkin*. Following Hitler's belief that the audience lacked receptivity, these films were designed to remove the need for deep critical thought so that the audience could interpret the *prima facie* evidence in front of them.¹⁷⁴ Various aspects of Nazi ideology were used in the cinema; youthful sacrifice for Germany was the focal theme of 1933's *Hitlerjunge Quex* (*Hitler Youth Quex*) which depicted a young HJ member being killed in the line of duty. The undoubtedly dangerous intention to inspire sacrifice from Germany's children necessitates

¹⁷¹ D. Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933-1945* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 205.

¹⁷² A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 165.

¹⁷³ Document 260 – Joseph Goebbels speech delivered at the Berlin Imperial Court in the Hotel Kaiserhof, 28 March 1933, in Rabinbach & Gilman, *Third Reich Sourcebook*, 560-563, first published in G. Albrecht (ed.), *Nationalsozialistische Filmpolitik: Eine soziologische Untersuchung über die Spielfilme des Dritten Reichs* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke Verlag, 1969), 26-31, trans. in Welch, *The Third Reich*, 149-154.

¹⁷⁴ D. Gilfillan, 'Prima Facie Deception: The Immediacy of the Face in Two Nazi Propaganda Films', *Journal of Jewish Identities*, 11:2 (2018), 217-244, 217.

interacting with this film here. Regarding antisemitism, there were two important films that were released in 1940, only a short time before the KL's shift towards industrial murder, which helped consolidate public apathy towards Jewish suffering. These films, *Jud Süß (Süss the Jew)* and *Der ewige Jude (The Eternal Jew)*, will also be examined below.

Hitlerjunge Quex was an early success of Third Reich cinema, released in September 1933 and loosely celebrating the sacrifice of HJ member Herbert Norkus who was killed by German communists in 1932. The priority given to this film, releasing so swiftly after Hitler's takeover, was surely in part related to capitalising upon Norkus' sacrifice whilst it was fresh in German memories, but the urgency the Nazis placed upon mobilising their youth surely contributed as well. In regard to the quality of *Hitlerjunge Quex*, one film magazine called it "a marvellous work, a film of far more than average importance" but accepted that it relied "all too heavily on rhetoric in the dialogue". The review added that "the dramatic portrayal of Hitler Youth Quex is exquisite: free and natural – a Hitler Youth could not hope to find a better representation".¹⁷⁵ The film's content reinforced ideas that the HJ had been teaching its members since 1926. It showed the value of comradeship, volunteerism, and the importance of dedication to the Führer. Whilst Nazis acknowledged the import of family influence upon youth, in practice they maximised the time children spent in school and youth groups to limit the potentially negative influences of home life. Protagonist Heini Völker's drunkard father slaps him for singing his HJ songs at home, exemplifying the potential negative family influences, which encourages Heini, and by extension younger viewers, to see the HJ centre as a safer social environment. Most critically, it stressed the insidious threats that Communists posed to Germany and its youth, with Heini ultimately being killed by them.¹⁷⁶

Hitler was the guest of honour at the film's Munich premiere where thousands of HJ members, who would hopefully become thousands of viewers, lined the streets. HJ leader Schirach gave a speech memorialising Norkus and emphasising the readiness of his comrades to follow in his footsteps: "in the place where the little Hitler Youth fell there now stands a youth movement of one and a half million. Each individual knows the spirit of sacrifice and comradeship... let us continue his fight, let us fight with his unyielding spirit. Heil Hitler!".¹⁷⁷ The film was given the *Prädikat* "artistically especially valuable" and, in 1938, it was given further recognition as being "valuable for youth" which increased its usage by youth groups and schools. Despite this, it is difficult to accurately gauge the

¹⁷⁵ Document 274 – *Lichtbild-Bühne* review of *Hitlerjunge Quex*, 12 September 1933 in Rabinbach & Gilman, *Third Reich Sourcebook*, 584-587.

¹⁷⁶ For a more complete plot summary see *ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ From *Völkischer Beobachter*, 13 September 1933 in O. Kalbus, *Vom Werden deutscher Filmkunst. Teil 2: Der Tonfilm* (Altona-Bahrenfeld: Cigaretten-Bilderdienst, 1935), 121-122, in Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 51.

reception to the film as the helpful SD reports had not yet been set up when the film released.¹⁷⁸ However, the fact that *Hitlerjunge Quex* echoed lessons that millions of German males were exposed to almost every day but dressed them up in an entertaining medium with impressive production values made it a very potent weapon for the NSDAP and the HJ. Based on the massive membership of the HJ in the 1930s, even if only a small minority embraced the film's messages, this dangerous picture's young audience would still number in the tens of thousands.

Dramatising the life of the half-Jewish Joseph Süß-Oppenheimer, *Jud Süß* exploited German fears of the highly assimilated Jew by portraying him as the antagonist pulling the strings of the Duke of Württemberg, to the misfortune of the eighteenth-century population. Süß' person and behaviour are identical to the archetypal Jew presented by the Nazi press. His hideous true nature is shown in his dealings with his confidant Rabbi Loew, underlining the message that the audience should fear the disguised Jew as much as the Jew in plain sight. This supported *Der Stürmer's* similar exploitation of these increasingly pervasive fears. Süß' sexual assault of a Christian woman eventually leads to his execution at the end of the film.¹⁷⁹ One can see how different mediums of Nazi propaganda supported one another; *Der Stürmer's* fixation upon the sexual deviance of the Jew could only serve to encourage its readers to accept the message of *Jud Süß*, and vice versa. Himmler clearly saw propagandistic value in the film, insisting upon showing it to SS commandos prior to their undertaking of missions relating to the Jewish Question, such as largescale deportations. His order dated 30 September 1940 told his officers to "make sure that the entire SS and police see the film "*Jud Süß*" over the course of the winter".¹⁸⁰ It is probable that some of the many thousands of Jews who died in the KL were targeted with particular spite by SS guards who saw *Jud Süß* and similarly vitriolic pictures.

By 1943, the success of *Jud Süß* was apparent, and it had been seen by 20.3 million viewers.¹⁸¹ An SD report revealed that the film had had the desired impact upon cinema goers. One scene depicting Süß-Oppenheimer raping an Aryan girl and another showing the Jews entering the city of Stuttgart provoked intense anti-Jewish outbursts amongst *Jud Süß* audiences. Incensed by the migration to Stuttgart, members of a Berlin cinema audience cried "expel the Jews from the Kurfürstendamm!

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 60-61.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 239-241.

¹⁸⁰ Copy of order from Himmler, 30 September 1942 in E. Leiser, *Nazi Cinema*, trans. G. Mander & D. Wilson (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 84-85.

¹⁸¹ From M. Dammeyer, ed. *Der Spielfilm im Dritten Reich* (Oberhausen: XII Westdeutsche Kurzfilmtage, 1966), 49, in E. Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Afterlife* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 154.

Get the last Jews out of Germany!”¹⁸² It is not insignificant that both David Welch and Eric Rentschler have agreed on the potency of *Jud Süß*’ impact on Germans. Welch states that the film not only contributed to the growth of extant antisemitism in Germany but that it also helped accelerate the evacuation of the Jews.¹⁸³ Rentschler shares Welch’s belief that the film contributed to the evacuation of the Jews by labelling *Jud Süß* the “cinematic prologue to the Holocaust”.¹⁸⁴ One should bear in mind that *Jud Süß*’ high budget and strong performances including that of Ferdinand Marian, who portrayed the chief villain, helped the film hit its mark with viewers, suggesting that the film’s quality played a role in its warm reception. Nonetheless, historians are correct in crediting the film with accelerating the regime’s shift to deportations, its potent impact proven by the SS’ use of it to rouse their men as well as its capacity to inspire public demonstrations.

Der ewige Jude endeavoured to capitalise on the success of *Jud Süß*, though director Fritz Hippler opted for a change of tack. Hippler prioritised delivering explicit antisemitism above lacing a palatable storyline with undercurrents of Nazi ideology. Framed as a documentary, unlike *Jud Süß*’ period drama, *Der ewige Jude* exploited the German fears of the ‘Wandering Jew’, an anonymous mythical Jew cursed to walk the earth for mocking Christ before his execution. The film showed the Jewish ghettos, comparing their inhabitants with the vermin of the animal world, and gave a tour of Jewish culture with emphasis placed upon its oriental nature, all manipulated to fit the Nazi *Weltanschauung* (worldview). The film’s most intense and controversial scene showed kosher slaughter to convince the audience of the savagery of the Jew.¹⁸⁵ Further evidence for the significance of Hitler’s January 1939 speech foretelling of the destruction of Judaism in Europe is given by *Der ewige Jude*. After shocking viewers with graphic content that was designed to be unsettling, the documentary picture incorporated clips of the Führer’s speech to reassure them that the Jewish Question would be handled.¹⁸⁶ The film was shown widely through 1940-1941 with 66 cinemas in Berlin showing it simultaneously.¹⁸⁷ This figure alone shows that it was hoped that Hippler’s extreme imagery would be seen by all cinema goers, ideally mobilising their opinion against the already marginalised Jews.

¹⁸² SD Report No. 145, 28 November 1940, in Boberach, *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 114-115, present author’s trans..

¹⁸³ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 245.

¹⁸⁴ Rentschler, *Ministry of Illusion*, 150.

¹⁸⁵ For a summary of *Der ewige Jude* see *Internet Archive, Illustrierte Film-Kurier*, no. 3152 (Berlin: Verlag Vereinigte Verlagsgesellschaften Franke & Co., 1940), [Der ewige Jude : ein Dokumentarfilm über das Weltjudentum. : Illustrierter Film-Kurier ; no. 3152. : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023], trans. in Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 246-247.

¹⁸⁶ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 251.

¹⁸⁷ From D. Sington and A. Weidenfeld, *The Goebbels Experiment* (London: 1942), 213, in Kershaw, *The ‘Hitler Myth’*, 242.

Initially, the reception to this film was not dissimilar to the positive one which met *Jud Süß*, but this was short-lived according to an SD report which clarified that the politically active often comprised the bulk of audiences at showings. The report also suggested that the graphic scenes convinced other viewers to leave.¹⁸⁸ The disinterest from the wider public is not altogether surprising giving that propagandistic material tended to become less effective the more blatantly it was delivered, as Hitler had noted in *Mein Kampf*. The newsletter *Unser Wille und Weg* did not seem to realise that the film was too overt in its indoctrinating intentions, stating that “this film with its persuasive power must be shown everywhere where antisemitism is still questioned. No one will fail to shudder at the sneaking servility and dirty bartering of the Jews”.¹⁸⁹ That this advisory resource for propagandists failed to see that the film was too overzealous in its Jew-hating showed that at times the Nazis failed to read the wider population. Nonetheless, the film’s message was clearly well received by a politicised minority. Hippler’s delivery of ‘factual’ criminal statistics which stated Jews were involved with vast percentages of world crime could only serve to further fuel the more zealously antisemitic audience’s desire to see a ‘solution’ to the problem.¹⁹⁰ Despite missing its mark with a significant section of German society, the resonation of *Der ewige Jude*’s message amongst its enthusiasts made it a very dangerous propaganda asset for the Nazis.

In sum, whilst most Third Reich motion pictures avoided cultivating National Socialist sentiments amongst the German population, the propagandised films were dangerous, especially when their intent was masked beneath a high-quality production. Films were exploited well by the Nazis, who were aware that this relatively new entertainment medium could reach millions of Germans as they flocked to the cinema. When considered as supplementary to oral and written propaganda, politicised films gave the NSDAP another road into the minds of the people. Even if some audience members rejected propagandised cinema offerings, their disillusionment mostly amounted to leaving theatres and quietly disagreeing, meanwhile the audience members who agreed with the messages tended to provide more vocal support for the regime. This was not an exclusively German problem, however, as resistance tends to be quieter and less visible than compliance and support in totalitarian states. Moreover, the passionately antisemitic section of society, whose hatred was

¹⁸⁸ From H. Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich. Die geheimen Lageberichte des Sicherheitsdienstes der SS 1938-1945*, 17 Volumes (Herrsching: 1984), vi. 1917-19, 20 January 1941, in *ibid.*, 242-243.

¹⁸⁹ *Calvin University*, German Propaganda Archive, *Unsere Wille und Weg*, No. 10 (1940), 54-55, trans. R.L. Bytwerk, [A Nazi review of "The Eternal Jew" \(calvin.edu\)](https://calvin.edu) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

¹⁹⁰ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 248 - Hippler accused Jews of being responsible for 34 percent of drug trade crimes, 47 percent of robberies, 47 percent of gambling, 82 percent of crime organisations and 98 percent of prostitution worldwide.

deepened by the latter two films examined above, gave the Nazis an essential body of support for shifting the Third Reich's Jewish policy from widescale deportation toward extermination.

Conclusion

The background factors which contributed to the development of the men in the Camp SS examined in this chapter are not exhaustive, but they have served to introduce the nature of the Germany that the SS guards emerged from in the early twentieth century. The themes discussed here, whilst they evidence the presence of militaristic and xenophobic thought in areas of society, did not, on their own, create the SS nor cause them to terrorise victims in the KL. To ascribe too great a responsibility to German education, negative experience of the Weimar period and propaganda in creating a body of perpetrators who administered the camps and killed countless innocents would be wrong. This chapter's purpose has been to highlight that the SS man in the camps who abused and murdered prisoners did not emerge from a vacuum and nor was he made exclusively by his service in Himmler's organisation. The development of SS individuals through childhood indoctrination, through more than a decade of economic hardship and civil unrest, and through a country under barrage from politicised propaganda is essential to bear in mind. There are a few particularly important points to carry from this chapter through the subsequent chapters of this thesis. As the education section showed, German schools through the first half of the twentieth century had a habit of imbuing youths with dangerous ideas which, especially after 1933, served to deny children their innocence. The Nazis, with the help of the HJ, used schooling to rush children into an adult mindset, determined to see young, politicised men ready to join the national community and military organisations. Also, Goebbels' ministry fired volley after volley of hateful propaganda at the population for 12 years. The impact of this upon men and boys who had been shaped by xenophobic and militaristic schooling and youth groups was, in many cases, sufficient to push them further towards Nazism and toward supporting Jewish persecution. Some of these people became the Camp SS perpetrators in the KL. Of course, not everybody who was exposed to the influences discussed in this chapter became KL guards, soldiers, or even Nazi sympathisers, but the men who did mostly endured these indoctrinating pressures to varying degrees. Shared experiences like these are key to piecing together the development of the men who committed the terrible crimes in the camps. Many of these atrocities were, of course, committed in the name of Himmler's SS making it prudent to better understand the nature of this 'elite' organisation in the following chapter.

Chapter Two – ‘Evaluating the Status of the SS as an Elite Organisation’

Introduction

The first chapter of this study examined background factors, including early life influences and propaganda, and their potential effects upon potential recruits for Heinrich Himmler’s SS. This has helped to identify the militaristic and xenophobic mindsets that were brought into this organisation by German men. It is prudent to now consider the quality of the SS, which was considered elite by its leader and many others in Nazi Germany. First, it is necessary to establish what is meant by the term ‘elite’. In this situation, the measurement of an ‘elite’ is based upon multiple factors: the intended superiority of the SS above other components of the Nazi regime; the supposed infallibility of SS recruitment and racial quality of its stock; and the ideological consensus that the SS sought to ensure. In short, the parameters by which to judge the elite status of the SS are those that would be associated with most elite military formations, or special forces, barring, perhaps, the highly prioritised racial purity. From its beginnings, the SS encouraged its men to develop a *Herrenbewusstsein* (master consciousness) as individuals and *Elitebewusstsein* (elite consciousness) as a group.¹ Himmler summarised his intentions for the SS and its legacy in November 1937:

We want to create an exclusive élite for the next centuries, a new nobility which will recruit the best sons and daughters for our people, a nobility which will never grow older, which reaches far back into tradition and that history which is of value, even into the most ancient of times, and simultaneously represents the eternal youth for our people.²

In relation to the SS’ task, Himmler said:

It is the obligation of the SS and of the police to solve positively the problem of internal security... we are tackling it in all seriousness and are really convinced that it is no second-rate task, and we are further convinced that only the best ideological training of our men and a racial selection will enable us to solve this problem someday.³

¹ H.F. Ziegler, *Nazi Germany’s New Aristocracy: The SS Leadership, 1925-1939* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 37.

² From *Bundesarchiv* (BAB), Berlin, NS 19/4004, fols. 278-351, 342, trans. Speech by Heinrich Himmler to senior SS officers in Munich, 8 November 1937, in M. Wildt, ‘The Spirit of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA)’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6:3 (2005), 333-349, 335.

³ Document PS-1992 (A) – Speech by Heinrich Himmler at National Political Course for the Armed Forces, “Nature and Task of the SS and Police”, 15-23 January 1937 in International Military Tribunal (IMT), *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression – Vol. IV* (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1946), 633.

The Reichsführer's targets for both the SS' reputation and its practical effectiveness were evidently very high.

This chapter will determine whether Himmler's self-identified paramilitary elite was justified in identifying as such. One of the central arguments within this study is that the SS' elite status was largely manufactured and, apart from in the case of some of the more militarily successful elements of the *Waffen-SS*, unearned. The Camp SS was one of the branches which this study views as being especially lacking in any discernible superiority above other military or paramilitary outfits. The reason for assessing the SS' perceived elite status is that, in proving that it was an illusion, it will help to understand the actions of its men within the concentration camps. The occurrence of the wide-ranging behaviours of SS men, especially those of the KL guards, becomes less surprising once the organisation's unhelpful elite façade has been stripped away. As such, the following examination will aid this study by supporting the assertion that the SS used the veil of being an elite organisation to cover a great many of its failings. These varied from a flawed recruitment system and *ad hoc* distribution of SS rank to outsiders, to the alcohol abuse and sadism of many within the hierarchy. Moreover, this study postulates that the lack of genuinely elite component parts of the SS contributed significantly to the atrocities in the KL system. To fully appreciate the factual quality of the SS, this chapter will give some attention to the *Waffen-SS* in the field as well as the men in the camps to show the pervasiveness of mediocrity. To only focus on one branch of the SS would inhibit this chapter's intention to form an accurate picture of the real status of the broader organisation.

There has been limited scholarly interaction with the SS' manufacture of an elite reputation. To some degree, this absence of discussion may be attributable to the declaration of the SS as a criminal organisation in the wake of the Second World War. This, and the SS' extensive record of atrocities, may persuade academics that debating whether the organisation was truly an elite is not crucial. It is in fact imperative to determine whether the SS, particularly the camp perpetrators, operated in a way which suggested that they were guided by a sense of responsibility as members of an elite. Nonetheless, despite the limited interaction with the topic, several historians have commented on the quality of the SS. Valdis Lumans has stated that the *Waffen-SS* "earned" a reputation as the toughest and most effective of all the German forces during the war. He adds that their *esprit de corps* was comparable to elite American forces like the Marines and the Airborne.⁴ This comparison is an assertion of the SS' elite status, at least as a combat force within the German war machine. This chapter contrasts with Lumans' statement, as the examination of the *Waffen-SS*

⁴ V.O. Lumans, 'The Ethnic Germans of the *Waffen-SS* in Combat: Dregs or Gems?' in S. Marble (ed.), *Scraping the Barrel: The Military Use of Sub-Standard Manpower* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 225.

shows its reputation was not always positive within the Third Reich. Nigel Cawthorne refers to the SS as the black-uniformed elite of the Nazi Party, who looked down on the SA.⁵ The SS certainly considered themselves superior to the Brown Shirts, but the great extent of their own shortcomings, which will be highlighted in this chapter, greatly undermined their claims to such status. Survivor Eugen Kogon took a dim view of the SS' efforts to become an elite when they were put into practice. He stated that the "elite guards" bore little resemblance to the "Teutonic braves" of old, despite Himmler's hopes, and that instead the organisation was predominantly composed of the unemployed from each social class, seeking to find purpose armed with brass knuckles and a revolver.⁶ Bruno Heilig, also a camp survivor, labelled the SS as "the élite of National Socialism" adding that those in the camps were "the élite of the SS", clarifying that such status owed to their capacity for brutality.⁷

One of the more convincing summaries of the SS' quality comes from Wolfgang Sofsky who says that "the camp SS during the war presented a picture that completely contradicted the recruitment ideal. A third-class force, it was neither physically fit nor especially motivated, neither ideologically schooled nor disciplined militarily – a motley crew, anything but an elite".⁸ Though Sofsky is correct in this assessment, this chapter will show that problems which compromised the SS' claims to excellence were already extensive in the pre-war years. Another harsh assessment of the SS' aims to develop an elite establishment comes from Amy Carney whose exploration of the encouragement to marry and start families in the SS showed that Himmler's efforts were in vain. Highlighting that in an organisation which hammered its ideology into its members and stressed loyalty above everything, Carney asks why the men largely resisted fulfilling their marriage and reproductive duties.⁹ Though Carney's study focuses upon the SS as a whole and this chapter does not explore the failure of SS men to heed the call to build families, her research reveals that the failures of SS elitism stretched into home life.

As this thesis' introduction clarified, the involvement of the SS in the ordered killings of the Holocaust will not be considered here. Rather, the chapter will give attention to aspects of the SS' function that had not been intended. These themes include the failings of the SS selection procedures which were unable to guarantee the selection of the 'best' candidates, according to their

⁵ N. Cawthorne, *The Story of the SS: Hitler's Infamous Legions of Death* (London: Arcturus Publishing, 2012), 6.

⁶ E. Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 6.

⁷ B. Heilig, *Men Crucified* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1941), 13.

⁸ W. Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 110.

⁹ A. Carney, *Marriage and Fatherhood in the Nazi SS* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 163 and 180-183.

own high ethnic standards. As well as flawed recruitment, there was a real gap between the subscription to SS ideology that Himmler had hoped for, and what he actually received. This was especially visible in continued religious activity from his men and the lack of engagement, from many, with the ideological teaching provided by leaders. Also of great importance to this chapter is the prevalence of alcohol abuse amongst the ranks of the SS. This was an issue which often became problematic for both the men themselves and those they encountered, chiefly their victims. Abuse of power was omnipresent within the SS, and sometimes it went hand-in-hand with the abuse of alcohol. The abuses varied from excessive enjoyment of prisoner mistreatment to the theft of Reich property, both of which Himmler himself banned and viewed as sins in contravention of an SS man's duty. The wide-ranging themes which will be investigated here will show that the SS was an immensely flawed institution, rife with both failures of policy and conduct. However, as a component part of a broader study of the Camp SS' development, the SS' shortcomings and the vices of its men cannot be examined exhaustively in this chapter. Fundamentally, a key purpose for addressing the most pertinent issues affecting the SS' performance here is to enable greater understanding of the problems as they reappear frequently through the subsequent chapters of this thesis. Moreover, this chapter shall conclusively contend that the SS' elite status was, indeed, overwhelmingly unearned and masked the truth about an organisation which provided ample opportunity for criminals and perpetrators to behave erratically and to abuse innumerable victims in the KL and beyond.

SS Recruitment

As early as 1925, the SS made efforts to set itself apart from other subsidiaries of the NSDAP with its recruitment. The first leader of the SS, Julius Schreck, set the tone for its recruitment, stating that "habitual drunkards, gossip-mongers and other delinquents will not be considered".¹⁰ At this early juncture, Schreck made efforts to assemble "the best and most reliable Party members to protect the movement and work selflessly and tirelessly for it".¹¹ Despite Schreck's early attempts to set the SS apart, it was Himmler, rising to the rank of *Reichsführer-SS* in 1929, who made serious efforts to screen potential recruits. In 1937, Himmler confessed that he had set out with the view that securing ethnic purity was an unmissable step on the path to building his 'elite' force. Himmler claimed:

¹⁰ From *Berlin Document Centre* (BDC), Guidelines for the Formation of the National-Socialist "Schutzstaffel" Issued by SS Headquarters (undated), Microfilm 87, in H. Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's SS* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 24.

¹¹ From *Stanford University*, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Central Archives of the NSDAP, undated memorandum by Julius Schreck, Microfilm 17, in *ibid.*, 24.

I said to myself that should I succeed to select from the German people for this organisation as many people as possible a majority of whom possess this desired blood, to teach them military discipline and, in time, the understanding of the value of blood and the entire ideology which results from it, then it will be possible actually to create such an elite organisation.¹²

It is thus clear that, for Himmler, biological traits were higher priorities than outstanding abilities in the selection of SS recruits. In his mind, the latter could be taught if the correct blood was present in recruits. This was a crucial misunderstanding of the development of talent on the part of the Reichsführer which was very detrimental to SS recruitment and contributed partly to the SS' inability to create an elite.

After Hitler's succession in 1933, the SS were able to be more selective and the *Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS* (SS Race and Settlement Main Office, or RuSHA) began to test applicants based upon 'scientific' tests composed by racial hygienist, and SS officer, Dr Bruno Schultz. His two measuring devices were a nine-point model which aided examiners in assessing an applicant's appearance and physical build, and a five-point scale aimed at rating the applicant's blood and human worth. As G.S. Graber has underlined, many Aryan-looking Jewish males in their twenties would have met the requirements of the supposedly scientific SS physiological tests.¹³ Himmler himself even acknowledged the imperfect nature of his entry requirements. Referring to the issue of excluding people beneath a certain height, Himmler said "of course it is impossible to be too discriminating here as it cannot be said that people who are smaller should not possess the same blood".¹⁴ The Reichsführer's own acknowledgement of the arbitrary measure of a person's ethnic worth says a great deal and highlights the nature of the inherently flawed pseudo-science which the SS believed could filter out impure, unworthy recruits. Naturally, Jewish males were not in the habit of joining the SS, but the fact that Schultz' screening could have judged an undesirable element to be worthy of SS service helps to dispel the notion that SS entry examinations were anything more than guesswork. Nonetheless, the tests were also supplemented by required genealogical proof of pure ethnicity dating back as far as the eighteenth century.¹⁵ This was a very difficult task for applicants, but Himmler was determined to persevere, in the short term at least. However, despite the implementation of entry assessments, those being accepted were not up to Himmler's expectations.

¹² PS-1992 (A) – Heinrich Himmler, "Nature and Task of the SS", 15-23 January 1937 in IMT, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression – Vol. IV*, 617.

¹³ G.S. Graber, *History of the SS* (London: Diamond Books, 1994), 81-82.

¹⁴ PS-1992 (A) – Heinrich Himmler, "Nature and Task of the SS", 15-23 January 1937 in IMT, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression – Vol. IV*, 617.

¹⁵ Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy*, 54.

Even though the SS numbered roughly 50,000 men upon Hitler's attainment of the Chancellorship, Himmler claimed to have dismissed more than this total over the next two years. He boasted, "from the end of 1933 to the end of 1935 we expelled all those of the newly accepted members who proved unsuitable. In these years I have expelled approximately 60,000 men. This has been of great benefit to the SS".¹⁶ To have expelled so many in this short period, despite Himmler's assurances that the process was helpful, indicated that efforts to scientifically measure a potential candidate's worth were fundamentally flawed and brought unsuitable recruits into the SS.

In spite of his efforts to sweep away those he regarded as inferior to the SS' high standards, Himmler had to later relax his demands. By December 1938, the SS had the opportunity to expand further and to do this there had to be some sacrifice on Himmler's part. He thus announced that entry requirements would be lowered for the next five years, allowing those who would have been considered unworthy in the mid-1930s to enrol. Whilst in previous years the SS had rejected spectacle wearers, people who were near-sighted or had lost vision in one eye became viable candidates for SS service.¹⁷ The enduring stigma placed upon poor eyesight likely fed into the Camp SS' particular targeting of bespectacled prisoners who they accused of being intellectuals, a hated status fuelled by the education system's shunning of intellectuality and, according to survivor Benedikt Kautsky, driven by an SS intellectual inferiority complex.¹⁸ Similarly, the demand to produce evidence of pure lineage was accepted to have been a doomed venture as well and, by 1937, Himmler declared the production of an *Ahnentafel* (genealogical chart) to be merely a "spiritual contest" amongst the SS.¹⁹ In other words, Himmler's wish to prove the historical familial purity of each of his men was only ever an unworkable dream. It is for these reasons that Herbert Ziegler has accurately condemned the SS as falling below their self-designed elite benchmark, failing to become a true "reflection of the 'great reservoir of pure stock' for which the *Reichsführer-SS* strove".²⁰ Whilst the above examples of relaxed admittance do not suggest the inductees would be problematic for the SS, Himmler's decision to readmit members he had previously expelled from the organisation for

¹⁶ PS-1992 (A) – Heinrich Himmler, "Nature and Task of the SS", 15-23 January 1937 in IMT, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression – Vol. IV*, 619.

¹⁷ Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy*, 55-56.

¹⁸ For an example of Camp SS assaulting a prisoner for wearing glasses and associating this with intellectuality see Heilig, *Men Crucified*, 16. For observations of anti-intellectual sentiment of SS see *ibid.*, 144, B. Kautsky, *Devils and the Damned: (A True and Damning Exposé of Nazi Concentration Camps...)* (London: Brown, Watson LTD., 1960), 60-62 and P. Wallner, *By Order of the Gestapo: A Record of Life in Dachau and Buchenwald Concentration Camps* (London: John Murray, 1941), 88.

¹⁹ From *United States National Archives* (USNA), Microfilm Publication, Microcopy No. T-354, T-354/366/4070630, *SS Befehl für den Wintersonnenwendwettkampf 1937*, 18 November 1937, in J.J. Weingartner, 'The SS Race and Settlement Main Office: Towards an Orden of Blood and Soil', *The Historian*, 34:1 (1971), 62-77, 69.

²⁰ Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy*, 56.

failing to heed his orders to get married suggests that, at times, he welcomed men who had already demonstrated passive resistance to their leader's directives.²¹

These concessions paled in comparison to those made by the SS during the late war when men were forcibly enlisted compelling Himmler to cope with soldiers of doubtful physical quality and ideological conviction. This was critically problematic for the SS by the time of the KL's evacuation period, the focus of Chapter Six. Numerous victim testimonies recalled that conscripted SS guards were generally much more hesitant to abuse and kill than the traditional Camp SS. One anonymous Auschwitz evacuee referred to an SS guard accompanying them as "very mild mannered" and fearful of the SS' expectations of him. He had been a *Wehrmacht* soldier before being transferred into the SS.²² Other SS draftees went beyond being polite during the evacuations. On Ilse Kirstein's evacuation from a Gross-Rosen subcamp, one of the accompanying SS draftees, who were too old for frontline service, stated "If someone flees, I did not see anything".²³ These examples show that the SS' increasing reliance upon conscripts in the late war undermined the basic ethos of Himmler's KL and risked soft handling of perceived enemies of the state in its most desperate hour.

Himmler also managed to devalue his own recruitment policy by distributing honorary SS rank to those who, by the Nazi values of volunteerism and sacrifice, had not earned it. This was often done in a bid to strengthen the SS' ventures into other areas of society. One example was the SS' poaching of athletes from other sports clubs to present the SS as an elite sporting organisation in time for the 1936 Olympic Games. SS periodical *Das Schwarze Korps* published an article, dated 3 July 1935, entitled 'Jewish Victor in the German College Championships'. It focused upon Richard Kalischer's victory for a college swim team in Berlin and criticised the "sabotaging [of] all those healthy efforts aimed at liberating the German *Volk* from the Jew and his influence".²⁴ The article exemplified the SS' concerns about the impure representation of Germany in sports, accelerated by the proximity of the Olympic Games. The SS, viewing itself as an unparalleled body of exceptional manpower, therefore had to ensure its own sporting excellence to nullify the threat of undesirables permeating the German sporting elite. Himmler showed interest in unusual sporting feats such as cultivating ambidexterity amongst his men. He boasted that "shotput is done with both arms... pistols and rifles are fired left and right... hand grenades and clubs are hurled left and right" though admitted that "in

²¹ Carney, *Marriage and Fatherhood*, 178.

²² *The Wiener Library* (WL), London, Testimonies, Anonymous eyewitness account of the evacuation of Auschwitz concentration camp in January 1945, 9.

²³ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account by Ilse Kirstein of Christianstadt concentration camp and escape from a death march, 2.

²⁴ Document 338 – *Das Schwarze Korps*, "Jüdische Sieger bei deutschen Hochschulmeisterschaften", 3 July 1935, 3, in A. Rabinbach & S.L. Gilman (eds.), *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 705.

the beginning no record performances can be expected". The aim was for wounded veterans to be able to compete in sports and to regain military efficacy, should they injure their dominant arm. Himmler again showed his keenness to build direct links from the HJ, claiming that sporting ambidexterity would be "a very good development and application of all physical strength if we require such performances of youths in the ages of 13 to 14 from the very beginning".²⁵ Berno Bahro has criticised the lack of academic recognition of sport as an important element of SS' ideology. As such, the uniqueness of his research makes Bahro an authority on the topic of SS sporting achievements. Though historians had previously dismissed sport as a pastime to busy the men, Bahro has evidenced that it was a tool to legitimise "the physical and mental virility of this self-proclaimed 'Tat-Elite'".²⁶ Himmler's emphasis upon the importance and value of developing the uncommon skill of ambidexterity amongst his men indicates that Bahro is correct in identifying sport as a means for showcasing the SS' supposed exceptional talents.

In the drive for sporting success, Himmler obligated his men to earn the sports badge of the SA and the German Sports Badge. This was partly driven by the rivalry between the SS and the SA, with the former hoping to nominate half of the German Olympic team at the expense of SA candidates.²⁷ However, the SS saw lacklustre engagement with the sports badge scheme, with only 12 percent of the SS possessing the SA sports badge by December 1934.²⁸ This did increase to around 47 percent by October 1937, but the hope of universal SS attainment of the badge was not realised in time for the Olympics, nor afterwards.²⁹ The slow increase in sports badge attainment goes some way to explaining the SS recruitment of successful sportsmen from outside of the organisation. The sportsmen lured to the SS from outside of its ranks were exempted from active duty and on occasion were appointed to Reinhard Heydrich's SD, arguably a better placement due to its reputation as an "educated elite" with higher social standing.³⁰ On top of this, the SS financed training camps, paid for their equipment and hired coaches for the sportsmen as well.³¹ It should be noted that some success came, notably on the equestrian scene where the dominant *Wehrmacht* riders were supplanted by the representatives of the SS Main Riding School by 1938.³² But the crux of the matter was the cost

²⁵ PS-1992 (A) – Heinrich Himmler, "Nature and Task of the SS", 15-23 January 1937 in IMT, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression – Vol. IV*, 622-623.

²⁶ B. Bahro, 'Can Sport Form a National-Socialist Elite? The Example of SS Sports', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 31:12 (2014), 1462-1477, 1463.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1462.

²⁸ From BAB, NS 31/348, Chief of the SS-Amt, 27 April 1935, in *ibid.*, 1465.

²⁹ From BAB, NS 17/176, SS-Befehlsblatt Nr. 3, 25 March 1938, in *ibid.*, 1465.

³⁰ G.C. Browder, *Hitler's Enforcers: The Gestapo and the SS Security Service in the Nazi Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 136-137.

³¹ Bahro, 'Sport', 1466.

³² *Ibid.*, 1469.

to the SS in terms of its adherence to its supposedly unrivalled selection procedures. For instance, the equestrian SS ranks were only bolstered significantly when the SS lowered the racial admission criteria to allow many to qualify. This relaxation of the stringent entry requirements drew the ire of several older SS leaders.³³ The irony of the SS' determination to create its sporting elite was that it undermined its own 'elite' entry policies. This was ultimately avoidable; had Himmler prioritised gradual internal sporting development above getting quick results from poaching external sportsmen, he could have maintained the integrity of his entry requirements.

SS recruitment procedures were also bypassed by select acquaintances of Himmler. The supposed *Freundeskreis Reichsführer-SS* (Circle of Friends of the *Reichsführer-SS*) was a group of individuals from major businesses and institutions in the Third Reich, who represented their firms in attempts to curry favour with Himmler. The companies varied from the Deutsche Bank to the Dr Oetker food company, with each contributing financially to the SS. The total annual contributions were in the region of one million marks, an attractive sum which prompted Himmler to bestow SS rank in gratitude. Of the 32 non-SS members who met at the monthly 'Friends' meetings, 15 were granted the rank of *SS-Ehrenführer* (honorary SS commander) by Himmler.³⁴ Money superseded physical values in some cases clearly, but it was not the only way to gain easy access to the SS. Himmler, in the hope of winning friends and influencing outsiders, also granted the rank of *SS-Ehrenführer* to scientists, diplomats, public officials and high-ranking members of the NSDAP. Ironically, Himmler declared bitterly in front of a large audience of his senior SS officers that "we shall get SS members who only come to us because it is distinguished or because the black coat will naturally be very attractive in peacetime".³⁵ This evidently did not apply to the Reichsführer's personal connections who he felt might benefit himself or the organisation in some way. Whilst the sale of SS rank may have raised eyebrows amongst those who had earned their way into the organisation, the bestowment of rank upon those who were in no way fond of the SS was an affront to the men who were loyal to Himmler. Former chief of the Gestapo, Rudolf Diels, who had fallen out of favour in the wake of the Night of the Long Knives; Hitler's private secretary, Martin Bormann, who had a bad relationship with the SD; and military administrator Eggebert Reeder, who rebuffed any SS interference in his business, were all granted the title *SS-Ehrenführer*. Like the SS sportsmen, the honorary commanders were not required to do duties in the SS, yet still had the right to wear the

³³ From *Das Schwarze Korps*, 6 May 1935, in *ibid.*, 1468-1469.

³⁴ Höhne, *Order of the Death's Head*, 140.

³⁵ *Harvard Law School* (HLS), Nuremberg Trials Project (NTP), PS-1919, Speech of Heinrich Himmler at Posen, 4 October 1943, <https://nuremberg.law.harvard.edu/documents/2974-extracts-from-speeches-concerning?q=Himmler+1919-PS#p.6> [Accessed on 2 June 2023].

hallowed uniform of Hitler's paramount armed force.³⁶ By bestowing rank upon those who were, in some cases, not affiliated to the NSDAP in any way, Himmler was accepting people into his organisation who were not ideologically aligned with the SS.

Franz Ludwig Metzner, appointed head of the German boxing federation in 1937, was welcomed into the SS fold by Himmler, for the latter to gain more influence over the German sporting scene. On top of his boxing position, Metzner was also an advisor to the *Reichsminister* of the Interior. As such, he wielded some political influence, which may have factored into the Reichsführer's calculations. This eventually backfired for Himmler. During the war, a dispute arose between the civil administration and the *Sicherheitspolizei* (Security Police, or SiPo) and the SD which saw Metzner consistently posture himself with the civil administration against the police branches of Himmler's SS.³⁷ Although Himmler could make somebody a member of the SS, he could not make them think like SS members. Nor was he able to convince them to respect the supposed hegemony of his organisation. Thus, Himmler not only distributed titles in his exclusive enterprise in reward for cash investments, but he also granted rank to those who were not allied to the SS, nor sympathised with its own view that it should be positioned at the apex of German society. In short, Himmler's arbitrary gifting of titles, irrespective of whether they were honorary, brought people into the fold who did not embody what was required in the SS man. The values of honour, sacrifice, volunteerism and, at least, some engagement with the SS' worldview were not required to be an *SS-Ehrenführer*, hence why individuals like Metzner failed to benefit Himmler. This must be seen as a significant failure on Himmler's part; his desire to see the SS expand into new areas of society and to strengthen their reputation saw distinguished entrants wear a uniform they had not earned nor particularly respected. The Reichsführer's arbitrary bestowment of SS membership certainly devalued membership in his organisation.

Another aspect of SS recruitment which warrants some analysis was the declining quality, by the SS' standards, of newcomers as the war progressed. As the foreign territory under Third Reich control grew, the need for SS recruits increased, as did the pool of non-German men available for active service. Hitler had claimed in July 1941 that the use of foreign troops, especially those who were considered ethnically inferior, was not something he would consider. He said that:

We must never permit anybody but the German to carry arms! This is especially important; even when it seems easier at first to enlist the armed support of foreign, subjugated nations,

³⁶ Höhne, *Order of the Death's Head*, 136-137.

³⁷ Bahro, 'Sport', 1468.

it is wrong to do so... Only the German may carry arms, not the Slav, not the Czech, nor the Cossack, nor the Ukrainian.³⁸

Despite the insistence of the Führer, the German army came to rely on foreign auxiliaries as the war progressed. The SS were not apart from the rest of the armed forces, their need for replacements, fuelled by their very high casualty numbers in the East, led them to recruiting foreign men as well. The recruitment of these men directly contradicted Himmler's boasts about his selection ethos at Posen in 1943. The Reichsführer stated that "we have gone partly by outward appearance, and for the rest have kept these outward appearances in review by making constantly new demands, and by repeated tests both physical and mental, both of the character and the soul".³⁹ In reality, once the foreign pool of manpower was being exploited, SS selection ideals largely fell by the wayside. The first unit to have a non-German majority was formed in 1944 as the 13th *Waffen-SS* Mountain Division, the *Handschar*, which was composed of Bosnians. The significance of this division justifies returning to it in the next section. The *Handschar* was by no means alone, also in existence in 1944 were three Baltic divisions, two of which were composed of Latvians and one of Estonians; a Ukrainian division; and two Russian divisions.⁴⁰

The Camp SS also saw the use of foreign manpower. At the Trawniki training camp, near Lublin in Poland, the SS trained thousands of Soviet prisoners of war to serve as tools for carrying out the Final Solution, working in the Ghettos and both concentration and extermination camps. These Red Army prisoners, as well as captive civilians, volunteered for service at Trawniki to escape the insufferable conditions they themselves were subjected to in the KL. Peter Black's article on the Trawniki facility examines the plethora of reasons which tempted foreign prisoners to join the SS, including belief in German victory and material inducements, but alignment with SS values was not a motivation.⁴¹ The increase of foreign guards in the KL was often problematic as many of them behaved erratically. Judith Jägermann recalled Hungarian or Ukrainian SS taking over the sentry towers at Bergen-Belsen shortly before its liberation. She testified that "they were shooting quite arbitrarily... they took great pleasure and amusement in killing".⁴² Even after the camp was liberated,

³⁸ *German Historical Institute*, Washington, D.C., German History in Documents and Images, Martin Bormann's Minutes of a Meeting at Hitler's Headquarters, 16 July 1941, http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1549 [Accessed on 2 June 2023].

³⁹ HLS, NTP, PS-1919, Heinrich Himmler at Posen, 4 October 1943.

⁴⁰ L. Rein, 'Untermenschen in SS Uniforms: 30th Waffen-Grenadier Division of Waffen SS', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 20:2 (2007), 329-345, 336.

⁴¹ P. Black, 'Foot Soldiers of the Final Solution: The Trawniki Training Camp and Operation Reinhard', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 25:1 (2011), 1-99, 7-8.

⁴² *Center for Jewish History*, Leo Baeck Institute, Memoir Collection, ME 1319, Judith Jägermann, 'Memories of My Childhood in the Holocaust', 12, [Meine Erinnerungen= Memories of my childhood in the Holocaust / \(cjh.org\)](http://MeineErinnerungen=MemoriesofmychildhoodintheHolocaust/cjh.org) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

the foreign auxiliaries killed 41 more prisoners in what was known as the “reign of terror” over three nights from 15-18 April 1945.⁴³ As well as posing a great threat to prisoners, the foreign KL men often proved dangerous colleagues for the German SS. When the Gustloff Works, attached to Buchenwald, were bombed in August 1944, Ukrainian SS men fired upon panicking prisoners but somehow managed to shoot at other SS men as well. The Ukrainian SS thus drew their German counterparts into an accidental shootout during the bombing.⁴⁴ These examples of foreign guards causing problems in the camps support Kautsky’s claim that the increase of non-Germans served to worsen the discipline of the Camp SS.⁴⁵

Predictably, the German members of SS formations often clashed with their foreign colleagues. This led to verbal insults and sometimes violence.⁴⁶ A secret report of the SD in 1940 summarised the German viewpoint on language barriers in the East:

The [central opinion] is that Germans have no business concerning themselves with the rather difficult language of an inferior race... The fact that hardly a single administrative office in the East can do without a Polish or Ukrainian interpreter... is not conducive to the needs of the German leadership.⁴⁷

With such an arrogant outlook, it is unsurprising that relations between Germans and non-Germans within multinational SS formations were so unpleasant. It also goes some way to showing why, in the instance of the Gustloff Works bombing, KL guards could have communication issues leading to disastrous outcomes. A letter of complaint written by *Volksdeutsch* (ethnic German) Auschwitz SS guard, Johann Kasaniczky, further underlines the sour tensions between Germans and non-Germans caused by language barriers. Kasaniczky wrote, “I am hereby reporting SS Stormtrooper Marschall of the administration department for grossly insulting me... In answer to my question as duty guard about his business in the camp he replied: That’s none of your bloody business and, what’s more,

⁴³ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account by Joop Zwart, a Dutch political prisoner, deported from Sachsenhausen to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945, 16-17.

⁴⁴ Document 135 – Robert Leibbrand, “The Bombing Attack on August 24, 1944”, in D.A. Hackett (ed. and trans.), *The Buchenwald Report* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 304-305.

⁴⁵ Kautsky, *Devils and the Damned*, 11.

⁴⁶ From BAB, Militärarchiv, RS 3-30/2, Regimentsbefehl Nr. 4 des SS Hauptsturmführers Hauptmann und Regiments Führers an 4. Regiment, 10 August 1944, in Rein, *Untermenschen*, 337.

⁴⁷ Document 385 – Secret Report of the Security Service of the *Reichsführer-SS*, ‘Bilingualism as Means and Expression of German Superiority in the East’, in Rabinbach & Gilman, *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, 820, first circulated on 27 March 1940 as “Zweisprachigkeit als Mittel und Ausdruck deutscher Überlegenheit im Osten”, published in H. Boberach (ed.), *Meldungen aus dem Reich 1938-1945: Die geheimen Lageberichte der Sicherheitsdienstes der SS*, (Herrsching: Pawlak Verlag, 1984), 4:920.

learn to speak German properly before you speak to me".⁴⁸ This is an interesting example because, being *Volksdeutsch*, Kasaniczky was, ideologically speaking, not considered antagonistic to Germany's goals unlike non-German Slavic peoples. Evidently, the SS could be hostile to Germans whose ancestors had been cut off from the Fatherland and who, ultimately, the Nazis were keen to reincorporate into *Volksgemeinschaft*. There is little doubt that the linguistic diversification of the SS caused a lot of issues and strained the morale of both Germans and foreign troops. Clearly, the fractious nature of socialisation between the numerous nationalities which found their way into the SS ensured that the potential cultivating of comradeship was consistently stunted by squabbling. Had Himmler not been so particular about admitting Germans with minor medical or genetic imperfections in the 1930s, he may well have given himself access to a more significant pool of domestic reinforcements after the war depleted his main divisions. It is difficult to view the SS' failure to anticipate the need for vast numbers of German replacements, even ones of less 'elite' nature, as anything other than a strategic failure. This error eventually led to such diversification and subsequent disunity within the ranks that the SS' supposed superiority became more doubtful as the war went on.

As this section has examined, despite the emphasis the SS placed upon recruiting the best men available, Himmler's organisation did not maintain a high standard amongst the recruits accepted into its ranks. Some of this was down to wishful thinking on Himmler's part as well as his desire to expand his influence into sports and business which served to create more inconsistencies of policy. Regarding the latter issue, for an organisation which so proudly boasted the credentials of voluntarism, sacrifice, and hard work, to give out rank and uniform without the recipient earning them was a puzzling contradiction. Whilst it could be assumed, fairly, that without the war the SS would not have recruited such numbers of foreign auxiliaries, nor have had to accept poor physical specimens, the failure to adapt and protect their own values was a dismal failure. Himmler ultimately failed to implement a recruitment system which could endure hardships, leading the SS to become a poorly motivated, poorly staffed force by the end of the war. Simply put, the recruitment practices of the SS were not in union with their own measure of the term 'elite'.

Adherence to SS Ideology

Membership within an organisation such as the SS did not necessarily guarantee compliance with all its teachings and worldviews. In fact, the supposedly elite SS struggled with convincing its members

⁴⁸ *Birkbeck University of London*, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 26, "Letter of Complaint by the Auschwitz SS Man Kasaniczky", [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](https://www.bbk.ac.uk/nazi-concentration-camps/documents) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

to subscribe to multiple elements of its ideology. One particularly contentious issue was religion, and, more specifically, the affiliation of SS members with the Church. There is some disparity between historians' assessments of Himmler's efforts and intentions regarding SS religion. Heinz Höhne sits on the side of the argument which asserts that Himmler was enamoured with old Germanic ritual and sought to implement a "deliberate policy of neo-Paganism". Höhne does concede, however, that Himmler's endeavour to replace Christian celebrations, such as Christmas, with Pagan substitutes, like the Feast of Midsummer, was "divorced from reality... [and] remained primarily a paper exercise".⁴⁹ Graber echoes Höhne by dismissing Himmler's attempts to replace established Christian holidays as failures, emphasising that his SS were unable to be persuaded to abandon their traditions.⁵⁰ Michael Wildt goes further, stating with some emphasis that "Himmler wanted to release the SS from the Christian culture of the Occident, and to fight Christianity until its end".⁵¹ Conversely, James Weingartner, although agreeing that divorce from the Church was encouraged, has described Himmler as "extremely wary" not to offend religious sensibilities within the SS. He attributes this to the potential danger of political repercussions but also speculates that this may have been in part due to the legacy of his own Catholic upbringing. Weingartner points to the fact that at least one person was expelled from the SS for anti-religious speech, as evidence of Himmler's sympathy for his Christian men.⁵²

The truth appears to be closer to Weingartner's assessment than to that of Wildt's in particular. *Das Schwarze Korps* offers a good insight into the SS view on religion. In its article on the 23 April 1936, titled 'The German Faith: Where do we Stand?', the newspaper insisted that it was "in favour of religious sentiment and the revival of religion".⁵³ The article debates the value of the modern churches in comparison to ancient Germanic Paganism. It alludes to the former only being tolerable so long as they do not interfere in the political arena and so long as they do not pose a danger to the moral feelings of the German race. It then sympathises with Germans "who want nothing to do with Christianity primarily because they refuse to subject themselves to the stipulations of those portions of Christian moral law whose dictates are alien to their very nature".⁵⁴ *Das Schwarze Korps* also criticised Pagan worship of antiquity for failing to account for a thousand years of history and being "absolutely incapable of meeting today's religious needs".⁵⁵ The article concludes with the following

⁴⁹ Höhne, *Order of the Death's Head*, 155-157.

⁵⁰ Graber, *SS*, 88-89.

⁵¹ Wildt, 'Reich Security Main Office', 334-335.

⁵² Weingartner, 'Race and Settlement Main Office', 74-75.

⁵³ Document 195 – *Das Schwarze Korps*, "Wie steht es um den 'Deutschen Glauben'?", 23 April 1936, 1-2, in Rabinbach & Gilman, *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, 437-440.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

endorsement for a modernised neo-Pagan religiosity: “Religion is an affair of the spirit and can thus be based only on the spiritual. Our task is merely to see to it that any German who has rejected all Oriental doctrines and is striving to reclaim the inherited ethical legacy of our race from within himself is not thwarted in his efforts”.⁵⁶ *Das Schwarze Korps*’ article strategically occupies the middle-ground, cautious not to overtly offend readers’ spiritual sentiments. Nonetheless, its assertion that the Church should not interfere with secular matters can be construed as a rejection of the main Christian denominations whose German clerics ultimately found themselves persecuted, often ending up imprisoned in the KL. Furthermore, the words of the SS’ weekly publication suggest that the SS were against meddling religious organisations, but that there was an awareness that a light touch was required when discussing spirituality. Whilst the four historians above are not in unison with their views on Himmler’s views on the Church and religion, they do share the correct view that Himmler envisaged an SS wherein the loyalty of the men was not shared between himself and the Church. Accepting that Himmler wanted to secure undivided loyalty, but also sought to act cautiously, a contradiction which harmed his aspirations, it is necessary to consider his success in separating his men from the Church.

There is much evidence to show that the Reichsführer struggled to turn his men away from their religion. For one thing, three-quarters of *Allgemeine-SS* members reportedly maintained at least nominal ties with the Church. Also, by 1936, four-fifths of the prestigious 2,500-man *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* unit, which served as the Führer’s personal bodyguard and evolved into a respected battle division, considered themselves to be Christians. The SS-TV which made up the bulk of the Camp SS, and the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* (SS Dispositional Troops), which would form the core of the *Waffen-SS* were significant outliers with lower religious attachment amongst their men.⁵⁷ One Lutheran clergyman interred in the Sachsenburg camp recalled that he and his fellows were constantly verbally abused by the Camp SS who would say “you hypocrites... you rubbish pastors, you black crows, you lied to the people and cheated them! But we will get you for it!”. He noted that the SS treated the Catholic priests in the camp totally differently, but observed that the *Reichskonkordat*, the Nazi-Papal agreement to protect Catholicism in Germany, as opposed to

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Weingartner, ‘Race and Settlement Main Office’, 73-74. In the 1960s, John Steiner, a camp survivor who disguised his history in the KL, interviewed *SS-Obergruppenführer* Felix Steiner. John Steiner was taken by the former SS officer to join hundreds of SS veterans and their families celebrating a Germanic pagan Yule festival in a beer hall. This appears to show that Himmler’s efforts had some residual success but as this occurred several decades later, it is hard to deduce whether it was in fact merely symbolic neo-Nazi posturing or a commemorative gesture. See *University of Southern California* (USC), Shoah Foundation, Visual History Archive (VHA), Testimony of John Steiner, segment 680, [John Steiner - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](https://www.ushah.org/testimony/John-Steiner) [Accessed 5 April 2023]

religious sympathies, likely explained this.⁵⁸ This account highlights that in some instances the camp guards were convinced of the Church's incompatibility with their own Nazi and SS beliefs. This is plausible, because, as mentioned above, the camp guards were generally less religious than other branches of the SS. However, the abuse of the clergymen may have had more to do with the concentration camp setting and the perpetrators' awareness of their freedom to bully, rather than sincere anti-Christian sentiment. It was not unusual for the camp guards to abuse and, in the later KL, kill prisoners even if they were not members of social groups who were most hated by the SS. Moreover, the SS printed special Christmas brochures which were adorned with festive symbols and filled with lyrics to carols like *Stille Nacht (Silent Night)* and *O du fröhliche (Oh, How Joyful)*.⁵⁹ The necessity for these brochures showed that at ground-level, the wider SS were not in step with Himmler's hope that SS men would turn away from Christian traditions.

Furthermore, during the war when Himmler needed to replenish and expand the SS, Bosnian Muslims comprised a large portion of the SS *Handschar* Division and were permitted to practice their faith freely, with imams active within the unit. This naturally contrasted with Himmler's desire for his men to renounce established religion which could split their loyalties. The 'oriental' nature of Islam, as an Eastern religion, made Himmler's concession on worship a significant one. In the case of these Bosnian Muslims, necessity outweighed idealism because the war restricted Himmler's options. His utilitarian *modus operandi* led him to vocally praise Islam in front of the 13th SS Mountain Division, stressing that "we have the same aims... For 200 years Germany has not had the slightest cause for friction with Islam... the Jew has [also] been your enemy from time immemorial".⁶⁰ Whether Himmler was truly comfortable with the religion of these men at this desperate juncture of the war is up for debate, but it would be hard to suppose that in less difficult circumstances he would have been content with devout followers of an Eastern religion being in his 'elite' SS.

Moreover, Himmler was simply unable to get most of his men to subscribe to Pagan traditions and beliefs which he himself was obsessive about. For an organisation which highly prided itself on adhering to the *Führerprinzip*, with reported complete obedience amongst its ranks, the SS were especially obstinate over religion. Himmler had little reason to doubt that his men would comply with his will, assuming that "obedience is demanded and given in the soldier's life... and the little man always obeys or usually does".⁶¹ Yet the fact that the majority of the organisation rebuffed his

⁵⁸ WL, Testimonies, Anonymous eyewitness account regarding clergymen interned in Sachsenburg concentration camp.

⁵⁹ WL, 1478/1, SS Brochure on Christmas, 1934.

⁶⁰ From BAB, NS 19/2133, Speech to the 13th SS Mountain Division, 11 January 1944, in P. Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 677.

⁶¹ HLS, NTP, PS-1919, Heinrich Himmler at Posen, 4 October 1943.

efforts to separate secular and Church life, in order to dominate the loyalties of his men, showed that the SS fell short of the Reichsführer's expectations. Himmler's plan for supplanting the Church with Germanic Pagan spirituality was a misjudged, unrealistic undertaking which met with a cool reception amongst the SS masses. Weingartner underlines this point most effectively by emphasising that SS weddings and baptisms, conducted with Pagan ceremonies, "seem to have been so infrequent that their occurrence warranted special mention by education leaders to their superiors".⁶² It is apparent that Himmler's overconfidence in the *Führerprinzip* played a role in his failure to grasp that his men would not freely buy into a new way of worshipping. This blind belief that subordinates would dutifully follow the lead of their superiors repeatedly undermined Himmler's leadership.

Religion, whilst a very clear and distinct example, was not the only aspect of SS ideology which was poorly received by the men. There is evidence to support the conclusion that ideological tutoring was considered dull by many of the rank-and-file SS men. Lectures given to serving SS men were meant to play an important role in their indoctrination. Höhne has drawn attention to the seeming impotence of Himmler's written order to leaders of the *Waffen-SS* when he bemoaned the slipping standards of ideological tutoring. During the war Himmler urged his SS officers to train their men "to be more fanatical and convinced standard-bearers of the National-Socialist ideology", threatening that he would "judge capacity to command a unit not only by ability to train it well militarily but also by ability to educate every individual officer, NCO and man to be a convinced, steadfast ideological fighter in every situation".⁶³ The RuSHA, which ensured SS values were maintained, was also in agreement with Himmler on the paramount importance of ideological indoctrination, considering it the most significant part of SS service.⁶⁴ Regardless of this, Himmler was widely ignored. There were some efforts to increase and improve ideological instruction, but the commanders who tried to fulfil Himmler's wishes were often met with disinterest or ridicule. One ideological instructor dejectedly admitted that his "honour as an SS leader and officer had been impugned" since his efforts to tutor the men were "largely disregarded by the divisional staff".⁶⁵ The SS leadership were seemingly out of touch with what could be presented to their men effectively. Distribution of *SS-Leithefte* (SS Guide Volumes) to form a sort of curriculum of ideological instruction did not help to endear the lectures

⁶² Weingartner, 'Race and Settlement Main Office', 76.

⁶³ From USNA, No. T-175, Microfilm of the Files of the Personal Staff of the 'Reichsführer-SS and Chief of the German Police' (RFSS-Microfilm), Microfilm 225, SS Order, 24 February 1943, in Höhne, *Order of the Death's Head*, 480.

⁶⁴ From USNA, T-354/409/4124851, *Bericht über die Schulungslager II bis VII*, 4-22 October 1935, in Weingartner, 'Race and Settlement Main Office', 66.

⁶⁵ From USNA, RFSS-Microfilm, Microfilm 70, Memorandum 'Attitude of Section VI of Div. HQ' from Section VI HQ 13 SS Division, 10 April 1944, in Höhne, *Order of the Death's Head*, 480.

to the majority.⁶⁶ Likewise, by creating guidebooks to teach from, the SS unintentionally removed the element of instructor free will. This limited spontaneity and made lectures even more unattractive, ensuring that SS attendance remained poor.⁶⁷ Moreover, the rigid guidebooks directed teaching toward important themes such as the *völkisch* value of 'Blut und Boden' (Blood and Soil), 'Jews' and 'History of the German People' which were covered in twice-weekly 40-minute sessions.⁶⁸ It is perhaps unsurprising that SS men were poorly motivated to attend 80 minutes of ideological teaching each week when the content included large amounts of philosophy and history covering abstract concepts.

Altogether, Himmler's intention to create an ideological elite, an SS which championed its leader's worldview, firmly failed. The Reichsführer understood well enough, regarding religion at least, that soldiers would have resisted radical and forceful change, but his caution only served to make ideological conversion spasmodic at best. Himmler's personal convictions were generally too unusual for his men to sincerely buy into. Ultimately, the gap between Himmler's ideologies and those of his men, a gap which grew when the SS began to utilise foreign auxiliaries, was unable to be bridged. This meant that through the KL and across European battlefields, men wore SS uniforms without completely buying into the organisation's ethos. This did not cripple the SS' mission to confront the supposed Jewish Question in Europe, but it did go a considerable way to creating differences of opinion amongst the men, hindering Himmler's desire to create an army of unquestioning, homogenous automatons. This final point is important to bear in mind. The SS' lack of consensus on ideological issues meant that there were other crucial factors which convinced the KL perpetrators to carry out the atrocities that occurred in the camps.

Alcohol Abuse in the SS

Both perpetrator and witness testimonies often reference the presence or use of alcohol in events involving the SS, particularly their actions in Nazi-occupied Eastern territories and the camps. Yet, in spite of this, there had been limited scholarly analysis of the impact of alcohol on these occurrences until Edward Westermann considered it in 2016.⁶⁹ Westermann points out Himmler's naivety in believing that the murders his men committed had not damaged them.⁷⁰ At Posen in 1943, in front

⁶⁶ From USNA, T-354/408/4124199-202, *Auszug aus dem Diensttagebuch (SS-Pioniersturm 1/3)*, 1 January-31 March 1936 in Weingartner, 'Race and Settlement Main Office', 72.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶⁸ From USNA, T-354/366/4070484-85, *Richtlinien zur weltanschaulichen Grundschulung der SS*, 17 February 1936, in *Ibid.*, 72-73.

⁶⁹ E.B. Westermann, 'Stone-Cold Killers or Drunk with Murder? Alcohol and Atrocity during the Holocaust', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 30:1 (2016), 1-19, 1. Also see E.B. Westermann, *Drunk on Genocide: Alcohol and Mass Murder in Nazi Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021)

⁷⁰ Westermann, 'Stone-Cold Killers', 14.

of many of his officers, Himmler had proudly boasted that “we can say, that we have fulfilled this most difficult duty for the love of our people. And our spirit, our soul, our character has not suffered injury from it”.⁷¹ Truthfully, the SS showed many signs of mental injury resulting from their involvement in the genocidal policies of their leaders and drinking offered respite to many perpetrators. However, at Posen, Himmler asserted that he had no tolerance of alcohol abuse, saying that “we really need waste no words on the subject of alcohol”.⁷² This was another instance wherein the Reichsführer’s own view was not shared by his subordinates. High-ranking deputies *SS-Obergruppenführer* Reinhard Heydrich and *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Adolf Eichmann reportedly got very drunk and boisterous together at least once, in 1942, despite their senior status.⁷³ There were a great many other senior SS men who did not embrace Himmler’s own outlook on alcohol consumption, which may have contributed to widespread tolerance, by other SS officers, of drunkenness amongst the SS ranks. Nonetheless, Himmler summarised that with the losses of the war “we can’t afford to lose still more men, physically or morally, through addiction to alcohol and self-destruction... crimes committed under the influence of alcohol must be punished twice as severely. Leaders who allow their subordinates to hold drinking parties in their companies will be punished”.⁷⁴ Despite mentioning the subject at Posen, he only covered it briefly with a few lines of a speech which lasted three hours, suggesting he did not feel his SS officer audience required this point to be laboured. Himmler’s distorted view of his organisation gave him a tendency to consider abuses and vices as being committed by the smallest minority within. For the fantasist Reichsführer, the broadest part of the SS was, by definition, too elite to succumb to problems of lesser men.

The abuse of alcohol within the SS surely disproves Himmler’s claim that his men had come through their service, and the difficult challenge he had set them of eliminating the enemies of Nazism, without suffering varying degrees of mental damage. Of course, this would only explain alcohol’s role as a coping method, used to suppress emotions after carrying out the unpleasant jobs the SS were charged with. However, alcohol played a significant role in the facilitating of the SS’ actions as well, enabling the perpetrators to subdue their consciences as they committed cruel acts in the name of National Socialism. It is naturally difficult, without testimony on the subject from each SS man who turned to alcohol, to deduce what each drinker was driven by. Nonetheless, there are some clues to the role played by alcohol, be it post-perpetration anaesthesia or morality-suppressing

⁷¹ HLS, NTP, PS-1919, Heinrich Himmler at Posen, 4 October 1943.

⁷² *Holocaust Research Project* (HRP), Nuremberg Trial Document PS-1919, Speech of Heinrich Himmler at Posen, 4 October 1943, <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/holoprelude/posen.html> [Accessed on 2 June 2023]

⁷³ Westermann, *Drunk on Genocide*, 2.

⁷⁴ HRP, PS-1919, Heinrich Himmler at Posen, 4 October 1943.

catalyst, based upon the proximity of its consumption to SS atrocities. For instance, KL victims who noted the drunkenness of camp guards during their abuse suggests that, in those situations, the alcohol was a factor in the actions themselves, not a tool used for recovery afterwards.

There are countless victim testimonies, and a significant number given by SS men, which showed the centrality of alcohol to SS daily life and the crimes they committed. Alcohol abuse in the KL predated the implementation of the Final Solution in 1942 and led to chaotic scenes in the early camp system. On his prisoner transport to Dachau in 1935, a Nuremberg witness known as Dr Staff recalled that drunken SS guards threatened to shoot prisoners aboard the train, or throw them off, which was taken very seriously by Staff and other victims based on the SS' intoxicated state.⁷⁵ Bruno Heilig, meanwhile, recalled a festive atmosphere amongst the SS on his train to Dachau in 1938, stating that as well as his group's young guard getting drunk on beer, "confused shouting, clinking of glasses, laughter and cries of distress, sounds of blows, bawling of songs, muffled sounds of heavy bodies falling filled the carriage". Another drunk guard targeted one victim in a two-hour assault.⁷⁶ Dachau survivor John Matthew Ellis described another transport arriving in 1938 in which drunken SS guards had started shooting carelessly, killing their own *SS-Hauptsturmführer* in the process. Ellis does not reveal whether there was punishment, but his assertion that the SS guards were satisfied by this death suggests that the culprits avoided any reprisals.⁷⁷ The consistency in SS indiscipline on these transports served to terrorise the victims on board but equally served to exacerbate the guards' determination to act wantonly in uniform.

Later, at Buchenwald during the war, an anonymous victim testimony identified an *SS-Hauptscharführer* known only by the surname "Hinkelmann" as "constantly [running] around drunk". Hinkelmann was reportedly responsible for the deaths of many hundreds of prisoners in the camp quarry and goaded prisoners who were carrying heavy stones for his own amusement. The account added that "although he was almost always in a drunken state, he was a positive genius at inventing forms of torture".⁷⁸ Survivor, Eugen Kogon, noted that the Camp SS had a habit of bothering prisoners at night-time when they were drunk, bursting into the camp, conducting raids, and abusing arbitrarily.⁷⁹ Through the war, prisoners in most KLs had to live in fear of SS attacks upon their living quarters through the night. During the war such attacks were carried out with great confidence by

⁷⁵ WL, 1655/2588, Statement by Dr Staff, witness at Nuremberg, on the treatment of Jews by the SS on their way to Dachau.

⁷⁶ Heilig, *Men Crucified*, 10-12.

⁷⁷ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account by John Matthew Ellis, arrested in Vienna in 1938, of Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps, 5.

⁷⁸ Document 45 – Unsigned testimony, "The Stone Quarry", in Hackett, *Buchenwald Report*, 185.

⁷⁹ Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 79-80.

the SS, often due to the involvement of camp officers. Chapter Five examines such wartime attacks in greater detail. It is helpful to emphasise here, alas, that the noticeable trend was that, whilst pre-war drunken abuse had the potential to be deadly, during the war alcoholism led to more vicious attacks. Admittedly, this owed a lot to the intended escalation of industrial murder in the wartime camps as well as to the worsening SS conduct with alcohol.

Boredom also played a significant role in the consumption of alcohol, often leading to poor behaviour. The SS, especially within the camps, had free time after their shifts ended and alcohol to ply themselves with. In the *SS-Führerheim* (SS officer's club) at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Emilia Żelazny, a young Polish servant remembered one instance wherein some officers behaved wildly after drinking:

I well remember the night-time din and the squeals of the drunken gang driving there in their cars. The blackout was then in force, so I could not recognise any of them. The little chapel that stood in the middle of four old linden trees in the Timmels' garden became a target for the drunken SS men. They kept shooting at it until they completely destroyed it.⁸⁰

This behaviour would have been especially reprehensible to senior SS leaders because the officers' drunkenness both set a poor example for the Auschwitz guards and threatened the integrity of the blackout regulations in place by shooting and driving at night-time for leisure. Himmler said of a similar situation involving drunken gunfire: "I am repeatedly being informed that a member of the SS or the police has felt the need to use his firearm in a completely inappropriate and irresponsible manner. Usually this happens in the company of others and under the influence of alcohol and indeed particularly in the Eastern territories". He then described this as irresponsible, un-German and an imitation of Slavic behaviour.⁸¹ Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss admitted in his memoirs that he often turned to alcohol to "put [him] into a happy mood" at the camp. Despite this, he claimed that he would not allow himself to be derelict in his duty, nor be affected by alcohol the next morning. He added that "I also expected my officers to behave the same way at all times because there is nothing more demoralising for subordinates than when the superior is not there at the start of work because he got drunk the night before. My attitude about this was not very popular".⁸² If Höss' zero tolerance of disruptive alcohol use amongst his officers made him unpopular, it is reasonable to suppose that numerous officers felt strongly about being able to drink as they pleased. His own awareness of his unpopularity on this topic suggests that he knew that the

⁸⁰ Testimony of Emilia Żelazny, from *Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (APMA-B)*, Statements Collection, vol. 82, 144-147, in P. Setkiewicz (ed.), *The Private Lives of the Auschwitz SS* (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2014), 37.

⁸¹ From BAB, NS 19/3939, RFSS instruction, 24 October 1942, in Longerich, *Himmler*, 322-323.

⁸² S. Paskuly (ed.), *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 124.

issue with alcohol abuse was serious as well. Želazny's example of alcoholic misbehaviour at the Auschwitz officer's club and other instances wherein the Auschwitz SS drank irresponsibly were thus likely known to Höss.

Himmler was either unwilling, or unable, to act to prevent his SS men from behaving badly, and dangerously, when drunk. One situation which underlines Himmler's apparent distance from reality, regarding alcohol at least, can be seen in his decision to accept *SS-Obergruppenführer* Friedrich Jeckeln's defence when the latter was accused of drink driving in 1939. Following the accusations, Himmler showed genuine concern, writing questions to Jeckeln which read: "How much alcohol had you drunk that day?... Were you in breach of the rules of the road?". Jeckeln told the *Reichsführer* that he had consumed "4-5 glasses of Moselle wine, 3 or at most 4 glasses of schnapps... [possibly] 3 glasses of beer on top". Himmler, apparently contented, took the matter no further.⁸³ That Himmler did not punish the consumption of over ten alcoholic drinks prior to driving may help to see why alcohol consumption got out of hand within the SS. Another instance evidencing Himmler's unwillingness to act can be seen in his handling of *SS-Brigadeführer* Matthias Kleinheisterkamp in 1942. Kleinheisterkamp's drunken behaviour had become a significant problem for the *Reichsführer* and, in a letter dated 9 October, he told the commander that "the only reason I refrain from your dismissal is because of the impression the transfer would make on the *Wehrmacht*, because then I would have to state openly why I am transferring you".⁸⁴ Himmler chose to retain a senior officer whose problematic alcohol abuse had caused him much anxiety, rather than risking his own embarrassment in front of the *Wehrmacht*. These examples of Himmler's failure to handle poor conduct involved senior officers which may have convinced him to avoid severe punishments. Yet, it was precisely this failure to deal with his officers, the example-setters in his 'elite', that undermined his efforts to keep his organisation tidy. Moreover, Himmler's superiority complex prompted him to cover up SS vices instead of weeding them out. This hubris alone prevented the SS from improving the quality and conduct of its men.

Whilst it is reasonable to suppose that it was the fault of the many SS men that they both facilitated and coped with their actions because of alcohol use, blame must be attributed to the SS leadership as well. After all, the leadership went to some effort to ensure that alcohol was available for the men to enjoy. Despite his own intolerance of drink, Himmler saw alcohol's role in building SS comradeship through an idealised lens. He did not want beer to be abused but felt that it was

⁸³ From BAB, Berlin Document Centre, *SS-Obergruppenführer* Friedrich Jeckeln, Himmler to Jeckeln, 26 July 1939; Jeckeln's reply of 28 July 1939; report of *NSKK-Oberscharführer* Heinz Hussmann of 26 June 1939, in Longerich, *Himmler*, 321.

⁸⁴ Letter from Heinrich Himmler to *SS-Brigadeführer* Matthias Kleinheisterkamp, 9 October 1942 in H. Heiber (ed.), *Reichsführer! Briefe an und von Himmler* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1968), 156-157.

beneficial to his men if it was distributed responsibly, and thus alcohol rations made their way around the SS regiments, including to the men in the East carrying out the most intense SS crimes.⁸⁵ On 5 September 1942 at Auschwitz, SS Dr Johann Kremer noted men clamoured to take part in a *Sonderaktion* (special operation) liquidating selected prisoners because they were offered one-fifth of a litre of Schnapps to each volunteer.⁸⁶ Himmler even backtracked on threats he made to limit alcohol consumption as the war raged on. Alcohol consumption was, according to Himmler, “justified, naturally within the bounds of moderation, and occasionally even to be recommended on health grounds... alcohol bans already imposed and/or those still to be imposed [were] to be set aside during service at the front”.⁸⁷ The SS leader, generally unwilling to drink if he could avoid it, was out of touch with how to manage alcohol consumption.

Kogon shows how Himmler’s intended comradeship boosting really unfolded. In pre-war Buchenwald, the SS officers indulged in monthly eating and drinking sprees, which “invariably ended in wild orgies”. Each table was flanked by six-to-eight wineglasses, with moderation at the back of the revellers’ minds. Even during the war these occurrences continued as the required alcohol was procured by men such as *SS-Hauptscharführer* Rieger, who, in his capacity as leader of the SS motor pool, could bring alcohol in from France and the Netherlands.⁸⁸ It is likely that the widely feared drunken nocturnal SS prowls around Buchenwald were encouraged by the camp’s officers’ own disregard for maintaining the supposed high standards of SS behaviour. In this case, the supposed comradeship boosting served only to strengthen the negative camaraderie described by Hans Buchheim wherein SS men encouraged each other’s excesses. Furthermore, Himmler’s intended use for alcohol was also shown to be interpreted arbitrarily by some SS medical professionals. One SS doctor at Buchenwald prescribed alcohol to three guards after they experienced distress at unloading corpses from a transport.⁸⁹ Whilst not overtly breaking rules, this was an unhealthy and dangerous path to set these guards on. It is also unclear whether the doctor in question acted spontaneously or was aware of Himmler’s earlier admittance that alcohol could be beneficial to health. The latter certainly provided justification for his actions, and, once again, shows Himmler’s unrealistic expectations of his organisation’s responsibility with alcohol.

⁸⁵ Westermann, ‘Stone-Cold Killers’, 4.

⁸⁶ Diary entries of SS doctor Johann Kremer in E. Klee, W. Dressen & V. Riess (eds.), *“The Good Old Days”: The Holocaust Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 259.

⁸⁷ From BAB, NS7/245, Communication of SS judge on RFSS staff to the Main Office of the SS Court, 18 August 1942, in Longerich, *Himmler*, 323-324.

⁸⁸ Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 118.

⁸⁹ From a fascimile of a document dated 27 January 1945, issued by *Standortarzt der Waffen-SS* in Weimar, in Komitee der Antifaschistischen Widerstandskämpfer in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, ed., *SS im Einsatz: Eine Dokumentation über die Verbrechen der SS* (Berlin [East]: Kongress-Verlag, 1958), 186, in Westermann, ‘Stone-Cold Killers’, 4.

In summary, heavy reliance upon drink was endemic in the SS. In the early KL, dangerous drinking, whilst undesirable, was not as uncontrolled and nor was the resulting prisoner abuse generally as vicious as in the later years. This changed as the purpose of the camps evolved and they began to exterminate enemies of the regime; alcohol abuse was increasingly destructive during the years of genocide, covered chiefly in Chapter Five and Chapter Six. This creates a narrative wherein the SS' alcohol abuse tended to worsen as time went on, supporting the idea that, to a significant degree, it was a result of the environment the SS were in. Undoubtedly, being charged with responsibility for carrying out the Final Solution was emotionally taxing for the SS and none of Himmler's bravado could change the fundamental human nature of his killers. Himmler failed to check the alcohol abuse, opting to avoid the issue by and large, facilitating the vast amount of suffering and death that it caused. Organised groups of SS perpetrators, such as 'Commando 99' at Buchenwald, discussed in Chapter Four for their influence upon the radicalising behaviours of guards in the early war KL, benefitted from slack control over SS alcohol misuse. In short, the prevalence of alcoholism, or, at least, of chaotic binges, played a massive role in undermining the SS' claim to an elite status.

SS Abuse of Power

The SS, despite its reputation amongst German contemporaries, was severely crippled by its members abusing their positions of power through various behaviours. One especially problematic SS abuse was sadism which, particularly in the KL, worsened the treatment of the Third Reich's victims. Predictably, the misuse of alcohol in the SS frequently contributed to sadistic attacks on KL prisoners which helps to show how the SS' numerous shortcomings interlinked to further lower their reliability. Nonetheless, excessive violence that was neither ordered nor served a punitive purpose was not officially endorsed by the SS leadership. An order issued by Himmler from August 1935 stated that "any independent, individual action against the Jews by any member of the SS is most strictly forbidden".⁹⁰ This clear rejection of spontaneous action against Jews was supported by another significant statement from Himmler's previously quoted 1943 speech at Posen which suggests such sadism was not a vice that plagued the SS. When referring to the treatment of Germany's racial enemies, he confidently asserted that "we shall never be rough and heartless when it is not necessary, that is clear. We Germans, who are the only people in the world who have a decent attitude towards animals, will also assume a decent attitude towards these human animals".⁹¹ It is clear from his speech's acknowledgement of the Final Solution that he was not denying the killing of the Jews with this statement, he was stating that the SS remained humane and

⁹⁰ H. Krausnick, H. Buchheim, M. Broszat & H.A. Jacobsen, *The Anatomy of the SS State* (London: Collins, 1968), 351.

⁹¹ HLS, NTP, PS-1919, Heinrich Himmler at Posen, 4 October 1943.

lacked malice in their conduct. When pressed in 1942 on what action should be taken against SS men who carried out unauthorised shootings, Himmler told the SS Legal Department that “if the motive is selfish, sadistic or sexual, judicial punishment should be imposed for murder or manslaughter as the case may be”.⁹² In June 1943, an *SS-Untersturmführer* was condemned to death for his bestial treatment of Jews, which underlines the fact that Himmler’s distaste for unlicensed excesses was somewhat genuine.⁹³

Whether Himmler was posturing for his audience at Posen or was genuinely unaware of the extent of SS sadism, the truth was that intense, arbitrary SS violence was pervasive in the camp system. SS guards frequently played spiteful, deadly ‘games’ with prisoners, exemplifying the cruelty in the KL. A “favourite hoax”, in the words of survivor Ellis, which appears in survivor testimonies with great frequency, was for the SS to send a prisoner close to the barbed wire, knowing that this would prompt the guard towers to shoot them.⁹⁴ The popularity of this malicious trick was increased by the plausible deniability associated with it. After all, the SS guards could hardly be incriminated by the dead victim, nor by the imprisoned witnesses who feared reprisals. Albeit an unlikely scenario, if senior SS took an interest in these prisoners’ deaths, they would have little to go on apart from the victims’ apparent decision to end their suffering by walking into the wire. As such, this pastime promised consequence-free murder for the guards. The act of chasing prisoners to the barbed wire to protect themselves whilst sating their urge to kill exemplified the murderous intelligence that the Camp SS displayed regularly. Many of the guards’ sadistic actions were adapted to provide the perpetrators alibis and justifications which prevented their own punishment whilst granting them freedom to abuse. The SS leadership’s failure to limit this served only to further empower the ground-level KL killers.

Dr Staff, mentioned earlier, recalled from his time in Dachau, that some of the SS there found many cruel pursuits to satisfy their urges. The men he referred to suspended Catholics and Jehovah’s Witnesses from trees in the midday sun for practicing their beliefs, showing that Himmler’s anti-Church sentiments sometimes hit their mark. The guards forced other prisoners, meanwhile, to roll in stinging nettles for their amusement.⁹⁵ Staff also mentioned an especially sadistic exercise, a “favourite game”, wherein the SS forced a prisoner to ingest large doses of castor oil. They would then “chase them through the camp for hours while they were suffering from the effects of that condition. In the end they were usually thrown into the camp pond”.⁹⁶ Karl Röder, also at Dachau,

⁹² From Buchheim, Broszat, Krausnick & Jacobsen, *Anatomy of the SS State*, 363.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 351-352.

⁹⁴ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account by John Matthew Ellis, 6.

⁹⁵ WL, 1655/2588, Statement by Dr Staff.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*.

remembered seeing the castor oil torment and referred to it as part of the SS' "mass sport" which also included forced frog jumping, somersaulting for miles, and singing while jogging. Röder noted that for the SS, these events were a "real folk festival which caused them to laugh out loud". During the photographing of newcomers, the SS rigged the prisoners' chair to push a spike upwards into the prisoner's behind when a lever was pulled, prompting roars of laughter from the guards. Röder noted that the SS never missed the display and watched repeatedly even when the victim had experienced the vicious prank previously and was no longer surprised.⁹⁷ Whilst it is nigh impossible for people outside of the SS and Nazi Germany to see humour in these savage 'games', the perpetrators evidently derived sincere amusement. Jews were attractive targets for this abuse, and one must draw links between Nazi portrayals of Jews and the SS' enjoyment of tormenting them. Much Nazi propaganda showed Jews to be awkward, ugly, and corpulent beings, who were uncomfortable with work. Though this imagery was designed to disgust, it could provoke mocking humour, especially when the SS guards abused Jews in the camps. Whilst this only helps to explain the SS enjoyment of 'games' played with Jewish victims; it would be reasonable to suppose that enjoyment could be found with vilified Nazi enemies as well. The interconnection between SS sadism and SS entertainment should not be understated when considering why the guards went against Himmler's intentions for their conduct. Moreover, the subject of the SS' sadistic humour and its increasing lethality in the war is considered more deeply in Chapter Five.

The sadism of the SS outside of the camps sometimes manifested itself differently to that which existed in the KL, due to the different settings and triggers in play to those that were present within the camps. As such, Richard Rhodes has explored the contradiction between Himmler's view and the reality of SS sadism, focusing on the SS in the field instead of those in the camp. He points to the example of *SS-Obersturmbannführer Zeezen*, an *Einsatzgruppen* ('Deployment Groups', used for extermination in the East) commander who boasted of his unit's particular efficiency in killing Jews and, who, on one occasion when they ran out of ammunition, started throwing Jews down a well instead.⁹⁸ Another example where the SS were clearly falling beneath Himmler's expectations and enjoying their role in the Holocaust is shown in a letter from cavalryman *SS-Oberreiter Emmerich Menzner* in 1942. Bemoaning that he did not get to take part in the shooting of a "whole mass of Polacks" he wrote that he "missed a big deal yesterday".⁹⁹ There was overlap between the *Waffen-SS*' style of sadistic abuse with that of the Camp SS. For instance, David Wajapel, a witness to Nazi

⁹⁷ K. Röder, *Nachtwache: 10 Jahre KZ Dachau und Flossenbürg* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1985), 333-334.

⁹⁸ R. Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 166.

⁹⁹ WL, 703/2, Transcript from *SS-Oberreiter Emmerich* regarding his expression of regret at missing out on raids of three Polish villages.

war crimes in Poland, recalled that when the SS came to his hometown of Radom and set up a headquarters, people were arbitrarily dragged through the gates for the “staging of sadistic games”. Wajapel stated that all ranks, not just those at the bottom, took part in these occurrences.¹⁰⁰ Seemingly, the deriving of humour from torturous, and often deadly, games was not exclusively a KL phenomenon and they were enjoyable activities for the perpetrators in the field. Much like in the camps, the officers showed a willingness to participate in abuse, showing that the failure of Himmler’s leadership caste did not stop at the KL.

Himmler was also adamant that his men must not profit from their service in the SS beyond the financial benefits of their salaries. In his infamous Posen speech, Himmler announced that “we have not the right to enrich ourselves with so much as a fur, a watch, a mark, or a cigarette or anything else. Because we have exterminated a bacterium we do not want, in the end, to be infected by the bacterium and die of it”.¹⁰¹ Fundamentally, Himmler feared supposed Jewish tendencies manifesting themselves amongst his men. Akin to the issue of alcohol abuse, Himmler alluded to his awareness of some isolated breaches of his rules, stating that “a number of SS men — there are not very many of them — have fallen short, and they will die, without mercy”.¹⁰² However, the truth would have caused considerable upset for the Reichsführer, as the extent of SS theft was far greater than he could have imagined. Moreover, despite Himmler’s threats of draconian punishments, Westermann argues that efforts to stem corruption proved illusory.¹⁰³ Thus, as with the problem of alcohol misuse, Himmler was again blind to the severity of the issue and failed to handle it.

Piotr Setkiewicz has compiled together the revealing testimonies of many Polish men and women who served in the households of the Auschwitz SS. The value of these testimonies, mostly those of servant girls, is found in the fact that the authors’ opinions were not as emotionally charged as those of camp victims, and they had largely unrestricted access to SS households. To this end, they tend to be more neutral than many prisoner and SS testimonies.¹⁰⁴ Focusing upon the home lives of the SS at Auschwitz, this collection of accounts reveals that a significant proportion of the guards had valuables and other goods that they had smuggled out of the camp. It is helpful to list a few of these examples here to illustrate the point. *SS-Obersturmführer* Dr Wilhelm Frank’s house, for example, was largely furnished from objects made by people confined within the camp.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, *SS-Unterscharführer* Werner Rohde, had a gun cabinet made by Auschwitz’ imprisoned

¹⁰⁰ WL, 1655/3236, Affidavit by David Wajapel, on deportation, ill-treatment, and extermination by the SS.

¹⁰¹ HLS, NTP, PS-1919, Heinrich Himmler at Posen, 4 October 1943.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Westermann, ‘Stone-Cold Killers’, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Setkiewicz, *The Private Lives of the Auschwitz SS*, 8-9.

¹⁰⁵ Testimony of Alfreda Babiuch, from APMA-B, Statements Collection, Vol. 82, 150-154, in *ibid.*, 18-19.

woodworkers.¹⁰⁶ Proudly displayed in open view within his home, *SS-Unterscharführer* Rudolf Wöntz had a chest measuring 30 x 15 x 10-centimetres-filled with jewellery which was clearly amassed from the camp.¹⁰⁷ Also planning to sell goods for profit after the war, *SS-Sturmbannführer* Karl Bischoff left Auschwitz with two chests of stolen valuables.¹⁰⁸ Wöntz and Bischoff likely utilised one, or both, of two main methods for illegally hoarding riches that were officially Reich property at Auschwitz. They could have directly stolen items from *Kanada* (Canada, named thus by the prisoners reportedly due to its relative safety), the property sorting area of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Alternatively, they may have bartered for jewels with prisoners who had hidden them for the purpose of trading for food. Both methods, as well as other less common profitable activities, were detestable to Himmler and other senior officials. One example of an unusual effort at profiting from camp service was seen at Buchenwald where a photograph destabilised the camp's punishment system. One SS man took advantage of a hanged escapee, photographing him, and selling the photograph outside of the camp. This prompted an unsuccessful camp-wide search and a change in policy wherein hanged prisoners were swiftly taken down by the SS and no longer displayed as a deterrent.¹⁰⁹ Buchenwald's leadership had clearly grown uneasy and paranoid, in fear of drawing the ire of Himmler for leaks to the outside world, due to a single SS guard looking to profit from a photograph.

The flouting of the rules was not restricted to the lower ranks, prominent SS men were equally guilty of ignoring instructions from the top as well. In Buchenwald, commandant Karl Koch reportedly allowed his wife Ilse to bathe in Madeira wine which was said to have generated animosity from his men. When several truckloads of lemons came to the camp intended for Buchenwald's SS guards, Koch kept most of them, prompting the spreading of rumours around the camp that his wife was being massaged with lemon juice. This was untrue but showed that Koch's greedy appropriation of items intended for the entire SS garrison of the camp had caused demoralisation.¹¹⁰ Koch's officers emulated their superior's selfishness. Whilst the rank-and-file had to content themselves with sharing a bottle of wine between six, the commissioned men had no shortage of champagne.¹¹¹ This is not to say that the guards were left out of the self-enriching ethos of Koch's Buchenwald; they were known to make vast sums of cash by selling cigarettes to prisoners. Koch's administration had thus effectively institutionalised corruption amongst the Buchenwald SS. Whilst at Dachau, one prisoner informer called Ziffer had been praised and protected by the deputy commandant for

¹⁰⁶ Testimony of Prakseda Witek, from APMA-B, Statements Collection, Vol. 82, 167-171, in *ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰⁸ Testimony of Maria Pawela, from APMA-B, Statements Collection, Vol. 82, 163-166, in *ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰⁹ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account by John Matthew Ellis, 11.

¹¹⁰ Document 7 – Franz Eichhorn, "Barber to the Commandant", in Hackett, *Buchenwald Report*, 122.

¹¹¹ Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 117-118.

denouncing corrupt individuals but when he was transferred to Buchenwald and incriminated corrupt SS guards, he was beaten to death.¹¹² SS investigator, Georg Konrad Morgen, brought an indictment against Koch in 1944, containing accusations of corruption from as far back as *Kristallnacht* in 1938. Morgen accused Koch of collecting incoming prisoners' valuables purposefully incorrectly: "The Jews were allowed to pass large tables. There they had to throw their valuables into open boxes that had been set up. The effects were not recorded. In this way, money and valuables that could no longer be estimated flowed to the effects room, and nothing is known about their whereabouts".¹¹³ Morgen also accused Koch of being "very fond of working with fines", and of intimidating prisoners with the threat of physical punishment prompting prisoners to volunteer larger sums as a deterrent.

Koch was able to capitalise on various situations including one which Morgen recorded: "When a wolf died and a bear ran into the electric wire, it was declared that malicious prisoners had killed the animals. To avert the worst, thousands of Reichsmarks are said to have been collected on this occasion alone".¹¹⁴ This was corroborated by camp survivors. According to one, deputy commandant Arthur Rödl assembled prisoners to reprimand them for snowballing his wolf to death, saying "you'll have to pay... I've got to have another one". 7,000 marks were reportedly collected from the prisoners.¹¹⁵ Another inmate added that the camp leadership used Hermann Göring's name to drive the collection as the wolf was gifted by the Reichstag president. Despite the success of the ruse, no replacement wolf was purchased with the vast fines.¹¹⁶ Both accounts reveal that the true cause of death was entirely down to SS mishandling of the animal. Koch's financial corruption went further, according to Morgen's indictment, as "on various occasions wealthy prisoners who were only in the concentration camp for a short time offered well-known donations for their release". His shrewdness prompted Morgen to add: "How large the total amount collected in this fraudulent way

¹¹² Wallner, *By Order of the Gestapo*, 199-202 and 263.

¹¹³ HLS, NTP, NO-2366, Georg Konrad Morgen brief against Koch and Dr. Hoven for corrupt practices at Buchenwald, 11 April 1944, 27-28, present author's trans., [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Brief against Koch and Dr. Hoven for corrupt practices at Buchenwald \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed on 2 June 2023]

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30. Note that inmate Gustav Herzog claims the bear escaped and was shot by deputy commandant Arthur Rödl who posed for a picture next to the animal but still demanded huge payments from the prisoners. Herzog also mentions the demise of the wolf. Document 12 – Gustav Herzog, "Excuses for Collecting Money" in Hackett, *Buchenwald Report*, 129.

¹¹⁵ Heilig, *Men Crucified*, 248. Also see 248-249 for further examples of SS authorities extorting the prisoners for sums of money. A survivor writing under the pseudonym Peter Wallner also remarked that the SS pressured the prisoners to pay larger and larger sums to cover the cost of a new wolf, observing that one barracks' donations alone would have been sufficient, but they ordered around 35 barracks to contribute. Wallner, *By Order of the Gestapo*, 202.

¹¹⁶ Kautsky, *Devils and the Damned*, 73. Further examples of SS efforts to steal money from prisoners on 74. Appendix 10, a statement on corruption at Buchenwald under Koch by Carl Gärtig offers further information, 307-309.

is cannot be determined, since the documents are almost completely missing. But the sums must have been huge".¹¹⁷ Koch's corruption, exposed by the SS investigator, led to his execution by the SS at Buchenwald, just a week before the camp's liberation in April 1945.

Whilst Koch's corrupt behaviours became too egregious to keep hidden, other senior SS men were able to break the rules in a more covert manner. Numerous Auschwitz survivors claim to have witnessed corrupt activities in the commandant's villa during Höss' posting at the camp. Prisoner Stanisław Dubiel worked as a gardener at the villa and claimed that Höss' wife, Hedwig, ordered him to "organise" (KL slang for taking or stealing) food for receptions for significant guests including Oswald Pohl who, from early 1942, was the most senior figure in the camp system. Dubiel added that Frau Höss "did not give me either the money or the ration cards normally needed to purchase food articles".¹¹⁸ It is highly doubtful that Höss' wife would use the term "organise" as it was an element of the prisoner vocabulary across the KL, but Dubiel's account insinuates that her intentions for him to source free food for her were clear. Dubiel brought Frau Höss numerous foodstuffs that she would have struggled to acquire through the legal channels, including three 85-kilogram bags of sugar in one year alone. She told Dubiel that "no SS man should know about these deals".¹¹⁹ Dubiel ensured that the Höss family received five litres of milk per day, despite their ration cards allowing just over one-fifth of this amount. The Höss' organiser highlighted the hypocrisy of this charade, saying that "it is significant that Höss issued orders prohibiting such work. For his own household, he did not obey this order".¹²⁰ Dubiel noted that the Höss family's rule-breaking was not restricted to consumables and that the commandant saw to the release of a prisoner named Erich Grönke, who he appointed director of the nearby tannery. Grönke's gratitude was shown in the daily delivery of leather goods to the Höss villa. Dubiel speculated that, due to Grönke's involvement in handling jewellery from deceased gas chamber victims, his deliveries to the Höss villa may have concealed more valuable assets.¹²¹ A Polish artist, Mieczysław Koscielniak, revealed in a 1983 interview with Steven Paskuly that as a prisoner in Auschwitz he was called to the Höss house to sort and select the best art works that commandant Höss had taken during the camp's expansion.¹²² This gives some credence to Dubiel's speculation as Höss showed a willingness to steal other types of valuable Reich property. It is difficult to say why Höss slipped through the cracks whilst Koch was apprehended but the latter's personal involvement in unsanctioned murders may have drawn attention to his

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 31.

¹¹⁸ Testimony of Stanisław Dubiel, from APMA-B, Höss Trial Collection, vol. 4, 45-52, in Setkiewicz, *The Private Lives of the Auschwitz SS*, 119.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 121.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 121-123.

¹²¹ Ibid., 125.

¹²² Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 164.

profiteering. Regardless, both men were commandants of major KL and neither showed much regard for Himmler's insistence that the SS must not enrich itself at the expense of the Reich.

Höss would also have been considered to have abused the power of his senior position due to his own failure to resist his carnal urges. Relations with prisoners were forbidden, and relations with Jews were particularly unforgivable. *SS-Hauptscharführer* Gerhard Palitzsch, one of the men at Auschwitz from its inception in 1940, was found guilty of having sexual relations with a female Jewish prisoner and arrested.¹²³ Following his arrest, the disgraced Palitzsch was sent to the Russian front where he was killed in action. Höss himself carried out an affair with an inmate, albeit a non-Jewish political prisoner named Eleonore Hodys, in 1942, which led to an embarrassing pregnancy and abortion scandal for the commandant.¹²⁴ Höss' punishment for his own transgression was perhaps softened due to Hodys' political, rather than Jewish, prisoner status. A mere shuffling of the SS deck saw him moved from Auschwitz to the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps. Höss' affair again highlights that even those who were most responsible for seeing SS ideology put into practice, were prone to failing dismally. Despite this, Höss still found time to criticise Palitzsch' "filthy deeds" of drinking heavily and becoming involved with the Latvian Jewess which spelled the end of his Auschwitz career.¹²⁵ It is not clear what prompted Höss to bemoan Palitzsch' failures in spite of the fact that he had done similar. It may be that because the latter's crime involved a Jew, Höss' antisemitism prompted him to view Palitzsch' "filthy" actions as incomparable to his own misdemeanours. However, as seen with Höss' hoarding of food and accumulation of valuable items, it seems equally plausible that Höss felt the SS rules were somewhat flexible when he was involved, leading to a relative indifference about his own romantic indiscretions.

Palitzsch and Höss were not alone in their guilt of sexual exploitation at Auschwitz; Max Eisen recalled that during his time working in a camp infirmary that SS non-commissioned officers would sometimes bring pregnant inmates from Birkenau for abortions masked as appendectomies.¹²⁶ Yet, sexual crimes were not solely perpetrated by males. Some of the SS' female helpers were guilty of similar offences. One of the most notable of these was Irma Grese whose brutal sexual assaults of prisoners led to her hanging at the age of 22 after the war. However, their pseudo-SS status makes it difficult to tie their failures to inherent flaws of the SS. Meanwhile, the *Einsatzgruppen*, tasked with extermination in the East behind the front, were fully-fledged SS members. Far away from the eyes

¹²³ Ibid., Profiles of the SS: Palitzsch, 310-311.

¹²⁴ H. Pauer-Studer & J.D. Velleman, *Konrad Morgen: The Conscience of a Nazi Judge* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 112-113.

¹²⁵ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, Profiles of the SS: Palitzsch, 310.

¹²⁶ USC, Shoah Foundation, VHA, Testimony of Max Eisen, segment 140, [Max Eisen - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](https://www.usc.edu/shoah/vha/testimony-of-max-eisen) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

of Himmler, many men within these units took Jewish women as sexual slaves and acted with far less discretion than either Höss or Palitzsch had tried to.¹²⁷ To underline the extent to which the SS' sexual deviancy became either known, or speculated about, it is useful to consider comments made by those external to the organisation. A captured German *Leutnant* named Priebe, whose conversations have been compiled, along with those of many other POWs in Allied captivity, by Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, showed his own distaste for SS methods. Whilst bemoaning the nature of SS house searches in their hunt for Jews, Priebe cursed "the damnable fact that the SS, in their uncontrolled sexual activities, didn't even stop at Jews".¹²⁸ The development of a reputation for activities such as this would have caused Himmler huge annoyance if he were to have become aware of it. The above-mentioned case of Matthias Kleinheisterkamp showed the lengths to which Himmler would go to prevent gifting ammunition to SS detractors. That a German army officer in Allied captivity was accurately critiquing the SS' sexual vices shows that they were not successfully kept secret, allowing the SS name to be besmirched. The above shows that both senior SS and members of the lower ranks were prone to sexual indiscretions. These crimes would have been less significant had they not targeted Jews and other KL prisoners. For a supposedly elite organisation whose pride came, at least in part, from its members' reported ethnic cleanliness, sexual mixing with undesirable elements was incredibly harmful.

This section has interacted with just a small sample of instances of SS abuses of power but has adequately shown the varied nature of the problem. Himmler had a rose-tinted outlook on the men who served him which was demonstrated by his speech at Posen in 1943. It is difficult to determine whether Himmler was much more aware of the flaws of SS members than he chose to let on, or if, in fact, he was remarkably unperceptive for a man of his rank. The latter seems more convincing based upon the knowledge that the Reichsführer desperately wanted neither moral nor financial corruption to sully the reputation of his ranks. His handling of Kleinheisterkamp showed his fears of embarrassment, making the theory that he was content for problems to endure silently and undisturbed particularly convincing. Because of the lack of determined anti-abuse initiatives from the senior SS, likely partially attributable to high-ranking SS complicity in many of the problematic vices, rulebreakers were seldom harassed. The impact of this upon the KL was that the camps were riddled with sadistic abuses and clandestine deals of contrabands items. Furthermore, the failure to quell power abuse within the SS showed that the organisation was remarkably mediocre with severe flaws that often rendered its men unreliable.

¹²⁷ Westermann, 'Stone-Cold Killers', 12-13.

¹²⁸ From *The National Archives*, London, WO 208/4130, Special Report Air Force 4604, 27 October 1943, in S. Neitzel & H. Welzer, *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing and Dying* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 122.

Conclusion

Overall, the thesis of this chapter is that the SS was a severely flawed institution. The research has shown that this was true for numerous sections of the SS, most notably the Camp SS and the *Waffen-SS*, both of which played central roles in the Holocaust. To this end, the organisation cannot be considered to have been an elite. The reasons for this were far broader than this brief chapter could cover comprehensively. Nonetheless, the discussion has shown that policy failures and uncontrolled vices existed throughout the SS hierarchy. In other words, the lower ranks were only part of the problem and their superiors, who should have rectified the problems beneath them, set disastrous examples for their men. Despite Himmler's wishful thinking about the high quality of his SS empire, his failures were devastating. Refusing to acknowledge the severity of the issues amongst his men and being unable, or unwilling, to radically overhaul the system to improve discipline, Himmler entrenched the extensive problems of the SS. He was thus significantly to blame for the KL's gradual decline into worsening conditions. With the conclusions of this chapter established, moving forward the failures, excesses, and other contradictory behaviours of the Camp SS are more understandable. The KL was not staffed by perfect Nazis nor by those who selflessly followed the will of their leaders. The SS insignia did not guarantee the discipline of its wearer, and it is important to acknowledge that due to their unextraordinary status, the actions of Himmler's troops were both unpredictable and extremely variable. Ultimately, Himmler's dream for the legacy of the 'elite' SS could never be realised based upon its numerous shortcomings. This study's next step is to trace the development of the concentration camps and the behaviours of KL guards from Chapter Three through to Chapter Six. Following on from this chapter will be an important examination of the KL's early years from 1933 to 1939.

**Chapter Three – “Tolerance Means Weakness” – The ‘Dachau School’ and Theodor Eicke’s
Development of the Pre-War KL System’**

Introduction

The previous chapter assessed the reputation of the SS in depth and concluded that, by and large, the SS was a deeply flawed and divided organisation. Despite this, the KL largely served its purpose to contain and subdue undesirable elements for over a decade. A great deal of the KL’s operational success, and the effective development of many of its SS guards, can be traced to the early camps, particularly Dachau outside Munich. The aim of this chapter is thus to examine the importance of the early Dachau camp, across the pre-war period from 1933 to 1939, and assess the impact of its schooling methodology on establishing the foundations for a uniformed concentration camp system. This chapter will also concentrate on the major role played by Theodor Eicke, Dachau’s second and doubtlessly most important commandant, due to his broad contribution to the establishment of *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler’s uniformed camp system. In a study of Camp SS criminal development, Eicke, as a perpetrator himself, must play an important role because, in the words of Niels Weise, he “became a multiplier and ‘father of perpetrators’” due to his influence at Dachau.¹ Whilst Eicke has been identified as a central figure in both reversing the trend of careless SS management in early Dachau and in building the KL model which endured until 1945, his true importance is rarely emphasised. It is critically important to assess the impact that both Dachau and Eicke had upon the conduct of the SS camp guards, to contribute to the broader aim of this thesis.

The suggestion that a concentration camp had a ‘school’ within its walls may have seemed somewhat abstract to the authors of the earliest Holocaust literature, but Christopher Dillon has recently focused on Dachau’s important function as a training facility for SS guards. He suggests that early Dachau histories were commemorative, rather than analytical, in nature, resulting in works which tended to document and immortalise the suffering experienced by victims of the camp.² As such, they fail to identify the mechanisms at work within the camps that contributed to the system’s expansion. Dillon identifies Dachau as highly significant for numerous reasons including the training of thousands of SS guards, for its place in the “pre-history of the Holocaust”, and for its institutional development of violence.³ Other historians have also recognised Dachau’s importance as a model

¹ N. Weise, *Eicke: Eine SS-Karriere zwischen Nervenlinik, KZ-System und Waffen-SS* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2013), 26.

² C. Dillon, *Dachau & the SS: A Schooling in Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

camp from which the SS would develop the KL system. Referencing the establishment of the camp as a tool for SS punishment, Tom Segev has referred to the Dachau KL as “truly the first of its kind”.⁴ Daniel Goldhagen has echoed this and asserts that Dachau represented “Germany’s largest and most important institutional innovation during its Nazi Period”.⁵ Peter Longerich highlights that upon Theodor Eicke’s appointment as commandant on 26 June 1933, Dachau’s regime became notably different to those in other concentration camps in the mid-1930s.⁶ Dachau was revolutionary in its administration and influence on the camp system but it is important to recognise that it was Eicke who made it so. Without Eicke, Dachau’s potential was unlikely to be unlocked; the absolute indispensability of Eicke as a visionary has not been sufficiently recognised by the historians above. Following Eicke’s promotion out of Dachau and later transfer to the front with the SS-*Totenkopfverbände* fighting division, Dachau’s importance to the KL system plateaued. In other words, it is essential to acknowledge that Dachau’s importance in the mid-1930s was in fact Eicke’s importance.

Furthermore, the ‘Dachau School’, to which Dillon has referred, was designed to prepare SS recruits for the reality of concentration camp life so that they may operate as efficient, unquestioning, and unwavering guards. Despite the assessment of the SS’ elite status in Chapter Two showing that the conduct of the Camp SS was often poor, the ‘Dachau School’ was able to instil the crucial SS *Weltanschauung* into recruits. This did not guarantee reliability, selflessness, nor the perceived chivalry expected of an SS man but this pseudo-SS apprenticeship radicalised recruits and provided them with a platform to learn their trade before transferring to other camps to spread the Dachau administration’s practices. Though flaws did develop in the conduct of SS guards, even in these early years, Eicke’s leadership helped to prevent the most detrimental vices from reaching their most damaging potential whilst he was in charge. Moreover, there is certainly evidence to support this view of Dachau’s secondary function as a training facility, with nine SS men who were serving in Dachau on 30 May 1933, the date on which it was handed to the SS from the State Police, reaching the most senior ranks of *Lagerführer* (essentially the second-highest position in a camp) or commandant across seven other camps.⁷ This does not take into account the men who joined

⁴ T. Segev, *Soldiers of Evil: The Commandants of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 12.

⁵ D.J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Abacus, 1997), 170.

⁶ P. Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 153.

⁷ Dillon, *Dachau*, 12. – Dillon names the respective SS men and lists the camps they later moved to as Auschwitz, Flossenbürg, Gross-Rosen, Majdanek, Natzweiler, Neuengamme and Ravensbrück.

Dachau's ranks after this date and later moved on, nor the men who transferred to positions lower than *Lagerführer*.

This chapter forgoes the thematic structure present in this study's other chapters in favour of a chronological assessment of the development of the centralised KL. This method is preferable for clarifying the process that created a uniformed system, which in turn institutionalised the SS guard behaviours which are of central value to the broader study. Also, whilst Dachau, the first SS concentration camp and the only one to survive from 1933 to 1945, will serve as the focal point of the following engagement with the development of uniformity in the KL, other early concentration camps will be examined as well. As has been explained in this study's introduction, this chapter will focus solely upon the pre-war period due to the evolving purpose of the KL after the start of the Second World War. To best convey the impact that Eicke had upon the KL, this chapter will first examine the state of Dachau in the months prior to his appointment as commandant. In this period, under the command of *SS-Oberführer* Hilmar Wäckerle, Dachau was a terroristic and unrestrained place which, despite engraining some enduring behaviours in the SS guards, promised little for the KL's future. Following this, the section explaining the importance of Eicke's tenure as Dachau commandant will show that Wäckerle's successor was an effective appointment who had a huge influence upon his SS guards. This influence grew exponentially upon his appointment to the role of concentration camp inspector in the summer of 1934 as will be seen in the last section of this chapter. Overall, this interaction with the pre-war KL will show that, starting from the Dachau camp, one man was able to implement a universalizable method of camp administration which, with its accompanying SS rulebook, had a massive impact upon guard behaviours throughout the existence of the Nazi KL system.

The Wäckerle Period at Dachau

Dachau was an ever-evolving phenomenon, each of its commandants running the camp in accordance with their own style, and it is therefore prudent to start at the beginning of its SS history by considering the management of inaugural commandant Hilmar Wäckerle. Wäckerle was seemingly well qualified for his posting to Dachau with a career that had taken him from active service during the Great War and into the interwar paramilitary *Freikorps*. He had been hardened from his youth, sent to the officer school of the Bavarian Army at 14, where monarchist values were defended at great pains.⁸ This may have gone some way to hardening his political views, with Dillon referring to this institution as "profoundly conservative".⁹ The officer school produced about half of

⁸ Segev, *Soldiers of Evil*, 63.

⁹ Dillon, *Dachau*, 35.

the generals in the Bavarian Army in the fifty years prior to the Great War, and one of its leaders later wrote that the school had determinedly sought to maintain the “consciousness of national duty, sacrifice, toughness, chivalry and brotherhood-at-arms”.¹⁰ These values were remarkably similar to those that the SS would later adopt and use for much different ends. As seen in the first chapter, the potency of militaristic and nationalistic currents within German education in this period give credence to the supposition that Wäckerle’s schooling influenced his career. Following the war, Wäckerle adopted sincere anti-communist views and had joined the Nazi Party by 1922; the extent to which this was influenced by what had been instilled into him at the officer school is impossible to say, but its conservative monarchist ideology would have endorsed his anti-communist sentiments. On top of his conservative views, as a Bavarian native, the revolutionary People’s State that existed from 1918 to 1919 most likely contributed to the development of Wäckerle’s resentment of communism, reinforcing the idea that Weimar era upheaval politicised future SS men. Likewise, his pedigree from the officer school surely went some way to qualifying Wäckerle for management of the new camp at Dachau in Himmler’s eyes, on account of the overlapping values between the SS and this Bavarian military academy.

At this early juncture in the SS’ rise to dominance over the camps, recruitment of camp personnel was somewhat haphazard and Wäckerle’s appointment as commandant transpired to be problematic. In fact, following the SS takeover of Dachau on 11 April 1933, the brutality with which Wäckerle ruled was apparent, seeing 12 prisoners either tortured to death or driven to suicide by the end of May. Segev has justifiably identified his management style at Dachau as being marked by personal and political brutality.¹¹ The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum refers to the Wäckerle period as the beginning of a “campaign of despotism and terror from which the prisoners had no protection”, with SS guards’ “hatred” being aimed especially at Jewish prisoners.¹² A dozen fatalities might appear relatively insignificant when one considers that camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau could oversee thousands of murders daily less than a decade later; however, at this point when the camp system was in its infancy, the deaths of any prisoners must be considered momentous. This early death toll already confirmed Dachau as the most lethal and terroristic camp in Nazi Germany.¹³

¹⁰ From L. Kuchtner, *Das Köngl. Bayer Kadettenkorps in Deutsches Soldatenjahrbuch* (Munich: Schild, 1966), 65-78, in Segev, *Soldiers of Evil*, 63.

¹¹ From T. Segev, ‘The Commanders of Nazi Concentration Camps’, Phil. Diss. (Boston, MA: 1977), 98 in J. Tüchel, *Konzentrationslager: Organisationgeschichte und Funktion der “Inspektion der Konzentrationslager” 1934-1938* (Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt Verlag, 1991), 393.

¹² G. Megargee (ed.), *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 442.

¹³ Dillon, *Dachau*, 11.

On 12 April 1933, Erwin Kahn, Arthur Kahn (no relation), Rudolf Benario, and Ernst Goldman were shot by the SS in Dachau. The only initial survivor, Erwin Kahn, was taken to a nearby hospital and left under SA guard where he later died. His autopsy suggested he had not died from the gunshot wounds he sustained in camp but rather from unrelated internal bleeding around his larynx, indicating he could have been murdered by his SA guards. When Arthur Kahn's body was sent home to Nuremberg, the skin around his gunshot wounds, an important indicator of the distance from which he had been shot, had been cut away.¹⁴ The SS had made efforts to obscure the facts of his death from his family and whoever they might inform. Nonetheless, before he died Erwin Kahn managed to tell hospital staff his version of events that led to the deaths. He said that on 12 April, during the camp's evening meal, the SS ordered the four victims to follow them and, after being led away, each was shot from a distance of around two metres.¹⁵ When District Court Munich II prosecutor Josef Hartinger and medical examiner Moritz Flamm first attended the Dachau camp on 13 April, the latter pointedly told Wäckerle, "your guards are very good shots with their pistols", since each of the victims had suspiciously been hit in the back of the head whilst supposedly fleeing.¹⁶ Apparently keen to manipulate the truth of events, Dachau hosted a *New York Times* reporter on 22 April. The "quiet-mannered" Wäckerle offered a version of the murders which completely contradicted Erwin Kahn's; the prisoners had "ignored a challenge and got 100 yards into the woods before the bullets brought them down".¹⁷ Whilst Flamm had already called out the lies over such accurate shots to the head, the SS still saw potential to manipulate the international perception of such brash murders.

Furthermore, despite the bold killings on 12 April, Wäckerle's reckless regime continued to oversee prisoner murders. Repeatedly, the perpetrators executed their victims whilst retrospectively claiming they were preventing escapes. On 17 May, Hartinger and Flamm concluded that SS-*Oberscharführer* Karl Ehmman murdered inmate Leonhard Hausmann with a gunshot fired from less than 30 centimetres away. Ehmman had claimed he had opened fire upon Hausmann, who was accused of fleeing from his work area, from 10 to 12 metres away.¹⁸ Similarly, on 24 May, Dr Alfred Strauss was killed by SS guard Johann Kantschuster who declared he had shot Strauss from eight metres away when the prisoner decided to attempt an escape. Investigations revealed that

¹⁴ T.W. Ryback, *Hitler's First Victims and One Man's Race for Justice* (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), 54-55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷ *The New York Times*, "Nazis Shoot Down Fleeing Prisoners", 23 April 1933, 22, [TimesMachine: Sunday April 23, 1933 - NYTimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/1933/04/23/archives/nazis-shoot-down-fleeing-prisoners.html) [Accessed 20 January 2023]

¹⁸ Document 642-PS, Bavarian State Prosecutor Karl Wintersberger, Decease of the arrestee in protective custody, Leonhard Hausmann in the Dachau concentration camp, 1 June 1933 in International Military Tribunal (IMT), *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression – Vol. III* (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1946), 454.

Kantschuster had shot Strauss twice in the head, once from beneath and once from above to the right. In conjunction with other open wounds and bruises, Kantschuster's account was flawed enough for charges to be levelled.¹⁹ Another killing showed a somewhat different effort to mask the perpetrators' actions. On 16 May, Louis Schloss was found hanged but the investigators deduced he had likely died from autointoxication and fat embolism caused by other injuries.²⁰ In other words, the SS had hanged Schloss post-mortem to portray a suicide.²¹ Curiously, Schloss had been repeatedly targeted in Julius Streicher's *Der Stürmer* as a "typical Jewish pig", and upon his arrival at the camp on 15 May, one guard encouraged his colleagues to do with him as they pleased. This is a good time to return to the concept of negative 'camaraderie' advanced by Hans Buchheim; one guard was endorsing his supposed comrades' behaviour providing it was abusive. Furthermore, in the case of Schloss' murder, it would seem that Nazi propaganda facilitated the Camp SS' targeting of a victim before he even reached them, reiterating its potential power. Streicher's vitriolic attacks on Schloss inspired such hate from the SS that their victim only lasted 24 hours in the camp.²²

In reading into the methodology of early murders, one can see the bold nature of SS guard violence under Wäckerle. There was no plausible defence for the close-range shootings of supposed escapees, after all if the guards were so close to prisoners genuinely attempting escape then they could have stopped them without shooting. As it was, however, the early KL murderers in Dachau were establishing an enduring killing technique in the camp system; the justification of preventing a fabricated escape attempt with lethal force, which will be seen often across this study. Hartinger informed Flamm as early as 13 April that he in fact suspected Wäckerle had ordered each of the murders. His conclusion was based upon the guards' personalities, the Jewish identity of each of the victims of 12 April and, not least, his observation of Wäckerle who made a "devastating impression" upon him.²³ This is plausible based upon the overlap in the methodology of the killings, suggesting a framework had been planned that might minimise legal repercussions and also Wäckerle's determination to harm those he viewed as enemies.

¹⁹ Document 641-PS, Bavarian State Prosecutor Karl Wintersberger, Death of the prisoner in protective custody Dr. Alfred Strauss in the concentration camp Dachau, 1 June 1933 in IMT, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression – Vol. III*, 453-454.

²⁰ Document 644-PS, Bavarian State Prosecutor Karl Wintersberger, Decease of the arrestee in protective custody Louis Schloss in the Dachau concentration camp, 22 May 1933 in IMT, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression – Vol. III*, 455.

²¹ Ryback, *Hitler's First Victims*, 145.

²² *Ibid.*, 130-131.

²³ Ryback, *Hitler's First Victims*, 28.

Commandant Wäckerle had a personal vendetta against Communist Party official Hans Beimler, reportedly announcing that he sought to kill the man himself.²⁴ Beimler effected a successful escape, subsequently revealing much about Wäckerle's personality and management of Dachau in his 1933 memoir. Upon Beimler's arrival at the camp, Wäckerle, described by Beimler as a "typical political murderer", accused the former of misleading proletarian prisoners who were in the same incoming transport.²⁵ The Communist official spent a fortnight at Dachau, entirely in isolation, suffering beatings and encouragement to commit suicide by the reliable SS henchman Hans Steinbrenner, who will be returned to later, as well as harassment from the commandant himself. When Beimler resisted Wäckerle's encouragement to kill himself, urging the commandant to shoot him if needs be, he received the response "a swine like you isn't worth a bullet... we'll let you die of hunger".²⁶ Wäckerle's attempt to incite suicide was likely linked to his awareness of his own inability to kill a high-profile political prisoner outright, at least not without prompting investigation. Later, to buy time to implement his escape plan, Beimler agreed to kill himself if he could wait a day longer as it was his son's birthday. Both Steinbrenner and Wäckerle agreed to the condition showing that, in early Dachau, the SS were in a somewhat weak position wherein a prisoner marked for death could dictate terms to them if they wanted to achieve their goal. Beimler escaped on the night of 8 May 1933 after agreeing the deal; Wäckerle's incessant drive to see Beimler die convinced the Communist that he would not survive the camp and would rather "die under their bullets" escaping.²⁷ Had the vitriolic commandant not pushed so hard to see the prisoner die, he probably would not have risked a daring, near-suicidal, escape. Wäckerle's own zeal and personal animosity thus caused the SS to suffer the embarrassment of a successful escape and subsequent international publicity from Beimler's memoir. This conflict was entirely representative of Wäckerle's personality and his pre-SS development into a staunch communist-hater.

Additionally, as part of his regulations for the Dachau, Wäckerle empowered a camp 'court' which was entitled to sentence prisoners to severe punishments and would be presided over by himself with the assistance of one or two officers, and one SS man from the guard personnel. Should a tie in verdict emerge, the commandant himself would determine the outcome.²⁸ Wachsmann quite reasonably describes Wäckerle as acting as if he were omnipotent, his placement of the camp under

²⁴ From *Staatsarchiv Munich*, StA 34479/1, Vernehmungsniederschrift Hans Steinbrenner, 3 January 1953 in Dillon, *Dachau*, 35.

²⁵ H. Beimler, *Four Weeks in the Hands of Hitler's Hell-Hounds: The Nazi Murder Camp of Dachau* (New York: Workers' Library Publishers, 1933), 22.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 40-42.

²⁸ Document 922-D – Special Directives for 'Collective Camp' Dachau, circa May 1933 in IMT, *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, 14 November 1945-1 October 1946*, Vol. XXXVI (Nuremberg: International Military Tribunal, 1949), 6-10.

martial law showing his belief that he could act as he saw fit. However, crucially, at this point capital punishment was still within the sole remit of the judicial system, not the SS, and his confidence that he could position Dachau beyond the law was erroneous and contributed to his downfall.²⁹

Nonetheless, despite deaths in the camp provoking continued investigation from Hartinger during Wäckerle's tenure as commandant, evidence suggests that some within the police were willing to facilitate the arbitrary violence of Wäckerle's reign. *Hauptmann* Max Winkler, an officer of the Munich police, offered strong support to Ehmann after he killed Hausmann, asserting that the guard was a calm and responsible man. This support came despite Ehmann's habitual heavy drinking and his earlier shooting of a communist's wife through a window. Winkler supported the perpetrator's explanation of Hausmann's death and deduced he was merely doing his duty.³⁰ There is thus an apparent contradiction wherein the authorities officially forbade murder by the SS in Dachau whilst their efforts to punish and deter it were hindered. This consolidates the image that even though Wäckerle's Dachau was reckless and unconstrained, some occurrences of complicity from the external authorities led to his regime continuing its malpractices. This did not help to prevent the gradual escalation of negative guard behaviours in the pre-war period. Awareness that there were influential individuals who were both able and willing to aid guards who broke the rules served to devalue KL regulations which were fundamentally central to prisoner survival. Camp guards had reason to believe that they would be protected should they ignore the regulations which were meant to ensure prisoners' safety. This, Himmler's preference to ignore ill-discipline discussed previously, and the gradually increasing impotence of external authorities in matters of KL operation enabled the guards to act freely. The swelling assumption of their own invulnerability, rooted in the KL's early years where abuses frequently went unpunished, set the Camp SS guards on their path to even more vicious behaviours during the war which will be seen in the following chapters.

A combination of Wäckerle's failure to adequately cover up the deaths in Dachau in 1933 as well as intensifying rivalries between Himmler and other senior members of the NSDAP, admittedly beyond Wäckerle's control, led to the demise of Dachau's first commandant. Hans Frank, then Minister for Justice for Bavaria, was adamant that Himmler's SS could not be allowed to get away with extrajudicial killings and on 1 June, he charged Wäckerle and his staff with aiding and abetting murder after examining the 12 known deaths in the period leading up to the end of May.³¹ The charges were reportedly quashed as a result of Hitler's personal intervention, saving the early SS

²⁹ N. Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (London: Abacus, 2016), 56.

³⁰ Ryback, *Hitler's First Victims*, 142-143.

³¹ G.C. Browder, *Foundations of the Nazi Police State: The Formation of SiPo and SD* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 69.

murderers from the judiciary. Nonetheless, on 2 June, Frank urged Himmler to end the killing in Dachau and undertake personnel changes.³² Rather than going to inconvenient lengths to defend Wäckerle for actions which were unlikely to have distressed his own conscience, after all the KL's purpose was to subdue and dominate the NSDAP's enemies, Himmler simply dismissed the commandant. Whilst Frank saw to Wäckerle's removal, the precedent for KL abuse had been set in his brief but chaotic term as commandant. By not overtly resisting Frank's interference, Himmler safeguarded Dachau and his camp system from the risk of further harassment for the time being. In the end, Hilmar Wäckerle had proven to be a poor candidate as Himmler's representative in the very first Nazi concentration camp. It is reasonable to summarise the examination of Wäckerle's period with the postulation that through his reckless management, the commandant failed to control his guards in a way that Himmler, and the nascent Nazi government, required, facilitating erratic violence in the opening chapter of Dachau's life. This legacy of haphazard terror was difficult to handle but Himmler's replacement for Wäckerle showed the Camp SS how to better structure their retribution against Nazism's enemies.

The Eicke Period at Dachau

Most competent assessments of Dachau's evolution into Himmler's flagship camp attribute its swift turnaround after Wäckerle's dismissal to his successor, *SS-Oberführer* Theodor Eicke. Wachsmann's vast volume on the KL identifies Eicke as the "powerful motor" that drove forward Himmler's true vision for the camps, arguing that Wäckerle's successor "dominated" the system for years after 1933.³³ Wachsmann adds that "Eicke's authority over his men was absolute, and although it ultimately derived from Himmler, it was fed by the force of his personality".³⁴ This purported power of personality that Eicke possessed will be returned to shortly. Dillon, in his study of the 'Dachau School' credits Eicke with playing the "guiding role" for the institution and felt it necessary to forewarn readers of the frequency of Eicke's appearances in his study, so central was he to the KL's development.³⁵ Wolfgang Sofsky has underlined Eicke's sheer power which came from his eventual ability as leader of the IKL to circumvent his superiors due to having Himmler's ear on matters pertaining to the camps, which emphasised his vast influence on the system.³⁶ Segev dedicated a full chapter to him in his book about the commandants of the Nazi camps, with the well-travelled Josef Kramer of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen infamy being the only other camp leader justifying

³² Ryback, *Hitler's First Victims*, 194.

³³ Wachsmann, *KL*, 57.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁵ Dillon, *Dachau*, 50.

³⁶ W. Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 31.

a full chapter in the author's eyes. He considered Eicke to have "something of the gladiator in him", due to his strong will and desire for glory.³⁷ An apt example of Eicke's behaviour living up to Segev's label is his response, recounted by Dachau prisoner Fritz Ecker, to finding secret messages about the camp being smuggled out in late 1933. His incorruptible will and determination can be seen in his speech: "Two of the arrested traitors have already been transferred to the Beyond... We still have enough German oaks to hang anybody on them who opposes us. There are no atrocities and there is no *Cheka* cellar in Dachau. Anybody whipped, deserves to be whipped!".³⁸ Other historians to have cited Eicke's centrality to the KL's effective development include Peter Longerich, Max Williams and Geoffrey Megargee.³⁹ However, Eicke biographer Weise cautions that "even if Eicke was one of the central figures of the SS, his overall importance for National Socialism should not be overstated".⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the true magnitude of Eicke's contribution is even greater than has previously been argued. As will be evidenced ahead, Eicke was the prime mover behind the creation of a uniformed camp system. Whilst Himmler was the central visionary, Eicke was the only senior SS officer who displayed a near-flawless ability to develop the KL. He was able to colonise camps with his forceful personality alone and he expertly manipulated his subordinates by invoking their affection and anxiety at the same time. Without Eicke, the camp system would have developed into a very different institution due to the absence of his voice in crucial aspects of operation such as the KL's practices and guidelines. As this thesis views the KL to have been an indispensable tool of the authoritarian Nazi state, of which Eicke was an invaluable architect, contrary to Weise's warning, his importance to National Socialism after 1933 is in fact difficult to overstate.

Eicke was born in 1892 and was schooled between 1899 and 1909. He was educated in his village school for 11 years but left without a high-school diploma. His education took place in the first decade of the twentieth century, a period in which German pedagogy had a distinctly militaristic tone, as underlined in Chapter One. He did not finish his schooling, though the precise reasoning is unclear, and he decided to sign up for army service immediately. It would be reasonable to suppose that the pro-military themes of the Wilhelmine education system did little to dissuade Eicke's rush to join the Imperial Army. Moreover, Eicke later preferred to employ those with similarly rural backgrounds in his own formations, assuming they were more easily moulded than those from

³⁷ Segev, *Soldiers of Evil*, 94.

³⁸ Document 31 – 'Die Hölle Dachau', Report by the Social Democrat prisoner Fritz Ecker on Dachau SS guards, published 1934, translated in C. Goeschel & N. Wachsmann (eds), *The Nazi Concentration Camps, 1933-1939: A Documentary History* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 39.

³⁹ Longerich, *Himmler*, 153, M. Williams, *SS Elite: The Senior Leaders of Hitler's Praetorian Guard, Vol. I* (Stroud: Fonthill Media, 2015), 296, Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps*, 442.

⁴⁰ Weise, *Eicke*, 23.

urban centres.⁴¹ It is possible that this was inadvertently motivated by his perception of his own moulding into a political soldier. Eicke's *Kaiserreich* military career was unremarkable, seeing him serve as a paymaster in the First World War. Interestingly, due to his mother moving to France, some his siblings followed her and fought for France during the war. The rivalry between their Protestant patriotic father and Catholic Francophile mother had made childhood difficult for the Eicke children, Theodor's relatives remarking that he was especially unhappy. There is no shortage of evidence linking childhood discontentment with rogue behaviours in adult life and Eicke was not alone in the senior ranks of the KL in having had an unpleasant early life. For instance, Auschwitz-Birkenau commandant Rudolf Höss claimed to have had no playmates growing up, relying on his pony, Hans, for company, and experienced forceful pressure to focus on becoming a priest by his "fanatic Catholic" father.⁴² On top of this, Eicke's underwhelming military career was not as fulfilling as he might have hoped, unlikely to remedy a history of unhappiness at home. Akin to not being old enough to serve their country, it is plausible that inactive wartime service, spent at a desk, had a negative mental effect upon some young men, particularly fierce men of action like Eicke.

A stretch of political agitation leading to trouble with the law marked Eicke's life in the 1920s until he joined the SA in 1928 and then the SS in 1930. At 38 years old, Eicke was not a young man when he entered SS service, but this was something that several future senior KL officials had in common. Army volunteers who saw action in the Great War and later joined the SS reaching high rank also included Sachsenhausen commandant Hans Helwig, Flossenbürg commandant Jakob Weiseborn, Hermann Baranowski, also of Sachsenhausen, and Höss at Auschwitz amongst others.⁴³ There was a trend, therefore, despite its preference for Germany's brightest youths, for the SS to recruit older men from the pre-war generation for camp duty as their experience gave their tenures in senior positions added legitimacy. Shortly after joining the SS, Eicke began a rivalry with a *Gauleiter* (leader of one of Germany's administrative 'Gau' districts) named Josef Bürckel, which would later be central to his journey to Dachau. Bürckel was a proud SA member whilst Eicke's dedication to the SS led to newfound contempt for the SA, his previous employer. In 1932, Eicke was found guilty of the possession of explosives and the intent to use them, subsequently losing his job. Adhering to what Weise has referred to as a National Socialist version of the Mafia-like *Omertá*, Eicke refused to incriminate his co-conspirators and took full responsibility in a display of idealised SS behaviour where he prioritised loyalty to the cause and his comrades ahead of himself or his family. This loyalty was surely recognised by Himmler who was apparently at least aware of, if not overseeing, the

⁴¹ Segev, *Soldiers of Evil*, 99.

⁴² S. Paskuly (ed.), *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 48-51.

⁴³ Segev, *Soldiers of Evil*, 67.

bomb plan.⁴⁴ Eicke's sentence for the possession of, and suspected intent to use, explosives points to this man's clear determination to act against enemies, regardless of the cost. This was clearly reflected in his camp management style, ever remaining aloof to the suffering caused by the punishments engrained into his camp guidelines. Later, after a pardon and the Nazi succession in 1933, he swiftly returned to his quarrel with Bürckel, stormed his headquarters with a band of men and locked him in a cupboard. As a result, Himmler struck Eicke from the SS membership roll on 3 April 1933 and sent him to a mental institution despite confirmation of the latter's sanity. The storming of Bürckel's office is of great importance to identifying Eicke's effectiveness as a leader of men. This is not because of his own reckless abandon – the explosives episode revealed this – but because he was able to inspire a group of subordinates to act with him at their own peril to settle a personal score. Keeping Eicke's erratic and often unhappy pre-Dachau life in mind helps one to formulate an image of the man in question and may also help in understanding his impact upon the Dachau SS when he arrived at the camp.⁴⁵

It was due to Wäckerle's dismissal that Himmler ended Eicke's incarceration and bestowed upon him the position of commandant at Dachau on 26 June 1933. This significant U-turn in Himmler's direction regarding his flagship camp's leadership was partly due to the pressure from Justice Minister Frank, but other factors were also at play. Himmler must have been impressed by Eicke's professional record, paying his family a monthly allowance during his time in the institution and also informing Eicke's psychiatrist that he was willing to find him a position, on the condition that he stopped making trouble.⁴⁶ To this end, Himmler evidently had suspicions that Eicke had a vast pool of untapped potential; his decision to pay a disgraced SS man's family a stipend suggested he intended to exploit this potential later and knew that making Eicke's family comfortable indebted him to Himmler. The Reichsführer certainly enjoyed the leverage over Eicke which came from his power over the latter's incarceration. Eicke was aware of his debt to Himmler for releasing him and granting him high position, which ensured his unwavering loyalty to the Reichsführer for the rest of his life.⁴⁷ This employment of a strategy of leverage by Himmler was not isolated, in fact, Wäckerle's second in command, Robert Erspenmüller had suffered a corruption scandal in 1931 which had led to expulsion from the SS. This was countermanded by Himmler, securing future obedience and loyalty from Erspenmüller whilst in the ranks of the Camp SS.⁴⁸ Weise has thus identified three pillars

⁴⁴ Weise, *Eicke*, 373.

⁴⁵ Biographical information on Eicke from Williams, *SS Elite, Vol. I*, 294-296 and information on Eicke family's internal conflict and nature of Bürckel rivalry from Segev, *Soldiers of Evil*, 108-111.

⁴⁶ From *Berlin Document Centre* (BDC), Theodor Eicke Personnel File, in Segev, *Soldiers of Evil*, 113.

⁴⁷ Longerich, *Himmler*, 153.

⁴⁸ Dillon, *Dachau*, 36.

of the relationship between Himmler and Eicke; one pillar was the unflinching loyalty from Eicke toward his SS superior; another pillar was educative in the sense that Eicke was reformed and taught what was expected by Himmler through his time in the mental institute; the third was obligation as Eicke felt indebted to Himmler for his opportunity at Dachau. In this sense, Himmler had sufficiently manipulated and moulded his underling.⁴⁹ It is based upon these arguments that Weise argues that Eicke was formed more by Himmler and his educative methods and loyalty ideology than by the Nazi movement.⁵⁰ This is a reasonable supposition, though it is important not to attribute too much credit to Himmler for Eicke's results for it suggests the latter's skills and traits were derived from his superior which was not the case.

Eicke's impact on the KL was unparalleled and would prove to be crucial in the establishment of the so called 'Dachau School' environment. Whilst his predecessor's reign failed to establish order and discipline at Dachau, Eicke's service regulations which largely superseded Wäckerle's, were fully introduced on 1 October 1933, later spread to other camps in similar format. The phrase which resonated most from these guidelines was '*Toleranz bedeutet Schwäche*' ('tolerance means weakness'), a statement which underlined the complete hardness Eicke would demand from his men.⁵¹ Höss spent time in Dachau under Eicke's leadership and recalled how the commandant insisted that at least one company of Dachau guard troops be present when punishment was administered, usually through the medium of flogging.⁵² This forced observation of punishment was, it would appear, demanded in order to desensitise SS men to the sort of violence Eicke expected his guards to be able to witness and administer without hesitation. Höss described in his memoirs how he initially experienced shiver-inducing chills as he was forced to watch floggings within Dachau. Despite this, he stated that when he later witnessed a sanctioned execution at the start of the war, he was not as badly affected by this sight and claimed to be at a loss as to explain why this was.⁵³ If a reader takes Höss' recollection at face value, and there is little reason to doubt the veracity of such a small detail amongst memoirs which deal with graver personal crimes, then it would seem that Eicke's determination to both toughen and de-sensitise his men through punishment observation had success, at least in regard to Höss. At this point it is necessary to refer to the segment on alcohol abuse in the SS in the previous chapter. Whilst Höss hardened, others, who were either not emotionally steely or did not take particularly pleasure from watching suffering, found coping

⁴⁹ Weise, *Eicke*, 9-11.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 372.

⁵¹ *The Wiener Library (WL)*, 1655/2822, Regulations for disciplinary and penal measures and service regulations for camp personnel at Dachau, introduction.

⁵² Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 82.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

mechanisms including drinking. Since Höss himself confessed to later drinking regularly at Auschwitz, his hardness may have indeed come at a cost even if he did not realise as much. Eicke thus risked his guards' mental stability in forcing them to observe punishments. In some cases, this may be seen as an error as some guards' reliance upon alcohol and other vices caused deep behavioural issues, but, ultimately, Eicke forced his men to familiarise themselves with the infliction of pain. His intolerance of weaklings in his ranks prompted Eicke to swiftly harshen the camp environment and prepare his guards for the future. Though he would not know it then, his insistence upon SS observation of punishment offered the men their first, milder, experience of watching destruction *en masse* that many of them would supervise in the KL's killing facilities after 1941.

Another element of Dachau's camp guidelines which underlined the extent to which Eicke expected his men to act mercilessly can be seen in his demands for how his men must behave with their weapons. If a guard were to be attacked physically by a prisoner, the response must be, under all circumstances, to shoot said prisoner. By contrast, Wäckerle's regulations declared that such prisoners would be punished with death but did not explicitly demand that the present guard must shoot them immediately.⁵⁴ Under Eicke any hesitation to shoot, or the decision to counter an attack with non-lethal force, would result in the immediate dismissal of the guard in question. The zero tolerance of reluctance to use weaponry was worded thus:

Active attacks of a guard by a prisoner have to be stopped with firearms, not by physical force. A guard, not conforming with these orders, has to expect his immediate dismissal... mutineering or revolting detachments of prisoners are to be shot at by all supervising guards. Shots fired in the air are principally prohibited.⁵⁵

In this instance, it seems that Eicke was attempting to browbeat his men into obeying his authority through the demand that they respond with deadly force to prisoner rebellion. It may seem unusual that Eicke's effort to instil discipline overtly demanded the use of lethal force in such a scenario whilst the murderous Wäckerle's did not, but Eicke was supplanting erratic killing with structured killing, a necessary step in improving order at Dachau. Furthermore, under Eicke a guard who may have experienced any degree of moral dilemma which prompted hesitation had a simple equation to work with; shoot to kill or be shamed and reprimanded. This also applied to any prisoner attempting to escape, with the prisoner in question "to be shot at without a challenge".⁵⁶ For some, the distressing dilemma of choosing to comply or be disgraced was undoubtedly another factor pushing

⁵⁴ Document 922-D in IMT, *Trial of the Major War Criminals, Vol. XXXVI*, 6-10.

⁵⁵ WL, 1655/2822, Regulations at Dachau, Part 6: Guard Duty.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

them toward unhelpful coping mechanisms like drink, facilitating further unpleasant acts. Former Mauthausen adjutant Josef Kramer, claimed that during his time at the camp from 1938, when Eicke's orders had spread across the KL, escapees were given ample warning: "If a prisoner [escaped], the guard had to challenge him three times with the words 'halt, or I shoot', then first fire a shot in the air and only the second shot to kill".⁵⁷ Considering that Kramer refers to Eicke, at that time the supreme camp inspector, visiting the camp three or four times, it is doubtful at best that such inaction was tolerated in a camp, like Mauthausen, known for particularly severe treatment. However, it does show that the SS were aware that this particular directive was morally reprehensible enough to warrant covering up by the end of the Second World War.

It is worth flagging an important influential factor in relation to the following of these shoot-to-kill orders from Eicke. Of course, many within the SS were ideologically fuelled which eased their conscience, though the previous chapter has shown that this was not universal by any means. Sofsky supports those findings, saying that it would be wrong to assert that all perpetrators of crimes in the concentration camps were fuelled solely by National Socialist zeal.⁵⁸ The examination of youth factors which surely played a role in the lives of many of the younger SS men has been addressed, but environmental factors must also be considered. Dillon has focused upon the role that Nazi Germany's *Männerstaat* ('masculine state') had upon the concentration camps and identifies Dachau's camp guidelines' 'tolerance means weakness' mantra and the SS' portrayal of its camp guards as soldiers as important elements.⁵⁹ To see the ramifications of associating a perceived lack of harshness, or 'tolerance', with weakness, one can look at Höss' own reception to this ethos. Höss stated that he was not in agreement with Eicke's methodology of invoking the wrath of the guards at the prisoners' expense but that over time he accepted and adopted the views promulgated by the commandant. He further claimed, perhaps insincerely, that he did not become insensitive to human suffering. However, Höss declared, "I was not allowed to be soft. I wanted to have the reputation of being hard. I did not want to be thought of as a weak person".⁶⁰ Fear of being called out for softness, in this case, at least according to the SS man's own admission, was motivation enough to get with the programme. There were few more stinging rebukes within the SS cliques than '*Einzelgänger*' ('loner'), and to avoid being tarred by it one had to engage in the camp's abuses. As Dillon aptly puts it, "the guard who wanted to belong had to join in, beating and laughing along with the group".⁶¹

⁵⁷ WL, 1975/2/3 Josef Kramer Statement at Bergen-Belsen, 22 May 1945.

⁵⁸ Sofsky, *Order of Terror*, 8.

⁵⁹ C. Dillon, "'Tolerance Means Weakness': The Dachau Concentration Camp S.S., Militarism and Masculinity", *Historical Research*, 86:232 (2013), 373-389, 376. Also see Dillon, *Dachau*, 179-217 for a broader examination of martial masculinity in the SS and the wider Third Reich.

⁶⁰ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 96.

⁶¹ Dillon, "'Tolerance Means Weakness'", 378.

This demonstrates the toxic nature of camaraderie between the camp perpetrators; belonging came at a high cost, at least to the victims who suffered the abuse of men seeking membership of the SS' social collective. In relation to Eicke's order for lethal response to prisoner attacks, desire to be accepted and fear of being othered drove SS guards toward murderous compliance. A master manipulator like Eicke, who was able to cultivate such unconditional loyalty from his subordinates understood the desperate allure of belonging and, to this extent, his exploitation of fears of rejection was masterful.

The inference from this small section of the late-1933 guidelines should be that the commandant demanded that SS retaliation be black and white, with no grey areas, and that lethal force should be used without question when the situation required it. At this point it is important to explain that whilst the *Wehrmacht* were legally obliged to follow orders, the SS' paramilitary status and its voluntary oath to Hitler were not binding, and SS men, in this case the camp guards, could leave without following orders and receive no reprimand. Nonetheless, the *Führerprinzip*, the concept of orders from superiors being sacred and unquestionable, added to the pressure that SS guards experienced when confronted with the decision of whether to obey. As the SS insidiously taught its members, the failure to adhere to the *Führerprinzip* was beyond shameful and anxious guards had to bear this in mind when debating their own compliance with deadly orders. Yet, it was not until 1939 that the SS was permitted to create its own judiciary, with its own penal code, to deal with internal issues like dereliction of duty. As such, during the formative 'Dachau School' period, guidelines were not legally enforceable.⁶² Despite this inability to legally enforce the shoot-to-kill rules in Dachau, and other early SS camps, victims of the Nazi regime have recalled how the SS men were not just willing to obey, but, rather, they often actively searched for a just cause to enable them to kill. This shows that the *Führerprinzip* was generally effective when inciting the Camp SS to kill. Equally, it supports the theory that the masculine peer pressure environment of the KL prompted SS guards to behave violently out of anxiety of shunning, seeing as non-compliance was not physically punishable.

Also, within Dachau at least, SS enthusiasm to both fiercely suppress prisoner infractions and to seek opportunities to abuse suggested that Wäckerle's legacy of ruthless terror endured. Moreover, examples of this eagerness, while frequent, should be considered as failures on the parts of the SS guards if one considers Himmler's expectations for his men to remain decent. In a later testimony, Dr Staff, imprisoned in Dachau after 1935, emphasised the willingness of the camp guards to carry out the violent acts at the camp, as opposed to them choosing to act with some hesitation. He added that "compulsory membership would run counter to the whole significance, growth and

⁶² Dillon, *Dachau*, 63.

political aims of this criminal organisation... any compulsory membership would have imperilled the political purpose, would have lessened the enthusiasm... and would thereby have weakened... the whole unit".⁶³ Staff's assessment was inadvertently prophetic; by the final year of the war, when the KL relied on a sizeable influx of conscripted guards to oversee camp evacuations, men who were forced into SS uniforms undermined the KL's function on numerous occasions, as Chapter Six will show. Furthermore, Eicke's words from his June 1937 orders of the month corroborated the voluntary nature of the guards' embracement of the Dachau culture. He referred to young men "with bright eyes" who came to the 'Dachau School' to "willingly subordinate themselves and enter full of expectations into the school of obedience... following their inner yearning, they forego their parents' house to allow themselves to be sculpted in body and mind by the SS".⁶⁴ Whilst Eicke romanticised the process, young minds did indeed enter Dachau voluntarily with a hunger to prove themselves which empowered the masculine peer pressure environment. Survivor Bruno Heilig drew attention to the youth of the Dachau SS in his memoir, often focusing specifically on their brutality; for instance, he saw a young guard, whose voice was still breaking, chasing an exhausted prisoner three times his age until he collapsed with the wheelbarrow he was charged to carry. After driving him further with kicks, the youngster took the wheelbarrow himself and emptied it over the victim, laughing as he went. He shouted to another prisoner, "that fat lout seems to have pegged out. Have him cleared away!".⁶⁵ Another of Dachau's inmates echoed Heilig's underlining of youth brutality, stating that it was the NCOs between the ages of about 20 and 28 who were the "permanent terror" of the camp.⁶⁶ Young men like this were Eicke's bright-eyed apprentices and by the war years they would become practiced brutalists.

Beyond the new guidelines ushered in with his regime, the strength of Eicke's personality, mentioned earlier, must be considered instrumental to his ability to mould his Dachau guards into harsh and obedient men. Eicke had a very strong rapport with the men under his command, and sought to dissolve barriers between ranks, to some extent, by encouraging men to address their superiors with "Du" (informal form of 'you'), as opposed to "Sie" (polite form of 'you'), hoping to foster more fraternal relationships. Piotr Setkiewicz has made efforts to put this into perspective, however, stating that evidence has shown, despite Eicke's intentions, that officers used any opportunity to make their men stand to attention. Equally, Eicke's attempts to dissolve rank

⁶³ WL, 1655/2588, Statement by Dr Staff, witness at Nuremberg on the treatment of Jews by the SS on their way to Dachau, 3.

⁶⁴ From *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* (IfZ), Munich, MA 292, IKL Befehlsblatt 1 July 1937, s. 2550154, in Dillon, *Dachau*, 54-55.

⁶⁵ B. Heilig, *Men Crucified* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1941), 26-27.

⁶⁶ P. Wallner, *By Order of the Gestapo: A Record of Life in Dachau and Buchenwald Concentration Camps* (London: John Murray, 1941), 88.

boundaries did not spread to later camps like Auschwitz, according to Setkiewicz, where non-commissioned officers and their superiors ate separately, and the latter opted to leave icebreaker evenings between the ranks as swiftly as possible.⁶⁷ Moreover, Aniela Bednarska, a Polish servant at the Höss residence, remembered being told by an Auschwitz Kapo (common term for *Funktionshäftling*, or prisoner functionary, SS-appointed assistants from the prisoner population) that when the Höss family hosted SS guests from the camp staff, they always behaved formally towards the commandant.⁶⁸ Although Eicke's efforts to dissolve rank boundaries did not create an enduring trend for the broader camp system, they were, nonetheless, important in showing both the unique status of Dachau as his own project camp and why the men were so captivated by his leadership.

Despite Eicke's failure to remove rank barriers in the long-term, he was sincerely loyal to his men, telling them, "I am ready to listen at any time to the youngest comrade and will stand up for any comrade if he proves an honest and open character".⁶⁹ He once wrote a letter of complaint to the Bavarian police chief after one of his men, Max Kögel, was rejected when he applied for a police job due to previous bankruptcy. He wrote that Kögel was "an honest man; as a discharged soldier and one of the chief fighters for Adolf Hitler, he was found worthy of serving as an SS officer. His achievements and loyalty speak for themselves. Were he not honest and loyal, I would have already expelled him".⁷⁰ This example encapsulates the lengths to which Eicke would go for his men, including in situations where he personally had nothing to gain. Such devotion was appreciated by his men and helped secure their reciprocated loyalty and, in some cases, idolisation. At times, Eicke gathered to drink with his men, an exercise well beyond the scope of the bureaucratic, alcohol-avoiding Himmler, which undoubtedly helped Eicke ingratiate himself with his SS inferiors. One could not suppose that these efforts were in vain, with the men under his command referring to him fondly as "Papa Eicke" for his paternalistic demeanour and dependability.⁷¹ One such adoring SS man was Johannes Hassebroek, who at 25 years old was handpicked by Eicke in 1936 as a platoon leader, again showing Eicke's faith in youth. Hassebroek eventually served as the commandant of Gross-Rosen concentration camp, evidencing Eicke's ability to see and nurture potential within his ranks. Speaking of Eicke 40 years later, Hassebroek said that "he was a true friend, and we were his friends in the way that only real men can be... Eicke was dynamic, the source of the special brotherhood-in-

⁶⁷ P. Setkiewicz (ed.), *The Private Lives of the Auschwitz SS* (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2014), 7.

⁶⁸ Testimony of Aniela Bednarska, from APMA-B, Statements Collection, vol. 34, 13-18, in *ibid.*, 115.

⁶⁹ Document 148 – Theodor Eicke's Commandant's Order 1/34 for the Lichtenberg concentration camp issued 2 June 1934 in Wachsmann & Goeschel, *Nazi Concentration Camps, 1933-1939*, 151.

⁷⁰ From BDC, Personnel Files, Max Kögel Personnel File, in Segev, *Soldiers of Evil*, 115-116.

⁷¹ Wachsmann, *KL*, 104.

arms which joined each of us with all the others and all of us as one with Eicke".⁷² Many others who served in Dachau in the 1930s carried similarly deep affection for their mentor into the later KL as their careers progressed, making the survival of Eicke's vision for the KL through the war years more understandable. This nurturing of Eicke's ideals in later years was aided by graduates of the 'Dachau School' reaching leadership positions like Hassebroek. Eicke's loyalty and willingness to dissolve rank barriers seemingly represented an effort to cultivate vertical comradeship, a concept from Thomas Kühne discussed in this thesis' introduction, where his men felt his paternal affection. Based on their coining of the nickname "Papa Eicke" and his enduring reputation as a great comrade, one must say that Eicke's efforts met with success.

The role of Eicke's personality in ensuring his men followed his will was more complex than just endearing his subordinates towards him. Accepting Eicke's absolute authority was an unconditional prerequisite for being welcomed into the Camp SS fraternity. Eicke's will trumped all, and, echoing the importance of the *Führerprinzip*, as the maxim that adorned his writing paper read, "only one thing matters: the order given".⁷³ It was clear that there was a demand for reciprocation of the loyalty he offered to his men, and an equally clear statement that should this duty of loyalty be failed, one would be severely punished. In this sense, Eicke's handling of subordinates reflected that of Himmler; whether Eicke was aware that he endeavoured to manipulate the mechanics of loyalty to indoctrinate his men in the same way that his superior had done with him is doubtful.⁷⁴

Demotions in rank, brief arrest and financial penalties were available to the SS in the pre-war period, but the most severe punishments were temporary *Ausschluss* (exclusion) and the more terminal *Ausstossung* (expulsion).⁷⁵ One example of the severity of Eicke's wrath when dealing with men who failed him was recalled by Höss from his own days as a recruit in Dachau. After being found guilty of stealing meat with prisoners from the camp's slaughterhouse and selling it on the black market, four SS men were sentenced to severe prison terms by a Munich criminal court. The SS courts were not in existence until later, so these men were prosecuted externally, and Eicke dealt with their dismissal personally. He paraded them in front of Dachau's whole guard regiment, personally stripped them of their rank and dishonourably discharged them. He complimented the show with a lecture to the rest of the regiment, stating that, if he could, he would have flogged them and put them in the concentration camp, so abhorrent was their betrayal. It was Himmler who would not allow such severe retribution, showing that the subordinate was at times more radical than the Reichsführer himself. Whilst Himmler, as the previous chapter showed, wished to minimise publicity of SS

⁷² Johannes Hassebroek interview in Segev, *Soldiers of Evil*, 117.

⁷³ P. Berben, *Dachau: The Official History 1933-1945* (London: The Norfolk Press, 1975), 45.

⁷⁴ Weise, *Eicke*, 374.

⁷⁵ From *Staatsarchiv Munich*, NSDAP 750, Gruppenbefehl Nr 5, 27 October 1933, in Dillon, *Dachau*, 65.

misdeemeanours, the wrathful Eicke prioritised punishment above prestige. This example also encapsulates the sort of career-ending embarrassment that Camp SS men dreaded as punishment for failing in their duty. Abiding by the 'tolerance means weakness' guidelines and behaving brutally enough to earn a reputation was much more attractive than risking Eicke's deep, personal resentment for behaving weakly in the KL. Had Eicke remained in the KL to fiercely defend SS principles during the war, one might suppose that the system's endemic problem with indiscipline might have been somewhat mitigated. The permitting of his departure to the front should be seen as a major strategic misstep from Himmler.

Höss stated that a similarly harsh fate awaited any others within the camp's SS who defied Eicke and got involved with prisoners, even out of compassion.⁷⁶ Eicke's absolute intolerance of gestures of lenience and support towards the SS' captives set the trend for continued merciless behaviours through the KL's existence. On the other hand, Eicke did at times punish SS men for operating in the brutal, hard manner he had demanded. In his role as camp inspector, Eicke saw to the dismissal of Paul Zeidler, an SS guard in Sachsenhausen, for the murder of Friedrich Weissler in February 1937. It would appear, based on the typically unpunished camp deaths, that Zeidler was punished for something other than the murder. In fact, the crime he was guilty of was being caught by the external authorities which brought unwelcome pressure upon the SS.⁷⁷ Eicke had promised loyalty to his men, but in this case the guard had failed to mask his actions adequately with a claim of self-defence, or similar justification for killing a prisoner, thus failing Eicke and putting the SS under the spotlight. Whilst seemingly less phobic of public awareness of SS transgressions than Himmler, the KL chief was still aware that publicity from such stories was unhelpful. Zeidler thus found himself in prison, having paid with his SS career. His major mistake had not been murdering Weissler but failing to honour the developing methodology of the camps. During Wäckerle's careless management of Dachau, rogue murders were continually accepted and encouraged, but the KL under Eicke would not accommodate thoughtlessness. The camp inspector did not care about the deaths of prisoners, but he did care about order, and this meant that murder had to be either premeditated with a justification or spontaneous with an excuse swiftly fabricated. As will be seen frequently through this study, KL murders were regularly tenuously tied to justifications found in Eicke's guidelines. Eicke thus created the formula for killing in the camps which, despite countless unpunished instances wherein the process was ignored, endured as the default killing process throughout the KL's existence.

⁷⁶ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 83.

⁷⁷ Wachsmann, *KL*, 107-108.

To further show the impact of the themes discussed above, it is helpful to draw attention to examples of SS behaviour, at Dachau in particular, during the pre-war period. The preceding chapter established that the SS were guilty of behaving sadistically, but it is helpful to examine the specific examples from this period in more depth. One case of SS eagerness to kill in early Dachau, though far from unusual, was described by former prisoner Carl Nussbaum. The SS guards, determined to judge a prisoner as refusing orders and thus being in mutiny, ordered Nussbaum and a group of his fellows to clear waste out of an excrement cart with their bare hands. Nussbaum recalled that a Social Democrat lawyer charged with carrying out the same task refused to do it and was shot dead.⁷⁸ In this situation, the SS, who regularly utilised labour as a means for dehumanisation and punishment in the early camps, made the job especially unbearable by not providing hand protection, to tempt non-collaboration and subsequently apply the camp's guidelines to suit their desire. Once again showing the SS' tendency to use labour as a means of torment, a few weeks after his arrival in 1935, Karl Röder saw a guard hit a prisoner in the knee with his rifle whilst he carried a heavy plank with another inmate. Collapsing and dropping the plank, trapping the other prisoner beneath it, the victim tried to pick the plank up whilst the SS man harassed him furiously. Röder saw the guard throw the man's cap away and, knowing what was coming next, the prisoner refused to retrieve it, getting beaten with the guard's rifle until he relented. After the prisoner collected his cap, the SS man shot the prisoner twice whilst he was standing and then as the prisoner crawled towards him, he fired the rest of his bullets at him.⁷⁹ Since Röder does not state that the cap was thrown beyond the camp boundaries the guard seemingly threw it randomly with the intention of accusing his victim of running away from him. This thus permitted his use of lethal force.

Fritz Ecker, wrote about the "most feared" of Dachau's tormentors, Hans Steinbrenner, mentioned earlier, who Ecker described as an SS "flogging hero and murderer" who had the nicknames "Murdering Fire-Raiser", "The Long Terror", and "Ivan the Terrible".⁸⁰ Steinbrenner was, from Ecker's evidence, guilty of having multiple vices which were unsurprising considering the fallacy of the Camp SS' supposed elite status. He enjoyed punishment immensely, and according to Ecker, after July 1933, he started to cheat prisoners out of money as "donations" to him. Ecker added that, "where these donations went was clear from the drunkenness of Steinbrenner and his friends".⁸¹ As seen previously, sadism, financial corruption and alcohol abuse were common failures of duty which often manifested themselves together. However, Steinbrenner was clearly, from Ecker's description,

⁷⁸ WL, Testimonies, Carl Nussbaum's experiences in Dachau.

⁷⁹ K. Röder, *Nachtwache: 10 Jahre KZ Dachau und Flossenbürg* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1985), 23-25.

⁸⁰ Report by the Social Democrat prisoner Fritz Ecker on Dachau SS guards, published in 1934, in Wachsmann & Goeschel, *Nazi Concentration Camps, 1933-1939*, 39.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

an effective tormentor, and the sort of hard man that Eicke's 'tolerance means weakness' ethos was compatible with. In another report from the same period, Ecker describes the cruelty of an SS man named Brummer, the "kitchen bull", who upon apprehending a thief struck him in the face about twenty times "till the blood spurted from his nose and mouth". The man was then put on a crate with a board, labelling him a thief, hung around his neck and Brummer drenched the man with several buckets of cold water.⁸² Whilst it is difficult to assert, without relevant statements from these perpetrators, that these actions were carried out directly due to Eicke's contribution in Dachau, his presence and reforms facilitated them. Providing they were loyal to the commandant and the SS, Eicke's Dachau allowed guards to be violent, and many testimonies exist to bear witness to the SS' willingness to behave this way even at this early point in the camp system's history.

Overall, whilst Eicke was able to charm his men and create a binding paternal relationship with many of them, the risks of failing him were apparent. The complex personality of Dachau's second commandant undoubtedly helped to ensure the obedience and compliance of SS subordinates, going some way to ensuring they did not fail to implement his orders in the camp, regardless of how testing they were. After all, the benefits of being in Eicke's good graces were pleasant and merely required full submission to his methods, yet the cost of losing his favour was potentially life-ruining. Acknowledging the charisma Eicke wielded, it is unsurprising that he was able to convince the men under his command, before his Dachau commission, to risk their careers in his past rivalry with *Gauleiter* Bürckel. The sum of early Dachau's parts can be seen in the preceding paragraphs; simply put, many SS men in the early KL were willing to act in sadistic ways which were not in synchronisation with Himmler's rose-tinted view of his men. The problem was that Eicke's guidelines and hardman rhetoric demanded roughness which inevitably, because of numerous background factors and SS habits considered in the first two chapters, spilled over into brutality. The result was that early Dachau succeeded in breaking the will of prisoners, postured itself as an essential tool of National Socialism, and allowed its commandant's reach to grow from regional to national.

Eicke's Promotion to the IKL and the Spread of Dachau's Practices

Understandably, Himmler considered Eicke's reign at Dachau a success and, just over one year after his appointment to the position of commandant, Himmler officially acknowledged Eicke as the head of the office of the IKL on 4 July 1934. An official directive from the Reichsführer, from December that year, clarified that matters of organisation, administration, economic management, and the employment of SS personnel on guard duties all fell within Eicke's jurisdiction. It also stressed that

⁸² Report by Fritz Ecker on the "self-justice of the prisoners" in the Dachau camp, published in 1934, in *Ibid.*, 48.

the inspector was directly subordinated to Himmler, granting Eicke significant influence.⁸³ That in just over a year since releasing Eicke from his hospital confinement, and subsequently trusting him with the vastly important Dachau camp, Himmler promoted the commandant and assigned him executive powers over the whole KL supports Weise's hypothesis that the two men shared a particularly special relationship. Eicke's new title meant that he was no longer commandant at Dachau, although his takeover of the camp at Lichtenburg, in Saxony, on 28 May had already signified the evolution of his role into a more indispensable one.⁸⁴ It is interesting to note that, based upon Eicke's posturing as a preferable alternative to the extant Prussian administration and his neglect of prisoners' welfare at the camp, Johannes Tuchel identified Eicke's move as "a pure claim to power, not competence".⁸⁵ This view naturally depends on what Eicke is being judged on; for instance as a guarantor of prisoner wellbeing Eicke might be viewed as incompetent, although this would be based upon the supposition that he was endeavouring to protect inmates. However, judging Eicke's transfer to Lichtenburg purely in terms of his spreading the Dachau methods and his centralising of the KL, it is hard to view his actions as incompetent as the following shows.

Upon Eicke's arrival at Lichtenburg he dismissed the previous commandant, Hans Faust, for corruption, an allegation which was later proven to have been unfounded, showing that Eicke could be ruthless in his methods. He then swiftly implemented new camp guidelines.⁸⁶ On 1 June, just three days after his takeover, Eicke's trademark 'tolerance means weakness' motto spread around Lichtenburg, affixed to the new regulations. The rules were the same as at Dachau, with the same incremental punishment system for identically categorised prisoner infractions.⁸⁷ It was clear that Dachau had come to Saxony. Eicke also established a political department, and it is worthwhile noting that these departments were an essential fixture in the increasingly centralised camps, giving the Gestapo a foothold from which they could interrogate and assess prisoners. At Lichtenburg, the exact comments made by Eicke, upon assessment of the situation, were: "State of the troops, in terms of mood and discipline: very good. State of the civilian camp administration: corrupt and lazy".⁸⁸ The assertion was that the camp, run by a non-SS commandant, was falling short of the

⁸³ Document 72 – Directive by Heinrich Himmler on the establishment of the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps, 10 December 1934, in Goeschel & Wachsmann, *Nazi Concentration Camps, 1933-1939*, 78-79.

⁸⁴ Wachsmann, *KL*, 84.

⁸⁵ J. Tuchel, 'Theodor Eicke im Konzentrationslager Lichtenburg: Die Etablierung der Inspektion der Konzentrationslager im Sommer 1934' in S. Hördler & S. Jacobbeit (eds.), *Lichtenburg: Ein deutsches Konzentrationslager* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2009), 74.

⁸⁶ Tuchel, *Konzentrationslager*, 162.

⁸⁷ ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *The Manchester Guardian*, 10 January 1935, 4.

⁸⁸ Document 147 – Report by Theodor Eicke regarding his takeover of the Lichtenberg camp, dated 2 June 1934, in Goeschel & Wachsmann, *Nazi Concentration Camps, 1933-1939*, 150.

expected standards. The reference to laziness was most likely, by analysis of the evidence, related to the lack of hardness in Lichtenburg's administration which Eicke wanted to see within the camps.

Prisoner testimonies from pre-Eicke Lichtenburg describe the camp as a tolerable place of incarceration. Alfred Benjamin felt that he was "extremely lucky" to be transferred to Lichtenburg from the Papenburg camp in Prussia, where he had been abused by the SS. He described the commandant at Lichtenburg, a former police officer, as having been strict but proper, and that in comparison to Benjamin's prior misfortune, the abuse and mistreatment had stopped.⁸⁹ A prisoner tailor, Abraham Rajbenbach, further drew attention to some elements of Lichtenburg's operation which would have been unthinkable under Eicke's gaze. He mentioned that whilst leading the tailors in Lichtenburg, he asked their armed guard to stop overseeing him and his colleagues, and that the guard acquiesced.⁹⁰ Under Eicke's authority, a transgression against the unquestionable authority of the guards such as this, would have almost certainly, provided the guidelines were followed, led to harsh punishment. Whosoever, by the rules of Dachau, in the role of a foreman "violates the authority of an SS man responsible for discipline [and] assumes the rights of a superior towards other prisoners" would be punishable with eight days of strict arrest and 25 lashes at either side of this arrest.⁹¹ Over Rajbenbach's six months at Lichtenburg he observed no cruelty and stated, like Benjamin, that the commandant was proper and allowed no abuse. Further, he added that the commandant visited his tailor's workshop and paid him two marks for his services.⁹² This would also have been considered an abhorrent display of weakness by Eicke, and these kinds of acts may well have prompted him to reach his conclusions about corruption as well.

Furthermore, it is rational to suppose that prior to Eicke's arrival, Lichtenburg was administered along the lines of a prison, which would have been insufficient for Himmler in serving as a tool of terror and deterrence against Nazi enemies. Thus, Eicke, exemplary in his management of Dachau, was sent in to bring the camp up to the standard set by his men in Bavaria. His warning to the SS guards at Lichtenburg shortly after his arrival signalled his intentions to fix the camp "stone upon stone until completion but cast aside bad stones as worthless".⁹³ In short, the inflexible rule that 'tolerance means weakness' had taken root in Lichtenburg and Eicke would not tread gently in emulating his Bavarian model camp. This further enhances the suggestion that it was Eicke who was able to cultivate the atmosphere of violent abuses and Himmler, at least, certainly viewed him as the

⁸⁹ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account of Alfred Benjamin of his experiences of Papenburg and Lichtenburg.

⁹⁰ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account of Abraham Rajbenbach of his experience in Lichtenburg.

⁹¹ WL, 1655/2822, Regulations at Dachau, 1.

⁹² WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account of Abraham Rajbenbach.

⁹³ Document 148 – Eicke's order for Lichtenburg, 2 June 1934, in Wachsmann & Goeschel, *The Nazi Concentration Camps, 1933-1939*, 151.

key to spreading the organised terror which was thriving in southern Germany. Yet, Himmler interfered and appointed *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Bernhard Schmidt as commandant, a man Eicke had not personally considered for the role. Schmidt, appointed on 5 July 1934, was replaced in March 1935 during what transpired to be an extended period in which Tuchel blames Eicke for deploying incompetent men in the camp.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, 14 future KL commandants including Arthur Liebehenschel, of Auschwitz and Majdanek, were trained at Lichtenburg which showed that, on balance, Eicke's personnel appointments tended to work out favourably for the KL in the long-run. It is noteworthy that neither Liebehenschel, nor eight of the 14 other future commandants, ever served in Dachau.⁹⁵

Stefan Hördler has also identified a transfer trend wherein many of Lichtenburg's officers and enlisted men moved to the newer camps built by the SS together as part of a process of *Kaderschmiede* ('squad forging'). One such path was from Lichtenburg to Flossenbürg via Buchenwald and Hördler also identified a trend of movement from Lichtenburg directly to the newer Sachsenhausen camp.⁹⁶ In this way, Lichtenburg served as a springboard from which groups of SS men, familiar to one another, moved to new camps where they could continue to work together. In the case of the Lichtenburg-Buchenwald route, men who had learned to structure their violence together at the former went on to form the core of the wartime murder clique Commando 99 at Buchenwald which will be discussed in the following chapter. In short, the transfer of established colleagues could contribute to the emergence of killing gangs. Moreover, Hördler has reasonably asserted that the camp system "derived as much from practice at the Lichtenburg camp in Prussia as from practice at the better-studied Dachau camp in Bavaria".⁹⁷ Whilst Hördler draws reasonable conclusions from the growing importance of Lichtenburg in the early system, its significance only grew after Eicke's takeover and implementation of Dachau's guidelines and management style. In short, Lichtenburg's status was reliant upon what it took from its, indeed better-studied, Bavarian sister camp. To this end, regarding the development of future SS guards and leaders, it is more prudent to consider *who* rather than *where*. Essentially, Eicke was Dachau, and he became Lichtenburg; the IKL chief's personality and iron will took hold of these camps and fostered the future SS perpetrators within.

⁹⁴ Tuchel, 'Theodor Eicke im Konzentrationslager Lichtenburg' in Hördler & Jacobeit, *Lichtenburg*, 65-66 and 72-73.

⁹⁵ S. Hördler, 'Before the Holocaust: Concentration Camp Lichtenburg and the Evolution of the Nazi Camp System', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 25:1 (2011), 100-126, 100 and 111.

⁹⁶ S. Hördler, 'SS-Kaderschmiede Lichtenburg: Zur Bedeutung des KZ Lichtenburg in der Vorkriegszeit' in Hördler & Jacobeit, *Lichtenburg*, 127-128.

⁹⁷ Hördler, 'Before the Holocaust', 100.

Following Eicke's overhaul at Lichtenburg it was clear that he was determined to spread his administrative style across Germany. Just over two months after his takeover of Lichtenburg in May, on 1 August 1934 a set of Eicke's guidelines came into action at the Esterwegen KL, in the country's northwest. The camp was part of an unsuccessful experiment in running protective custody camps by the Prussian administration, under Hermann Göring, which led to the closure of two out of four camps in the Emsland region by April 1934.⁹⁸ Accepting failure, Göring permitted Himmler to take over Esterwegen on 20 June 1934, replacing the incumbent SA with his Camp SS.⁹⁹ Despite the camp's geographical distance and dissimilar formative history to Dachau, which might have justified some reassessment or alterations of the rulebook, many sections of Esterwegen's guidelines read identically to those of the former. 'Tolerance means weakness' was once again highly emphasised and Esterwegen's punishments for crimes mirrored Dachau's, increasing in the same level of severity.¹⁰⁰ Eicke entrusted the enforcing of the Dachau methods in Esterwegen to SS-*Standartenführer* Hans Loritz, a war veteran who had earlier requested transfer to work under Eicke at Dachau because they shared a good relationship.¹⁰¹ Soon, Eicke became a role model for Loritz' management due to his regulations' combination of arbitrary exercising of power and their exaggeration of pseudo-military order. Loritz often copied his superior's practices such as forcing his men to watch prisoner punishments to desensitise them.¹⁰² Loritz was eager in the application of the regulations and whilst the majority of his charges were incarcerated on political grounds, the commandant targeted Jews for especially difficult and degrading labour.¹⁰³ The conclusions that one may reach from Eicke's direct export of Dachau's guidelines are multiple. Firstly, the lack of significant alteration shows that in the opinion of Himmler and the IKL, the Dachau regulations functioned as well as they could have hoped. Secondly, the universalising of KL rules facilitated the seamless movement of staff between camps using the same guidelines, such as Dachau, Lichtenburg and Esterwegen in 1934. Loritz's transfer encapsulates this well. This was also critically important during the late war evacuation period, as it allowed staff who withdrew from endangered camps to filter into safer camps, enabling the KL to operate with some normality in its most chaotic period. Essentially, through his determination to colonise other camps with his own superior practices in the

⁹⁸ Wachsmann, *KL*, 47-52.

⁹⁹ Longerich, *Himmler*, 183.

¹⁰⁰ WL, 1988/1, Esterwegen Concentration Camp Rulebook.

¹⁰¹ D. Riedel, 'A 'Political Soldier' and 'Practitioner of Violence': The Concentration Camp Commandant Hans Loritz', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 45:3 (2010), 555-575, 561.

¹⁰² D. Riedel, *Ordnungshüter und Massenmörder im Dienst der "Volksgemeinschaft": Der KZ-Kommandant Hans Loritz* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2010), 350 and 100.

¹⁰³ Riedel, 'A 'Political Soldier' and 'Practitioner of Violence', 562.

mid-1930s, Eicke built the foundations of uniformed operation which the KL heavily relied upon by the second half of 1944.

The previous chapter has already considered the failure of the SS to successfully embed its ideology into all its members. Despite this, engagement with the camps shows that there were successes and Eicke's system was central to much of this. Political schooling was an important element of Eicke's 'Dachau School' with a minimum of two hours being delivered to SS men each week according to his plan, with time split between studying the current 'political situation' and learning about the key tenets of SS ideology. The political lectures were another part of Dachau's methodology which was to be exported across the KL system, again showing Himmler's prized model camp's value to the broader SS effort. Within the political tutoring, emphasis was placed upon the role of the SS as a 'protective wall' for Nazi Germany as well as fulfilling the role of shock troops on the ideological front lines.¹⁰⁴ Dillon has stated that it is difficult to make any quantitative statements regarding the success that political lecturing had upon the camp guards. However, he does make the assessment that Himmler and Eicke, at least, saw value in investing their limited resources into the endeavour as they issued propaganda leaflets and encouraged SS-men to embrace lectures and ideological discussion throughout the Third Reich's existence.¹⁰⁵ Prisoners of the camps often perceived their young abusers' behaviours as the results of purposeful training; one Dachau inmate, writing under the pseudonym Peter Wallner, was shocked by the behaviour of teenage SS men who accompanied them in their work commandos. The youngsters' antisemitic remarks such as "they march like currency smugglers!" prompted Wallner to write that "[it] came to me these children were deliberately trained to become beasts".¹⁰⁶ Paul Martin Neurath, who was also at Dachau and then Buchenwald from 1938, argued that based upon the youth of many 18-year-old camp guards, they had been about 12 when Hitler came to power and could not remember the struggles from the Weimar years. For this reason, he argued that the young SS were taught to hate inside the camp, alleging that the SS "didn't get sadists, they made them".¹⁰⁷ There is much truth to this, the SS' continued belief in the value of ideological instruction showed as much, but, as Chapter One examined, youth influences were critical in engraining discriminatory views into young recruits.

One aspect of SS ideology was the encouragement of its men to leave the Church and by the end of 1938, 69 percent of SS-TV men from the camps had no attachment to the Church. This put them ahead of the rest of the SS, including the 54 percent non-affiliation of the particularly ideologically

¹⁰⁴ Dillon, *Dachau*, 81.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁰⁶ Wallner, *By Order of the Gestapo*, 111-112.

¹⁰⁷ P.M. Neurath, *The Society of Terror: Inside the Dachau and Buchenwald Concentration Camps* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2005), 7 and 71.

imbued *SS-Verfügungstruppe*.¹⁰⁸ Thus, considering the willingness of almost three-quarters of the SS-TV men from 1938 to adhere to at least one important part of SS ideology, the political lectures hit their mark with some of the Camp SS. Alongside his guidelines, Eicke's political schooling reached Esterwegen, and one anonymous Jewish prisoner recalled his interpretation of the effect that these lectures had upon the young minds of the camp guards. The prisoner, writing of his incarceration during 1936 and who claimed to have received both the Iron Cross First and Second class in the First World War, remembered how the "18-year-old boys" who guarded the camp "seemed to have the most ridiculous ideas about Jews":

How often I was asked "How come you are so strong?" My reply that I played sport when I was young produced complete astonishment. As I came to a ditch one day, the sentry suddenly ordered "Chuck the Jew into the water". "Aye aye, Sir, I can swim". "Hey, the Jew can swim? Jump in, you Jew!". In this way I unwillingly got a refreshing dip. The sentries were quite amazed when they saw I was a good swimmer.¹⁰⁹

This prisoner was aware of the political lectures the camp guards received, particularly regarding the Jewish Question, and stated that discussion of the Talmud provoked particularly outrageous claims from the guards, with some accusing the prisoners of reading a text which "allows you to rape little girls".¹¹⁰

One might be tempted to understate the contribution that lectures made to this toxic line of thought present in the minds of these young SS men, and instead focus almost solely upon the prejudices these men brought into the SS, and the camp, with them from their youth. This would be something of an error, despite the critically important role played by the toxic aspects of German schooling and extracurricular youth clubs explored previously. The aforementioned Esterwegen prisoner shows this in another conversation he had with a guard who was "trying to be a bit more objective". The guard stated, despite this man's attempts to carefully redress the misconceptions he had of Jews, "I had Jewish friends at one time too, but now I realise what vampires you are".¹¹¹ The way in which the guard had explained his position implied that his antisemitic revelations had not come in his earlier life. Rather, by his own admission, the guard had had Jewish friends when he was younger but "now", or relatively recently, his opinion had changed, suggesting that his service in the SS had helped him to reach his newest conclusions. Considering the above, weekly sessions of political

¹⁰⁸ From E.E. Knoebel, 'Racial Illusion and Military Necessity: A Study of SS Political Objectives in occupied Belgium', Phil. Diss. (Colorado, 1965), 35. in H. Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's SS* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 449.

¹⁰⁹ WL, Testimonies, 1656/3/8/684, Anonymous Author, 1935/1936.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

tuition should be granted a degree of credibility regarding their ability to make many SS men within the camps think and act more in line with the Reichsführer and his leading camp inspector, Eicke. Höss, having had much first-hand experience of the effects of the political lectures, summarised their effects as such: “Because of [Eicke’s] constant hammering he created a hatred, an animosity against the prisoners which is incomprehensible and which outsiders cannot understand”.¹¹²

The export of Dachau’s personnel, who had been exposed to Eicke’s indoctrination the longest, to other camps within the system was not accidental but, rather, was an active policy employed by the camp inspector. The process was indeed an effective one, as was seen in the introduction to this chapter in relation to the dispersal of future camp commandants through the system. In the same vein as Loritz, Jakob Weiseborn went on to become commandant of Flossenbürg after 1938, having first been dispatched from Dachau to Sachsenhausen as part of the effort to spread the former’s practices via committed disciples of the Eicke style. In fact, most of Sachsenhausen’s staff at this time were experienced camp men, including a former confidant of Eicke’s, Michael Lippert, who had joined Eicke in executing SA leader Ernst Röhm in 1934. When Buchenwald was established in 1937, the process was repeated with Weiseborn, Lippert, and Karl Koch, who later became commandant, transferring from Sachsenhausen to implement the established operational practices in the new camp. Koch had prior experience as commandant from both Columbia Haus and Esterwegen proving his capacity to run camps for Eicke. By 1945, Koch had been completely disgraced due to an SS investigator finding evidence of the kind of indulgent self-enrichment that Himmler loathed, which had undermined his camp management for years. His selfish management style and sadistic personality prompted a great deal of rogue behaviour from his subordinates which will be seen in Chapter Four. It is interesting to note that Loritz, despite zealously supporting Eicke’s KL, was also known for his own self-enrichment and corrupt behaviours. He used KL prisoners for private labour projects, including building a villa on the Wolfgangsee, which, due to the KL’s prioritisation of productivity in 1942, prompted his transfer away from the KL to Norway.¹¹³ Despite Koch’s corruption, in his earlier KL career he convincingly portrayed himself as a true subscriber to SS ideology. He wedded his second wife, Ilse, in a night-time Germanic pagan ceremony in the forest around Sachsenhausen with torch-bearing SS men watching on.¹¹⁴ He was also zealous in forcing his men to subscribe to the SS lifestyle. Mimicking the paternalistic Eicke, albeit with a heavier hand, he berated his troops for poor attendance at communal meals on Sundays, telling abstainers they should leave the SS and “stuff their fat bellies somewhere else”. In one order from 1939, he singled

¹¹² Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 94.

¹¹³ Riedel, *Ordnungshüter und Massenmörder*, 348-349 and Riedel, ‘A ‘Political Soldier’ and ‘Practitioner of Violence’, 569-572.

¹¹⁴ Section on Weiseborn, Lippert and Koch from Wachsmann, *KL*, 117-118.

out Buchenwald SS men who had not yet submitted declarations of withdrawal from the Church, warning that this ought to be rectified immediately.¹¹⁵

Moreover, Eicke considered Loritz and Koch to be important enough cogs in his machine that he chose to consult them regarding the appointment of other camp officials.¹¹⁶ On numerous occasions, men who had committed infractions and unsatisfactory officers were sent to either of Eicke's assistants to be assessed and, if possible, reformed. Hermann Baranowski, at the time commandant of Lichtenburg, was sent to Dachau in 1936 where Loritz had taken over as commandant, due to causing friction with his guards as a result of his personal ambition. The punitive transfer and Loritz' influence "had the desired effect. Baranowski bowed to what was expected of him and from the very first day of his transfer gave no further cause for complaint".¹¹⁷ By contrast, Loritz rejected SS-*Oberführer* Karl Taus for being too soft when he was sent to Dachau for review. Underlining the cooperative nature of Eicke's triumvirate of personnel managers, Koch supported Loritz' assessment. Dirk Riedel has thus convincingly argued that in rejecting moderate men like Taus whilst serving as KL gatekeepers, Loritz and Eicke were ensuring the brutality of approved men, preventing any slackening of prisoner handling.¹¹⁸ Höss also remarked upon the indoctrinatory value of Koch and Loritz, describing them as catalysts for the hatred disseminated by the political lectures. According to him, in the eyes of Koch and Loritz, the prisoners were not humans but 'Russians' or 'Neanderthals'. The hardcore guards were strengthened in their will by these lectures as well as by the support shown by commandants such as Koch and Loritz. It is not surprising that inmates were reportedly on edge following lectures due to the visible intensification of SS hostility.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, the personnel transfer policy shows that the effort to politicise the men of the Camp SS was a two-pronged attack. Political lectures were supplemented in camps around the Reich by the presence of devotees Eicke deemed to be good examples of SS men. These exemplary individuals had often spent time in the camps that had been dominated by the inspector's administration from the beginning of his mission to make Himmler's vision a reality.

Eicke's superior role at the IKL meant that he was responsible for maintaining the progress of the camps towards uniformity and preventing backwards steps. At Dachau, his own successor proved to be a threat to the progress he had made and Eicke's response again highlighted the camp inspector's

¹¹⁵ Karl Koch command order No. 64, 12 October 1938 and No. 85, 20 March 1939 in Gedenkstätte Buchenwald (ed.), *Buchenwald Concentration Camp 1937-1945: A Guide to the Permanent Historical Exhibition* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2010), 39.

¹¹⁶ Wachsmann, *KL*, 118.

¹¹⁷ From *Bundesarchiv*, Berlin, SS File Baranowski, Hermann, Beurteilung, 16 October 1936 in Riedel, 'A Political Soldier' and 'Practitioner of Violence', 566.

¹¹⁸ Riedel, 'A Political Soldier' and 'Practitioner of Violence', 566-567.

¹¹⁹ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 94.

invaluable role to the development of the KL system. Heinrich Deubel was trusted with Dachau's management after Eicke's promotion and appeared to have the necessary credentials. He had spent almost two years as an enemy prisoner during the First World War, had maintained paramilitary involvement following the conflict and joined the SS relatively early in 1926.¹²⁰ Nonetheless, he fell short of Himmler's expectations and whilst his rule was not especially soft – at least 13 people were known to have died in Dachau in 1935 – it was perceived thus by the IKL. Deubel's approach permitted prisoner slacking and enabled them to mingle with one another. Meanwhile, his attempts to provide mathematics and language classes, as well as his suggestion to send a communist functionary on a Nazi-sponsored cruise to win him over, showed an apparent misunderstanding of how the KL was supposed to operate.¹²¹ Unless the progress made in Dachau since Wackerle's dismissal was to be lost, Deubel had to be removed. A readymade replacement was found in Loritz whose Eicke-inspired reign at Esterwegen was seen positively by the IKL.

Loritz met with notable success at Dachau and undid Deubel's back steps, banning the camp schooling of prisoners and doing away with his lax handling of Nazi enemies. With bombast reminiscent of Eicke, at his first prisoner rollcall he slammed the Deubel administration and organised a mass flogging to set the tone for his rule.¹²² He assembled the Dachau SS as if they were at a "military parade on some state occasion" and bellowed at the inmates: "Now you shall see what happens to anyone guilty of a breach of camp discipline. Let nobody stir or so much as turn a hair, or it'll be the [flogging] horse for him on the spot. Remember that!"¹²³ Labour was especially detrimental to prisoners' wellbeing under the Loritz regime; Peter Wallner, claimed that "what the Nazis wanted was not to make us work or perform a useful task, but to make us exhaust ourselves with toil, any toil". Sometimes, the work would simply consist of moving mountains of rubble from point A to point B and then back again. This hurried work caused injuries including hand sores which when poorly treated led to amputations.¹²⁴ Fred Pelican, another who endured Loritz' Dachau, estimated that 15-20 percent of the arrivals he entered the camp with in 1938 had perished after six weeks. Those who survived the hard work itself experienced a decline in their health over the winter period largely due to the exposure to the weather. When a prisoner doctor endeavoured to help frostbitten workers by applying Vaseline to their hands in a largely futile effort to ameliorate their symptoms, the Dachau guards hanged him by his arms for three hours in punishment.¹²⁵ The SS were

¹²⁰ Tuchel, *Konzentrationslager*, 372.

¹²¹ Wachsmann, *KL*, 116.

¹²² Riedel, *Ordnungshüter und Massenmörder*, 141-142.

¹²³ Heilig, *Men Crucified*, 91.

¹²⁴ Wallner, *By Order of the Gestapo*, 47 and 68-69.

¹²⁵ F. Pelican, *From Dachau to Dunkirk* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1993), 16-19.

thus more amenable to seeing prisoners lose hands, as Wallner testifies, than they were to allowing medical professionals treat them and perhaps retain their usefulness to the SS.

The SS torture method called the 'Baum' ('tree') or 'Pfahl' ('post') experience was introduced into everyday usage during Loritz' reign in Dachau. According to Heilig, the agonising method, which saw prisoners suspended by their arms which were tied behind their backs, caused many victims to let out the kind of screams that one would imagine when told tales about hell. One victim of the ordeal survived an hour and half of 'Baum' torture but continued to wail ceaselessly in the block afterwards due to the residual arm pain, others unfortunate enough to experience the 'Baum' were identifiable from the way their arms were hung powerlessly at their sides after the trauma.¹²⁶ The extensive destruction wreaked upon prisoners by Loritz' favoured method of torment justifies Gordon Williamson's labelling him as one of Dachau's most sadistic commanders.¹²⁷ It is thus unsurprising that Loritz earned the nickname "Nero" from inmates.¹²⁸ The 'Baum' was also used at Buchenwald, where Martin Caspar remembered passing out from the torture before being chased back to work with immobile hands, and was later used in Auschwitz I's Block 11, showing that Loritz' contribution reached other parts of the KL.¹²⁹ Riedel has observed that the crimes that Loritz and his men committed brought them closer together; under his guidance they proved their toughness and encouraged each other in their exclusionary attitudes towards undesirable elements.¹³⁰ In this regard, the relationships fostered by Loritz fit the definition of Hans Buchheim's facilitatory negative camaraderie rather than a supportive comradeship. Riedel's supposition that the commandant and his men bonded through abuse indicates that this negative camaraderie also had a vertical structure. Additionally, the most important thing to take from Deubel's lacklustre failure and the subsequent terroristic turnaround from Loritz is that the IKL was unwilling to tolerate any undoing of the progress made in the camps or failure to follow the guidelines, and that Eicke was still capable of manipulating how the SS guards at ground-level were behaving despite his contact time with them decreasing.

There is value in looking at the response to Eicke's death on the Eastern Front in February 1943 to measure his contemporaries' perception of his value to the Nazi movement. The SS circulated an official obituary for Eicke following his death in which his personality traits were praised at length. Describing the *SS-Obergruppenführer* as "one of those magnificent men of our movement" the

¹²⁶ Heilig, *Men Crucified*, 25-28 and 129.

¹²⁷ G. Williamson, *The SS: Hitler's Instrument of Terror* (London: Amber Books, 2013), 271.

¹²⁸ Riedel, *Ordnungshüter und Massenmörder*, 25.

¹²⁹ Testimony of Martin Caspar in Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, *Buchenwald Concentration Camp*, 105.

¹³⁰ Riedel, *Ordnungshüter und Massenmörder*, 352.

obituary underlined that he was “bold, uncompromising, and unflinching”.¹³¹ Focus was given to Eicke’s hardness, which had cemented his reputation: “Eicke was tough, iron-hard... Eicke was not to be taken down. Where he had to stand, he did not give way. Never!”.¹³² The most important elements of the obituary, however, were that it heaped praise on Eicke’s influence on the SS-TV from 1934 and underlined his one-of-a-kind nature. It asserted that when Eicke took over the SS guards in 1934 “he already possessed that kindness to the soldier that is an inner counterbalance to the true tough. The existence of these guards was very uncertain... Eicke immediately created order... In these nine years he formed his troop and shaped it with his spirit”.¹³³ Regarding the former IKL chief’s special status, the obituary stressed the importance of not overstating irreplaceability but neatly surmised “there will not be a second Eicke”.¹³⁴ Furthermore, months after his death, Himmler venerated Eicke with evident affection. He held a minute’s silence for fallen comrades during his speech to SS officers at Posen in October 1943, mentioning only his “old comrade and friend” Eicke by name.¹³⁵ Himmler also described the first camp inspector as a “very gnarled, sometimes quite uncomfortable, but wonderful personality” in a speech to high-ranking *Kriegsmarine* officers in December.¹³⁶ Perhaps Himmler’s greatest tribute came in 1944 when he told *Wehrmacht* generals that Eicke’s main merit was not as a divisional commander of the *Waffen-SS* but in that “he had created this commendable organisation for the suppression of sub-humans”.¹³⁷ The SS themselves thus clearly recognised that Eicke was uniquely qualified for his responsibilities and was the KL’s leading visionary through the 1930s.

Altogether, it is clear that, as he climbed the SS ladder, Eicke made himself indispensable to the effort of expanding the Dachau style to the wider camp system. The events in Lichtenburg and Esterwegen showed how Dachau’s seed, once planted, and cultivated by its greatest proponent, could swiftly bring new camps in line with Himmler’s expectations. Despite the numerous failures of SS ideological teaching, already identified in this study, that clear examples of zealous embracement

¹³¹ *Arolsen Archives*, Obituary for the late SS-Obergruppenführer Theodor Eicke, present author’s trans. [Search for documents in the Arolsen Archives | I-ID-01 - Obituary for the late SS-Obergruppenführer Theodor Eicke | I-ID-01 - Nachruf für den verstorbenen SS-Obergruppenführer Theodor Eicke \(arolsen-archives.org\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]. Note that Eicke was promoted to the rank of *SS-Obergruppenführer* on 20 April 1942, Williams, *SS Elite*, Vol. I, 297.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Harvard Law School*, Nuremberg Trials Project, PS-1919, Speeches Concerning the SS and the Conduct of the War [Six Speeches], Speech at Posen 4 October 1943, 1, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Speeches concerning the SS and the conduct of the war \[six speeches\] \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023].

¹³⁶ From IfZ, MA 313, Bl. 3201 ff., RFSS auf Tagung für Befehlshaber der *Kriegsmarine* in Weimar, 16 December 1943 in Weise, *Eicke*, 8.

¹³⁷ From RFSS vor Generalen in Sonthofen, 21 June 1944, from B.F. Smith & Agnes Peterson (eds.), *Heinrich Himmlers Geheimreden 1933-1945* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1974), 200, in Weise, *Eicke*, 8.

of SS ideals existed in the early camps under Eicke's care is no coincidence. He was a true believer in the effectiveness of hardness, and his support of lectures, despite them missing their mark with many, ensured that the camps had their quota of genuine SS believers who were hard in the way that he expected. The Camp SS' high percentage of religious non-affiliation showed that whilst other parts of the SS may have been less convinced, many of the KL guards engaged with what they were taught. Eicke's management of commandants and senior officers beneath him was very effective; by engaging the opinions of subordinates such as Loritz and Koch he showed that the KL's future leaders should meet the approval of zealous men who saw things through the Eicke lens. Criticism could be levelled against the seemingly omniscient architect for empowering two officers who, in actuality, worked for themselves as much as for the KL. However, on balance, both spread Eicke's ideology and methodology in the 1930s highly effectively which must somewhat validate his reliance upon them. Moreover, Eicke's postulated indispensability to the SS and vast contribution to the KL is supported by the highly commemorative reaction to his early death in 1943.

Conclusion

As the evidence has showed, the unification of the early KL system, under a management style cultivated at Dachau, was made possible by the dedicated efforts of Himmler's rough diamond, Eicke. Had the haphazard management of Wackerle's administration endured at Dachau, SS guards would have continued to murder haphazardly but they would have lacked the invaluable framework that Eicke introduced which, fundamentally, enabled further cruelty under the auspices of rule enforcement. Equally, without Eicke, camps like Lichtenburg, which was reputed for its mild prisoner treatment, and Esterwegen, where the SA had run things ineffectively, would have continued to function poorly and required much greater work to bring them up to Himmler's standards. Without absorbing the practices of the 'Dachau School', the guards in these camps would not have adopted the abusive tactics being mastered by the Camp SS in southern Germany. The transferring of men who had been hardened in the 'Dachau School' was a masterstroke as it removed the need for Eicke to start afresh at each camp he dominated. A few zealous Eicke followers were effective vehicles for his ideology as they reached new camps. This was especially the case when the numerous future commandants left Eicke's early camps to spread his practices. Overall, Eicke's colonisation of German concentration camps enabled the KL to develop rapidly in accordance with the aims of Himmler. Had Eicke been left in the asylum by his superior, it is unlikely that any other KL officer could have had the meteoric impact that he had upon the system. Undoubtedly, Eicke's enormous success at Dachau and strong management in the IKL helped the early camps transition into the places of murder and extreme suffering that they became during the war. Though he has previously been identified as a central character in the KL's growth, Eicke's true indispensability has seldom

been acknowledged. He was certainly the most important figure in the pre-war KL system and left a greater legacy upon the system and its development than anybody else. Only Oswald Pohl, who will be examined in Chapter Five, could be considered to have influenced the direction of the KL similarly but he lacked the impact of the first IKL chief. It is fair to say that without Eicke, the growth of the KL and the institutionalising of its guards' behaviours could not have been achieved so effectively. In a system which lacked powerful and unifying leadership in its later years, his absence was deeply felt. The following chapter will consider how the camp system fared immediately after Eicke departed his role in the IKL, focusing on its increasing lethality. This is a necessary next step in understanding the continued evolution of guard behaviours in the SS domain.

Chapter Four – ‘Increasing Lethality: The Middle Period of the Concentration Camp System, 1939-1942’

Introduction

Chapter Three examined the development of the KL system in the pre-war years and identified the vital role played by the first concentration camp inspector, Theodor Eicke, in establishing a successful, uniformed web of SS camps across Nazi Germany. This chapter explores the changes that the KL system underwent which marked the beginning of its middle period from the start of the Second World War on 1 September 1939 up to the official incorporation of the IKL into the WVHA under Oswald Pohl on 13 March 1942. Pohl’s involvement in the KL’s administration will be analysed properly in the following chapter. Importantly, this chapter will cover a period where Eicke, hitherto the central figure, no longer played an active role within the camp system. Eicke’s deputy, SS-*Gruppenführer* Richard Glücks, was subsequently appointed to the position of *Inspektor der Konzentrationslager*, holding the title from November 1939 until the war’s end. The broader ramifications of Glücks’ promotion will be discussed later in the chapter. The investigation into the changes within the camps during the early war period is an essential element of studies of the Nazi camp system and its employees. This is chiefly because the KL’s transition to a wartime institution saw it undergo numerous changes which contributed to its increasing autonomy and freedom to abuse prisoners. Nikolaus Wachsmann identifies the importance of this period by pointing out that despite most camp victims dying in the latter part of the war, the “lethal turn of the KL system began early, in the years between 1939 and 1941”.¹

There are multiple influences upon SS camp guard behaviours to examine from this period. The Second World War’s impact upon Germany as well as its effects on the attitudes of the SS proved to be at the heart of most of the issues discussed in this chapter. This supports Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss’ assertion that the start of the war brought with it “the great turning point in the history of the concentration camps”.² The war contributed significantly to the first, and most essential, theme of this chapter, the increasing presence of death within the KL. The substantial growth in KL mortality rates prompted a casual familiarity with death which became common amongst the camp guards during the period from 1939 to 1942. Swelling camp populations and disorganised camp management led to the creation of the ‘*Muselmänner*’ (literally ‘Muslim’) figures inside the KL. ‘*Muselman*’ was the slang term, used in the camps, for those on the verge of death, pitiful in

¹ N. Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (London: Abacus, 2016), 191.

² R. Höss, trans. C. FitzGibbon, *Commandant of Auschwitz* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), 83.

stature, and devoid of human emotion and functions, capable only of trying to alleviate their desperate hunger. Expectedly, the SS were cold to the suffering of these individuals and often worsened their suffering. As Wachsmann has pointed out, the images of *Muselmänner* have embodied the horrors of the last, most gruesome, days of the camps' and the Final Solution, yet "it was the early wartime period that gave birth to the *Muselman*".³ Their emergence warrants giving closer examination to the omnipresence of sickness and death in the KL's middle period as an influential factor in SS guard behaviours.

Subsequently, this chapter will analyse other crucial changes brought upon the KL by the war, which also served to worsen the death toll within the SS camps. One such evolution of policy was the advent of official SS executions inside the KL, which set a precedent for the future that the camps were no longer solely purposed as sites of internment but had the capacity to legitimately do away with enemies of the regime. This was supported, in no small part, by the SS' gradual deviation from the legal system and creation of their own courts which in essence established the KL system as its own *de facto* microstate scattered across the Third Reich, ruled by laws dictated by Himmler. The SS registry offices which emerged in the camps to facilitate the recording of prisoner deaths without the involvement of external administrators also proved to be important assets for Himmler, allowing the Camp SS to misreport causes of death in the KL without worrying about external authorities seeing concerning records. Another theme worthy of inspection in this period is the increasing autonomy given to commandants, caused to a large degree by the relatively ineffectual management of the IKL by the new camp inspector, Glücks. As this chapter will show, the growing confidence of commandants, exemplified by Karl Koch at Buchenwald, allowed for the blossoming of many new abuses within the camp system that had been absent, or less significant, in the pre-war years. Finally, this chapter will examine the increase in foreign KL prisoners which was an anticipated by-product of the successful Nazi advances in the early wartime period. As Chapter One showed, nationalistic and militaristic themes in early twentieth-century German society, in the mediums of education and film for example, thrived when they were creating a togetherness through othering. This section shows how SS xenophobia, particularly towards Slavs and other Eastern peoples, became a key motivator for violent behaviours in this period. Ultimately, the interactions with the above themes will show that, in conjunction with one another, they contributed to further severing the KL from German society and granted more freedom to act to the SS. This period was crucial in the KL's evolution from violent prison network to killing centre and, as a result of the numerous

³ Wachsmann, *KL*, 210.

changes considered in this chapter, it led to a serious reduction in the SS leadership's control over life in the camps.

Increasing Presence of Death in the KL

As the relative calm of the 1930s subsided to be replaced by an indeterminate period of conflict for Germany, multiple new facets of the camp system's operation led to a steep increase in the mortality rate. The impact of this was that death became a normalised feature of the camps, something which had seemingly lost its significance to the SS and was met with increasing apathy by camp guards. Whilst the guards had shown malice and determination to attack in the pre-war years, deaths were generally highly scrutinised, with murders often provoking troublesome backlash. This was illustrated in the preceding chapter with Munich prosecutor Josef Hartinger's investigations into the 1933 deaths at Dachau under Hilmar Wäckerle. The causes of the normalisation of death were numerous, often overlapping with one another, and it is important to identify them to help explain the changing situation within the camps.

The first factor which contributed to the heightened number of deaths behind the barbed wire was the reckless expansion of the camp system as the Second World War led to an increase in the prisoner population under SS control. The entire camp system's prisoner population grew from 21,400 in September 1939 to just under 100,000 by the time Pohl took over the IKL in 1942, continuing to grow to over 160,000 by 19 April 1943.⁴ The expansion was twofold, involving both the increase in population at the extant pre-war camps and the establishment of new KL sites as well. At Buchenwald, for example, the intake of prisoners increased significantly year-on-year in the early war period after 1939. The first year of the war saw the Thuringian camp take in 8,043 prisoners, a sizeable figure which corresponded with the swift Nazi victories in Poland as well as the SS' decision to imprison more undesirable elements within Germany.⁵ After this significant population increase, Buchenwald added 2,313 prisoners in 1940, 4,687 in 1941, and 12,855 in 1942. Across the same period deaths increased significantly too. In the years 1939, 1940, 1941 and 1942 Buchenwald saw 1,235 deaths, 1,772 deaths, 1,522 deaths and 2,898 deaths in each respective year. Prior to this, in

⁴ See *The Wiener Library* (WL), London, 1655/2930, Report of Pohl for Himmler, concerning the incorporation of the IKL into the WVHA, for statistics on camp population in September 1939 and see M. Broszat, 'The Concentration Camps during the first years of the War 1939-41/2' in H. Krausnick & M. Broszat, *Anatomy of the SS State* (London: Granada, 1970), 217 for 1942 estimate and see R. Hillberg, 'Bringing the Jews to Death' in P. Hayes, *How Was It Possible? A Holocaust Reader* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 465 for 1943 figure.

⁵ See Wachsmann, *KL*, 199 for information on the SS' imprisonment of enemies of the state, at the beginning of the war, who had hitherto remained safe from the KL, and Broszat in Krausnick & Broszat, *SS State*, 215 for statistics on the increase in protective custody arrests made between 1935/6 and 1941. Buchenwald's 1939 camp intake figure from WL, 517/1, Buchenwald Camp Material, 'Statistische Angaben über das KL. Buchenwald', 2.

Buchenwald, in the two pre-war years of 1937 and 1938 there were a combined 819 registered deaths.⁶ Whilst other factors played their part, a correlation exists between population increase and reported deaths at the Buchenwald KL. Elsewhere, Sachsenhausen also struggled with overcrowding in the winter of 1939-1940.⁷ Dachau, meanwhile, received 13,337 Polish prisoners between March and December 1940, significantly swelling the camp's population.⁸ The combined strain upon these established KL sites prompted action from Himmler who endeavoured to expand the system through the construction of several new camps.

Between 1940 and 1942, nine new KL were formed including Auschwitz, Neuengamme, Gusen (a large subcamp for Mauthausen) and Natzweiler-Struthof.⁹ These sites, whilst able to accommodate the population surplus from elsewhere, posed a new threat in that they were built as swiftly and as cost effectively as possible. Auschwitz, in Poland's Upper Silesia region, was put together with very little consideration according to inaugural commandant Höss, who was charged with getting the camp up and running:

In the shortest possible time, I was supposed to create a transition camp for ten thousand prisoners... the buildings were filthy and teemed with lice, fleas, and other bugs, and as far as sanitation was concerned, practically nothing was available. In Oranienburg [IKL Headquarters] I was already told that I could not expect much help for the most part, and I would have to help myself.¹⁰

It could be supposed that Höss' framing of the deadly conditions at Auschwitz being a product of poor support from his superiors served to reduce his own culpability. Yet, Höss' obsessive need for structure and efficiency stands out through his memoirs. His frustration at the IKL's disinterest in financially supporting his establishment of the Auschwitz camp was, it would seem, a genuine product of his diligence and disregard for incompetence. He added that he had to travel, sometimes great distances, for the most basic supplies:

Since I could not expect any kind of help from the inspector of the concentration camps, I had to take care of everything myself... In fact, I had to drive all the way to Zakopane in

⁶ WL, 517/1, 'Statistische Angaben über das KL. Buchenwald', 2.

⁷ Broszat in Krausnick & Broszat, *SS State*, 217.

⁸ Wachsmann, *KL*, 201.

⁹ WL, 1655/2930, Report of Pohl for Himmler. Pohl also states that camps were established at Gross-Rosen, Lublin, Niederhagen, Stutthof and Arbeitsdorf.

¹⁰ S. Paskuly (ed.), *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 118.

Rapka just to get a couple of huge cooking kettles for the prisoners' kitchen, and I had to go all the way to the Sudetenland for bedframes and straw sacks.¹¹

The conclusion that should be drawn from Höss' frustration is that the IKL demanded a new camp be built but they provided no aid in sourcing materials. Josef Kramer, who was Höss' adjutant at Auschwitz in 1940, corroborated the commandant's assessment of the camp's poor infrastructure. He recalled that "all that was there when I left four months after my arrival were stone buildings which had been built by the Poles. There had been men, women and cattle living in the wooden buildings. The stone buildings were empty".¹² Many prisoners had evidently been living in accommodation suitable only for cattle during Kramer's tenure as Höss' adjutant. This specific example reveals the clear disregard of the SS at Auschwitz for keeping prisoners alive and well. The fact that better accommodation could be found in the stone buildings at the camp was ignored. Admittedly, were any guards to have shown concern, however unlikely this may have been, they would have lacked the authority to move prisoners without support from above. Yet the fact remains, Höss and Kramer were indifferent, and the prisoners were left in terrible accommodation, despite a short-term alternative being available.

Another of the new camps was Neuengamme, near Hamburg, expanded in 1940 from its previous role as a small satellite of Sachsenhausen. Prisoners had to build the camp, digging the frozen ground in the spring, utilising heavy tools. The SS started to populate the camp whilst it was still in a state of construction, resulting in around 800 prisoners being forced to share three unfinished barracks.¹³ Koch, having been transferred away from Buchenwald in September 1941, oversaw construction of the Lublin camp, better known as Majdanek. Almost a year after his transfer, he complained that the camp's building progress was being hindered by a shortage of materials, lack of tradesmen and poor transport links. Koch went further, stating that he had too few guards and that many were "suitable only for garrison duties" due to their physical condition. He summarised that the guards, including his commandant's staff comprised chiefly of reservists, "are not familiar with how to run a concentration camp properly, are to some extent indifferent... and cannot get the hang of it".¹⁴ Koch, who showed his extreme lack of empathy at Buchenwald, was surely unperturbed by the implications these problems would have upon the prisoners due at the camp imminently. Unlike Höss, Koch, whilst often fanatical when it came to tormenting SS enemies, did not appear to be

¹¹ Ibid., 121.

¹² WL, 1975/2/3, Josef Kramer Statement, 2.

¹³ Wachsmann, *KL*, 203-204.

¹⁴ *Birkbeck University of London*, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 16, "Commandant Koch on Conditions at Majdanek, Summer 1942", [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](https://www.bbk.ac.uk/nazi-camps/) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

particularly assiduous. Rather, as the self-enricher that he was, it would be unsurprising if his complaints at Majdanek were fuelled by petulant indignance at being removed from his web of corruption at Buchenwald. However, Koch's reputation was badly shaken by his unceremonious transfer and Majdanek offered him an opportunity to regain favour. So, whilst he was undoubtedly annoyed at being there, it was in his interest for the camp to run smoothly which gives credence to his complaints that failures around him prevented the commandant from making a success of his posting. So, once again, the KL was being expanded beyond what the SS could cope with and at Majdanek, like elsewhere, the lack of sufficient materials and poor preparation would only risk disease and death when the camp opened. Thus, unlike the established camps, where the death toll was rising due to overcrowding, the new camps were being put together shoddily and threatened the safety of the incoming prisoners due to the carelessness of the SS.

The KL population's expansion, and subsequent problem with safely accommodating prisoners, was not the sole reason for death becoming an ever-present element of camp life. Rather, the subsequent issues caused by overpopulation were responsible for many deaths in the camps. Firstly, the inability, and unwillingness, of the SS to adequately feed prisoners contributed to the declining health of KL captives. At Sachsenhausen, on 1 September 1939, the dawn of war was marked with an immediate decrease in prisoner rations.¹⁵ Although war generally places strain upon belligerents' reserves, the immediate decrease in KL rations on the first day of the war represented a punitive, rather than reactive, decision from the SS at Sachsenhausen. Leon Szalet, a Pole who arrived at Sachsenhausen in the middle of September, was locked in his barracks to go hungry with many of his countrymen for extended periods. His account reveals that:

[The prisoners] are ordered to lie flat on their stomachs all day without moving. They are not allowed to use toilets. As a result, the floors become drenched with urine and filth... [the SS] try to let the Polish Jews suffocate by shutting off the air and barring doors and windows... there is not a drop of water. The September heat is terrific, and many actually choke to death.¹⁶

The SS' clear indifference to the suffering of these Poles is plain to see and the radical action of forcefully isolating whole groups of prisoners without food and water represented a different method of punishment to the pre-war KL. Even after the prisoners were released from their

¹⁵ H. Naujoks, *Mein Leben im KZ Sachsenhausen 1936-1942: Erinnerung des Ehemaligen Lagerältesten* (Cologne: Röderberg, 1987), 139.

¹⁶ *Center for Jewish History (CJH), Leo Baeck Institut (LBI), Leon Szalet Collection, AR 10587, No Peace unto the Wicked*, undated, 2-3, [No Peace unto the Wicked, undated | The Center for Jewish History ArchivesSpace \(cjh.org\)](https://www.cjh.org/No-Peace-onto-the-Wicked-undated) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

barracks, Szalet noted that “hunger is great, as a favourite punishment inflicted upon [the prisoners] by the *Blockführers* is the withdrawal of part of their ration”.¹⁷ Moreover, the declining food for camp prisoners across the system led to the presence of emaciated figures, the *Muselmänner*, emerging within the camp populations. The process leading to this state of extreme malnourishment was only exacerbated by the punitive labour in camps like Mauthausen where unfortunate prisoners, from social groups that the SS hated especially, were forced to carry rocks often exceeding 50 kilograms up 196 steps around 20 times per day. This was a particularly effective method of breaking new prisoners and sapping their strength, unable to recover due to the insufficient food, within a few days.¹⁸

Another problem which was fuelled by careless overpopulation in the camps was poor hygiene and disease. SS doctor, Gerhard Schiedlausky, was posted at the Ravensbrück camp from December 1941 and observed the causal link between the population’s growth and illness. He said of Ravensbrück, which comprised a main camp for women, a labour-driven subcamp for men, and a youth camp, Uckermark:

As far as hygienic conditions went in all three camps, in the beginning there was sufficient space in the women’s camp, but due to the mounting number of prisoners, there were not sufficient beds to go around, so that people working on day and night shifts had to alternate in a bed. Consequently, scabies and some lice were observed.¹⁹

Whilst Schiedlausky’s recollection gives an insight into the developing sanitation issues within the camps, the scabies situation at Ravensbrück was not as severe as other outbreaks and epidemics. Shortly after Christmas in 1939, the Flossenbürg camp, still under construction and lacking medical barracks, experienced an outbreak of dysentery which brought the camp to a standstill. Mauthausen also experienced a similar situation with dysentery in September 1939. From the period of July to September 1941, both the Gross-Rosen and Auschwitz camps saw typhus spreading amongst their prisoners. The same disease also killed 477 Soviet prisoners of war at Neuengamme in October 1941. At Dachau, a group of 250 who were afflicted with scabies during the winter of 1941-1942

¹⁷ Ibid., 4.

¹⁸ Harvard Law School (HLS), Nuremberg Trials Project (NTP), PS-499, Report on the killing of inmates at Mauthausen concentration camp, 2, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Report on the killing of inmates at Mauthausen concentration camp \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed on 2 June 2023]

¹⁹ HLS, NTP, NO-508, Gerhard O. Schiedlausky, Affidavit concerning conditions and activities in the concentration camps, including medical conditions, death rates, and experiments, 4, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Affidavit concerning conditions and activities in the concentration camps, including medical conditions, death rates, and experiments \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed on 2 June 2023]

experienced a high mortality rate despite their typically treatable condition.²⁰ There were, as evidenced here, unexampled issues with illnesses in the KL as poor hygiene became widespread, but the diseases themselves only partly contributed to prisoner fatalities.

The reaction of the Camp SS to disease was, in fact, crucial in causing deaths in this period. During Flossenbürg's dysentery outbreak, over Christmas in 1939, the SS closed the camp off entirely and left the prisoners, many of them sick, to suffer in isolation. Mauthausen's SS dealt with their dysentery outbreak that year by setting up a "sick bay" in a single room of Block 20, which would be used for two years. There was a shortage of beds, and the sick were often forced to lay on the straw covered floor which was tainted with blood, excrement, and other bacteria. Gross-Rosen and Auschwitz regularly resigned their typhus patients to death, administering lethal injections to minimise the disruption caused by the sick. Displaying similar disinterest in helping the sick, the SS at Neuengamme declared the camp a no-go zone for their own men whilst the hundreds of Soviet prisoners of war died from typhus, isolated without help, in late 1941. The Dachau SS' comparably *laissez-faire* approach to handling the scabies epidemic in winter 1941-1942 led to them abandoning the sick outside the showers, cold and unclothed. Unsurprisingly, a lot of these prisoners died from pneumonia.²¹ The dominant sentiment on the part of the SS was one of clear apathy to the suffering of the infirm in the camps. Furthermore, as these varied examples show, this attitude was pervasive rather than isolated, with Camp SS staff across the Reich showing a similar absence of pity.

Of course, to the SS guards, or at least to those subscribing to Eicke's school of thought, the sick were not innocent people, but enemies of the state who deserved their torment. This combined with the fact that the SS could record deaths internally without outside interference – an important change in the middle-period KL examined later in the chapter – meant that the SS could watch hundreds die without pressure to try to alleviate the issue. The rising death toll in the KL which has been discussed above, such as at Buchenwald where the annual mortality rate more than doubled from 1939 to 1942 showed that as SS apathy was able to manifest itself without hindrance, the prisoners of the KL began dying in unprecedented numbers. Further showcasing the issue of death becoming commonplace within the KL was the presence of crematoria at all camps for men by the summer of 1940.²² The addition of facilities designed to quickly dispose of bodies could only serve to further normalise death in the camps; the construction of crematoria effectively informed guards that a sizeable number of prisoners were expected to die under their care. Logically, this reduced

²⁰ W. Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 206-207. For a more complete assessment of disease outbreaks in the camp, in this period, see chapter 18: 'Epidemics'.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Wachsmann, *KL*, 225.

individual responsibility for prisoner survival, in turn disincentivising making effort to save sick prisoners. The crematoria were thus both a response to the growing death toll and a catalyst for it to increase further.

In summary, reckless camp expansion, hunger and disease were problems caused by the SS in the early wartime period which led to the deaths of thousands interred within the KL. The Camp SS witnessed all this suffering, often exacerbating it, and they became increasingly familiar with people dying in the camps. There were guards who struggled with the daily occurrence of the sick and hungry dying around them but many, especially those whose violent behaviours intensified in this period, developed an understanding that the nature of the camps had changed, and prisoners' chances of survival had decreased. The SS were consequently able to let their charges die with little concern. As prisoners were increasingly dehumanised and reduced to ailing figures by the above factors, SS abuse became increasingly easy. The weaker prisoners got, and the more they resembled the *Muselmänner*, the less human they appeared to their abusers. Essentially, the worsening health of the prisoners allowed their captors to view them through the lens of Nazi propaganda, as verminous elements of society. The fact that *Muselmänner* died in droves served only to familiarise the SS with the reality of their goal, the complete removal of Nazism's enemies from German society.

Introduction of Capital Punishment in the Camps

The Second World War's influence on the nature of punishment in the KL was immediate. On 7 September 1939, less than a week after Hitler's forces had invaded Poland, the first SS execution took place in Sachsenhausen. Although in 1938 executions had been carried out in the KL, they had been authorised by a civilian court, not by the SS.²³ By September the following year, however, communist Johann Heinen, who had refused to perform air raid duties in a Junker aircraft factory in Dessau was sentenced to be shot by an SS firing squad at Sachsenhausen. The *coup de grâce*, a pistol shot to the head, was administered by Höss.²⁴ Höss remembered that his firing squad comrades were rendered speechless by their involvement in this killing. He noted that the three men he had selected as the executioners were all older SS guards who had seen action in the Great War and been active in the beer hall fighting of the Weimar era. Despite the toughness of his comrades, Höss

²³ The executions in question occurred at Buchenwald where recaptured escapees Emil Bargatzky and Peter Forster were sentenced to death by the special court of Weimar. The inmates had reportedly killed an SS man in the process of effecting their escape. The executions took place on 4 June 1938 and 21 December 1938 respectively. Gedenkstätte Buchenwald (ed.), *Buchenwald Concentration Camp 1937-1945: A Guide to the Permanent Historical Exhibition* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2010), 111.

²⁴ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 98-99.

said that “all of us were deeply moved by what we had just experienced”.²⁵ Whether or not the four Sachsenhausen SS colleagues discussed why they were so moved by shooting a communist the future Auschwitz commandant failed to mention. It is possible that their direct perpetration of the act was more important to their response than the actual outcome itself. Importantly, however, as Chapter Six will show, older men serving in the KL frequently showed more hesitation than the SS’ younger volunteers. This was something which Eicke had identified, prompting him to prefer inducting “bright eyed” youths into the Camp SS on account of their perceived malleability. One can see why Eicke identified youths with little prior life experience as ideal candidates for KL service. Having been educated in the vociferously nationalistic and xenophobic Weimar and Nazi schools, and likely having been members of the *Hitlerjugend*, young volunteers were theoretically less likely to be fazed by executions, such as that of Heinen. It is curious that Höss himself claimed to have been moved by the execution because he had served time in prison for involvement in the political murder of schoolteacher Walther Kadow in 1923. If taken at his word about being deeply affected by watching his first flogging in Dachau, it seems plausible that even some committed Nazis amongst the SS were somewhat jolted by significant changes in the KL’s practices, or at least by their first experiences of them. Heinen’s death likely signified to Höss that the KL was no longer solely a place of internment, but a place of execution.

On the same day as the first execution at Sachsenhausen, Eicke, still based nearby at the IKL office in Oranienburg – Glücks succeeded him as IKL leader in November – arrived to give a speech to SS reserves replacing outgoing guards. The theme was a familiar one; Höss recalled that Eicke demanded complete submission to any orders given, that the “harsh laws of war had to be obeyed” and that “Himmler demanded of each SS officer an exemplary sense of duty... even to the point of sacrificing his own life”.²⁶ Significantly, in this recollection, Höss’ asserted that “now”, from that moment in September 1939, the main duty of the SS was “to protect Adolf Hitler’s nation from all internal dangers during this war”.²⁷ Eicke had spent years imbuing the defenders of his internal frontlines with the ‘tolerance means weakness’ motto examined previously. Yet Höss underlined that now this focus should be pre-eminent in the minds of SS guards. The guidebook for members of the Camp SS showed the increasing emphasis upon the threat from the supposed internal enemy:

Question: Our comrades at the front are fighting to defend our country from the enemy threatening it from outside. From whom are we defending it?

²⁵ Ibid., 99.

²⁶ Ibid., 98.

²⁷ Ibid.

Answer: We are defending our fatherland from treason, espionage sabotage, defamation, rape, and murder.²⁸

Eicke wanted his men to emulate the *Wehrmacht* and fight a war, as the guidebook shows, against the supposedly insidious elements comprising the KL population. Höss showed that he, at least, was aware of this expected intensification of prisoner handling. Combined with this, Eugen Kogon, whose published memoirs of his imprisonment in Buchenwald was supported by years of subsequent research, observed that Eicke made it clear that SS guards who shot prisoners 'attempting to escape' were to be "excused from investigations as much as possible". This led Kogon to the conclusion that guards who developed the initiative to shoot prisoners 'escaping' were safe in the knowledge that they were carrying out their duty, and might even earn a financial bonus for mental anguish they experienced in the process.²⁹ It is important to reiterate that the shooting of escaping prisoners was justified by the guidelines of the KL, but a decrease in active investigation of these occurrences could only facilitate further abuses. With less scrutiny upon Camp SS handling of inmates, disgraced killers like Paul Zeidler, seen in the previous chapter, were less likely to be reprimanded, on account of the normalisation of shooting prisoners accused of escape.

Supplementing the above was the Reich Ministry of Justice's failure to wrestle the power over life and death back from the grasp of Himmler's SS once the official camp executions started. Hitler, having received complaints about the SS executions from the head of the Reich Chancellery, Hans Heinrich Lammers, took responsibility for them himself. He then ordered the execution of two bank robbers, legally sentenced to a custodial period in prison, emphasising the point that he dictated the law.³⁰ It was thus clear for the Ministry of Justice to see that Himmler's authority over KL law was not just tolerated by the Führer, it was ultimately derived from him. The execution of the bank robbers served to warn Lammers to keep his complaints to himself, else risk losing more than jurisdiction within the camps. This ultimately consolidated Hitler's power, and by extension Himmler's as well, over the law in the KL. The knock-on effect of the empowerment of the Führer and his SS chief was also the strengthening of the Camp Inspectorate. This theme of the growing legal invulnerability of the camps will be returned to shortly and developed further.

Whilst the Camp SS tended to embrace the evolution of the camps into execution sites, despite some initial shock, like Höss' firing squad comrades experienced at Sachsenhausen, occasionally

²⁸ From *Bundesarchiv Koblenz*, NS 19/Neu 1457, "Lebensregel für den SS Mann", in T. Segev, *Soldiers of Evil: The Commandants of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 103.

²⁹ E. Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 297.

³⁰ From L. Gruchmann, *Justiz im Dritten Reich. Anpassung und Unterwerfung in der Arä Gürtner* (Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 1990), 679-681, Gürtner note, 14 October 1939, in Wachsmann, *KL*, 217.

guards showed disillusionment at the KL's evolution. Inmate Karl Röder remembered mass-executions of Soviet prisoners of war, numbering more than 8,000, at Dachau in the winter of 1941. It is important to remember that more than two years had passed since the first wartime execution in Sachsenhausen and that the escalation from single executions to mass murders of this scale did not occur overnight. In his recollection, Röder mentioned that all the SS in Dachau knew of these executions, but he focused chiefly upon one guard's reaction. An SS man named Müller supposedly "realised the inhuman cruelties of these executions" but, by his own admission, "did not have the courage to oppose them and to quit the SS, because he feared for the security of his wife and children".³¹ It is unclear whether Müller objected to executions within the KL altogether or, rather, the nature and scale of the executions of the Soviet captives. In other words, perhaps Müller would have been able to comprehend and rationalise an execution like Heinen's at Sachsenhausen in 1939, but the executions of thousands seemed gratuitous. Irrespective, Müller's defence for inactivity is suspect, although it is feasible that he harboured unnecessary concern for his family's safety were he to have tried to leave the Camp SS.³² On the other hand, and most significantly, the outcome of Müller's qualms is plain to see, he would continue to facilitate the daily operation of Dachau and thus play his part in its execution of Russian prisoners. Whilst Müller, both through his lack of hardness and his confessions to a prisoner, did not fit the type of the cold, unquestioning SS man whom Eicke, no longer IKL leader by 1941, would have hoped was staffing his most successful project KL, he was still obedient.

Interestingly, Müller was not the only SS man to show hesitation at killing whilst Röder was at Dachau. He also remembered a prisoner trying to commit suicide by getting shot for climbing the barbed wire fencing. In response, a watchtower guard shouted "you idiot, what do you want? Can't you see you can't run away? Go back down and get away!". The SS man would have received praise for shooting the inmate immediately but refrained. Only after the prisoner daringly swung his leg over the fence and pleaded with the guard to shoot and save him from worse torment did he relent and fire. Röder asserted the guard was an older man which fits with his own deduction that younger

³¹ WL, 1655/3340, Testimony by Karl Röder concerning general conditions in Dachau concentration camp.

³² It would be unwise to dismiss the possibility that a perpetrator experienced unnecessary fear over their family's welfare, but, equally, it was sometimes a convenient excuse to justify involvement in inhumane activities. *SS-Untersturmführer* Maximilian Grabner, the head of the Auschwitz Political Department who was executed in 1948, unconvincingly claimed that despite his activities in Auschwitz I's torture block, he "only took part in the murder of some three million people out of consideration for my family. I was never an antisemite and would still claim today that every person has the right to life". Statement of Maximilian Grabner, Head of the Political Department [at Auschwitz] in E. Klee, W. Dressen & V. Riess (eds.), *"The Good Old Days": The Holocaust Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders* (New York: The Free Press, 1991). 252.

guards were the ones who were developing into “masters of the art of tormenting people”.³³ It is very difficult to deduce accurately what went through this guard’s mind as he killed the suicidal inmate; he certainly displayed uncommon restraint and may have only acquiesced to the prisoner’s pleas out of fear that he would actually climb over the fence and potentially get the guard into trouble for his delaying. Regardless of motivation for his caution during the event, the guard could feasibly rationalise his eventual shooting due to his efforts to dissuade the victim’s despairing behaviours. Thus, he too represented a hesitant but compliant killer in the KL. These anecdotes from Röder show the inherent contradictions within the SS psyche and how guards could mentally absolve themselves for their involvement in KL killings based upon self-preservation or warning their victims.

The introduction of capital punishment to the KL was an incredibly important change within the system. For the first six years of its existence, the KL was designed to separate undesirable elements from the rest of German society in a non-lethal manner. It is true that prisoners died in the pre-war years, but scrutiny often befell the SS, severely curtailing the lethal potential of the camps. Hitler’s permitting of Himmler to both decide upon and carry out executions from September 1939 officially made the camps legitimate killing centres, albeit not to the same extent as during the Final Solution. Nonetheless, the environment was radically changed from one wherein death was heavily analysed from the outside to one in which it was justified under the right criteria. Most of the guards adapted but a few, like Müller, were apprehensive. Herein lies the problem: both types of guard, unless the disillusioned ones went beyond their secretive internal resistance, which was rare, were effective killers and accessories to murder within the KL. Moreover, the executions within the camps equated to SS inflicted death. Whilst deaths from hunger and disease were not attributable to an individual perpetrator, at least not in the eyes of the SS, executions were sanctioned instances of SS men directly ending the lives of prisoners. Because of direct SS killings becoming enshrined in the tenets of camp management, guards began to behave in new ways, taking their abuses further and ultimately increasing the death toll in the KL.

Growing Independence of the Camps from the German Legal System

The worsening conditions in the camps, and subsequent rise in deaths of people in the custody of the SS, naturally made the KL a more worrying reality for the civil authorities. Thus, to further enhance the legal autonomy of the SS, in October 1939, Hitler permitted Himmler to establish his own SS courts, authorised to implement their own punishments without interference from the

³³ K. Röder, *Nachtwache: 10 Jahre KZ Dachau und Flossenbürg* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1985), for Röder’s account of the prisoner’s death see 29-30, and for his comparison of older and younger camp killers see 84.

German legal system.³⁴ A new penal code for the SS was completed in 1942 which extended the SS courts' reach significantly. The *Disziplinärstraf- und Beschwerdeordnung der SS* (Disciplinary and Penal Code of the SS) brought all members of the fully-fledged SS, honorary officials, SS candidates and personnel attached to SS outfits under the umbrella of the SS justice system.³⁵ This change immunised Himmler's SS empire from being destabilised by interferers such as Hans Frank whose objections to deaths within the KL had seen Dachau's first commandant, Hilmar Wäckerle, dismissed in 1933. Moreover, dealing with especially violent cases, particularly ones involving sadistic actions, in courts beyond the remit of the SS was undesirable, not least because it removed the veil over the camps and revealed to the external authorities precisely how brutal the KL was. Equally, as the previously discussed alcoholism case of senior *Waffen-SS* officer Matthias Kleinheisterkamp showed, Himmler was paranoid about SS instances of poor conduct causing public embarrassment and preferred to deal with issues internally. The new SS courts would grant Himmler the power to deal with SS discipline all the while protecting the KL's secretive operation and the supposed good reputation of its staff. Amy Carney has argued, however, that the internal court system was ineffective in ensuring that SS men complied with orders from above. Lacking an effective structure for enforcing the organisation's policies consistently, it actually served to facilitate the disobeying of orders and failed to reprimand those who chose to take advantage of this inefficiency.³⁶ Thus, as well as ensuring the camps were largely free of the restrictions of the legal system, the SS courts enabled Camp SS men to behave erratically without much fear of reprisal.

Interestingly, in the month preceding Hitler's empowerment of these courts, an SS man named Ernst was found guilty of participating in the shooting of "about 50 Jews" following a day of repairs on a bridge. Despite killing dozens of KL prisoners who had not shown any indication of resistance or escape, the three-year custodial sentence given to Ernst was dropped. The amnesty granted acknowledged that Ernst was in a "state of irritation owing to numerous atrocities committed by Poles against persons of German race", that as an SS man Ernst was "particularly sensitive at the sight of Jews" and concluded that he had acted "thoughtlessly in a youthful spirit of adventure".³⁷ That he was described as acting with 'youthful spirit', provides a small amount of useful biographical information. The likelihood of Ernst's young age, inferred from this, and his reported acting against perceived Polish atrocities against Germany and his sensitivity "at the sight of Jews" reinforces

³⁴ P. Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 344-345.

³⁵ Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force Evaluation and Dissemination Section – G-2 (Counterintelligence Subdivision), *The Allgemeine SS, 1944* (London: World War II Investigator, 2007), 29-30.

³⁶ A. Carney, *Marriage and Fatherhood in the Nazi SS* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 180.

³⁷ WL, 1655/1603, File Memoranda of the OKH concerning the court martial of an SS man and a sergeant of the Field Police.

conclusions drawn earlier in this thesis of the dangers of indoctrination to immature minds. Likewise, it highlights again the value of youth to the SS; adept manipulators like Eicke saw the potential to exploit the kind of juvenile emotions that Ernst reportedly showed. Whilst it is not clarified whether Ernst was a member of the Camp SS, his escorting of a 50-person Jewish work commando suggests that he was attached to the KL in some manner. Though interesting information, the above is not the most curious aspect of Ernst's case, rather, it is the identity of the organisation which protected him from justice. Ernst was defended and cleared by the courts under the *Oberkommando des Heeres* (High Command of the Army). Despite the tone of Ernst's defence being very similar to what one would expect from the SS, it was the German Army protecting this killer. The complicity of the *Wehrmacht* in the atrocities committed during the Second World War is a subject of academic debate in its own right, but this case, however, serves to show that the SS was occasionally aided by German Army courts before they adopted their own justice system.³⁸

Another revelation of the middle-period KL was the introduction, in 1941, of registry offices within the most lethal camps, including Auschwitz and Mauthausen, so that prisoner fatalities could be recorded by the SS themselves without involving external civil servants. The unsurprising outcome was that the increasing fatality rate was explained away through the use of the convenient labels of accidental death or death by natural causes.³⁹ This was the SS practice prior to the registry offices' establishment, but from this point, external authorities were not privy to the disproportionate numbers of supposedly unintentional deaths.⁴⁰ Essentially, the pre-war method of masking deaths continued but could be increased without the risk of outside interference. This granted much more freedom to abuse and kill, for the Camp SS were safe in the knowledge that their own colleagues oversaw the recording of causes of deaths. Gustav Wegerer, Kapo of Buchenwald's pathology section, witnessed the recording of death both before and after the establishment of registries and described how by 1943 murders through lethal injections of air or various acids, strangulation and

³⁸ The conduct of the *Wehrmacht* during the Second World War, which had been hidden behind the myth of the "clean *Wehrmacht*" was challenged in H. Heer & K. Naumann (eds.), *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1994* (Hamburg: Verlag Hamburger Edition, 1995). This has led to a debate over the extent of *Wehrmacht* involvement in war crimes, particularly in the war with the Soviet Union. For a recent appraisal see A.J. Kay & D. Stahel, 'Crimes of the Wehrmacht: A Re-Evaluation', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 3:1 (2020), 95-127. Also see T. Kühne, *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship: Hitler's Soldiers, Male Bonding and Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 140-153 for a discussion of *Wehrmacht* crimes in the East which focuses on the role of comradeship in facilitating atrocity.

³⁹ Wachsmann, *KL*, 225.

⁴⁰ Kapo Gustav Wegerer testifies to the SS' misrepresenting the causes of deaths of many prisoners at Buchenwald between 1939-1940. Often heart failure, thrombosis and tuberculosis were listed on death certificates instead of the true reasons of starvation and pneumonia. B. Kautsky, *Devils and the Damned (A True and Damning Exposé of Nazi Concentration Camps...)* (London: Brown, Watson LTD., 1960), Appendix 3, Statement by Gustav Wegerer, 281-282.

hanging were never recorded with the real cause of death.⁴¹ To compliment the improper recording of fatalities, the SS' reports often put a spin on deaths which suggested they had attempted to save lives. Auschwitz prisoner and infirmary secretary Dr Leo Eitinger explained that a report from a lethal injection murder might read along the lines of "examination revealed pneumonia... the invalid's condition did not respond to very intensive therapy... despite treatment the invalid died".⁴²

As the above shows, the reasons for the KL's rapidly increasing death toll were never revealed to the civilian authorities. As a result, the rank-and-file were granted an extra layer of protection on top of the establishment of the SS courts in 1939, and Himmler also benefitted from knowing that potential SS detractors were increasingly shut out of the camps' administration. Moreover, the purposeful obscuration of the true causes of death was significant beyond the obvious fact that murders were covered up. As was the case in Mauthausen, murders were not only hidden, but the actual vicious nature of the murders was suppressed. During the creation of the sports field at the camp, many prisoners were shot dead, but the SS doctors would only allow for the mention of the presence of between one and three bullets in the death register, when frequently the victims had been riddled with bullets.⁴³ Whilst Himmler was a beneficiary of this heightened secrecy, he was logically also hindered by it to some degree. Camp SS serial killers, and those with particularly sadistic tendencies, would be offered protection by the recording of their victims' deaths as accidents, preventing senior officials from easily identifying unreliable men within the KL. Logically, this would be particularly troublesome further down the line when Pohl endeavoured to reduce the camp mortality rate in favour of productivity after 1942; the death registries' camouflaging of especially prolific killers could only hinder efforts to limit brutality.

The existence of internal death registries also aided SS killers in premeditating their murders. Josef Ackermann, a prisoner working as a physician's clerk in Buchenwald, recalled how he had to help with prisoner post-mortems and send the information to the SS court in Dusseldorf. The significance of many of these examinations, according to Ackermann, was that they were for prisoners who had supposedly been shot whilst escaping:

On many mornings up to 12 prisoners shot on escape were brought in. Their names were usually already known at the medical station on the previous day. Even the prisoners in

⁴¹ Ibid, Appendix 3, 283-284.

⁴² Ibid, Appendix 6, Statement by Dr Leo Eitinger, 296-297.

⁴³ HLS, NTP, PS-499, Report on the killing of inmates at Mauthausen, 2.

question often used to know from information by their *Scharführer* that they were to be shot on escape, that means, that they were to be driven into the cordon of guards.⁴⁴

In this case, as Ackermann's recollection reveals, murders were planned with such malice that the victims were tormented by the SS about their impending deaths. Ackermann's camp acquaintance, Austrian Consul General Richard Steidle, informed Ackermann that an *SS-Hauptscharführer* named Johannes Planck, who had come from Dachau, advised him to run into the cordon of guards or else he "would have to suffer a much worse death".⁴⁵ In this fashion, the SS eliminated innumerable prisoners until the war's end. Steidle died in Buchenwald on 30 August 1940, pre-dating the establishment of the SS registry offices, with SS men reportedly having caught the 58-year-old attempting escape. Seemingly, Planck's threat either prompted Steidle to run to his own death or he was murdered for resisting. Either way, the death was handled in the typical fashion and covered up as a prevented escape. Steidle's death demonstrates that the SS were able to kill and disguise their murders before establishing their own registry, after all the SS courts were regulating the conduct of the men by this point which lowered the chances of reprimand. However, the guards had to be cautious not to kill indiscriminately before the SS death registries were established due to the risk of drawing the attention of SS officials and the civilian administration to the nature of their murders.

In practice, once the SS registries came into existence, supporting their independent courts, killers, who were already growing bolder as Planck's example showed, were doubly insulated from punishment for murder. This encouraged many in the Camp SS to intensify their violence. One infamous guard at Sachsenhausen, *SS-Hauptscharführer* Gustav Sorge, born in 1911, confessed after the war to attacking incoming prisoners, "to take the starch out of them". The attacks were triggered by the unambiguous command of "*fertigmachen*" ("finish them").⁴⁶ Wolfgang Sofsky has identified the presence of military hazing tactics in the Camp SS' violence and notes that this was a product of the hazing techniques that they themselves had been subjected to as they entered KL service.⁴⁷ This is a valid contention. Herbert Brunnegger, for instance, conveyed the difficulty of *SS-Totenkopfverbände* training he received as a 15-year-old at Oranienburg in 1938. Along with five hours of drill each morning in a day which ran from 5am until 10pm, Brunnegger noted the presence of ruthless sadists among the drill sergeants. For this reason, he claimed "the service is strict and has

⁴⁴ HLS, NTP, NO-2631, Josef Ackermann, Affidavit concerning the Buchenwald and Dora (Mittelbau) concentration camps, 21 March 1947, 2, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Affidavit concerning the Buchenwald and Dora \(Mittelbau\) concentration camps \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed on 2 June 2023]

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁴⁶ ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *The Manchester Guardian*, 17 October 1958, 'Prisoners Run to Death at Nazi Camp', 9.

⁴⁷ Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, 223.

no regard for our youth". If exhausted recruits fell asleep during evening lessons, they were punished with night-time runs through the forest.⁴⁸ Whilst harsh treatment of recruits commonplace in military outfits, one can see how teenagers forced through unforgiving conditioning by cruel leaders might be inspired by their ordeal to abuse prisoners in the future. Survivor Paul Martin Neurath witnessed similar rough treatment of the SS guards by their officers and testified to the guards taking out their frustration on the prisoners after their own intense treatment.⁴⁹

Likewise, as Chapter One discussed, children in the HJ were victims of harsh training which may have prompted those who joined the Camp SS to adopt the practices they had experienced as children. Sorge's language, discussing breaking the will of the prisoners, supports the idea that hazing became a popular tool for abuse. In the KL's earlier years such behaviours had tended to be limited somewhat, intensely vicious but usually measured to be non-lethal for the perpetrator's own safety. Sorge had, however, first been directed to kill a prisoner in Esterwegen in the pre-war years and, despite initial hesitance, a senior officer convinced him that the SS would protect him from repercussions. In his case, fear of killing had been eased early on, and abhorrent mistreatment had lost its significance.⁵⁰ Sorge's use of the phrase '*fertigmachen*' in the case above suggests that he was less concerned about moderating violence as he established himself as a killer. The KL's gradual divorce from German society, accelerated by the creation of the SS courts and death registries, was extremely dangerous and freed individuals with a penchant for violence, like Sorge, to attack without restraint.

Aware of the increasing freedom for violence in the camp, Sorge spearheaded an infamous group of aggressive Sachsenhausen guards known as the 'Death Squad'. Sorge's eminent position in the group owed not just to his rank as a sergeant major and to his great initiative in abusing victims, but also to his displaying keen interest in managing and organising which showed a careerist side to his personality.⁵¹ The group was comprised of around a dozen young SS guards, mostly non-commissioned officers who were in their twenties. This again validates this study's identification of young men as being particularly vulnerable to being sculpted into camp killers. Sorge was described by an escaped prisoner as the "lord of life and death... whose helpers and aides were constantly competing with each other in shameful and murderous deeds".⁵² The fact that Sorge's companions

⁴⁸ H. Brunnegger, *Saat in den Sturm: Ein Soldat der Waffen-SS berichtet* (Graz: Leopold Stocker Verlag, 2000), 17-18.

⁴⁹ P.M. Neurath, *The Society of Terror: Inside the Dachau and Buchenwald Concentration Camps* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2005), 75.

⁵⁰ A. Riedle, *Die Angehörigen des Kommandanturstabs im KZ Sachsenhausen: Sozialstruktur, Dienstwege und biografische Studien* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2011), 170-172.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁵² *The National Archives*, London, WO 208/3596, Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre: Interrogation of Enemy POWs, August 1944, 1.

tried to outdo their colleagues shows how dangerous the hyper-masculine atmosphere within the camps could be and again shines light on the toxicity of social relations in the SS. Before taking the lead in the 'Death Squad', at the age of 28 in late 1939, Sorge started his transition to camp killer during the Weimar era when, embittered by unemployment, he joined the Osnabrück SA and earned the nickname *Der Eiserne Gustav* ('Iron Gustav') for his brutality in street battles.⁵³ This supports Chapter One's contention that Weimar disillusionment could prompt young men to join Nazi paramilitary groups; in Sorge's case it also played a key role in pushing him toward crimes in the KL. Later, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, Sorge participated in shooting inmates, under the pretence of stopping escapes, at Esterwegen from 1934.⁵⁴ His own transition to camp killer had thus begun as a young man, new into the Camp SS and serving at one of Eicke's project camps where tolerance meant weakness. Sorge was not just an SS murderer who solely enjoyed the freedom to hurt victims, he was a zealously antisemitic Nazi. In 1938, he had brought a photographer into the camp and commissioned him to capture images of "typically Jewish subhumans".⁵⁵ At the start of the war, whilst the camp was listening to a Hitler speech, he caught a prisoner appearing to fall asleep and burst out "you dare sleep while our Führer speaks?", subsequently attaching him to a penal company as punishment.⁵⁶ His dedication to the Nazi cause rendered Sorge entirely cold to the suffering inflicted by the SS. Showing that he neither took death seriously, nor even considered prisoners as human beings, he recalled after the war that prisoners collected into an exhausting "shoe testing company" were under immense daily strain and that whilst some lasted more than a few days "they all went *kaputt* sooner or later".⁵⁷ His use of the term '*Kaputt*' (literally 'broken') exemplified his view of prisoners as mere tools to be used to an end.

The activities of Sorge and his group were often sadistic in the extreme, varying their methods of murder from one case to the next. Sometimes they used high-powered hosepipes to cause huge trauma to their victims' hearts, whilst others had these hosepipes forced into different orifices, and on occasion the gang would handcuff prisoners so that they could not move out of freezing showers.⁵⁸ Several members were themselves notorious. *SS-Oberscharführer* Wilhelm Schubert's path to the 'Death Squad' saw him stationed in the Eicke project camps of both Dachau and Lichtenburg before reaching Sachsenhausen. Born in Magdeburg in 1917, he had served in the HJ

⁵³ Riedle, *Angehörigen des Kommandanturstabs im KZ Sachsenhausen*, 166-167.

⁵⁴ G. Morsch (ed.), *Die Konzentrationslager-SS 1936-1945: Exzess-und Direkttäter im KZ Sachsenhausen* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2016), 280-281.

⁵⁵ Naujoks, *Mein Leben im KZ Sachsenhausen*, 95.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵⁷ ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *The Manchester Guardian*, 17 October 1958, 'Prisoners Run to Death at Nazi Camp', 9.

⁵⁸ W. Benz, B. Distel & A. Königseder (eds.), *Der Ort des Terrors: Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager – Band 3* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006), 45.

before joining the SS at 19 years old in 1936. Unlike others in the Camp SS who had a difficult time in the Weimar years, Schubert had been too young to experience unemployment and its bitter consequences, being safe in his family home. Nonetheless he secretly joined the HJ in 1931 and his family revealed he had developed a fondness for drum and uniform from an early age.⁵⁹ In Schubert's case, it seems youth influences were more central to his drift towards militarism and SS service. At Sachsenhausen, Schubert became known as 'Pistolen Schubert' for his frequent shooting of camp inmates with his Mauser C96.⁶⁰ Emotionally unbalanced, especially around alcohol, Schubert's potential for extreme violence was noted by his SS comrades and his superiors who allowed him to direct his attacks at Jews and Soviet prisoners. He was awarded a trip to Italy and a medal for his part in the mass murders of Soviet inmates in autumn 1941.⁶¹

Despite being an asset to Gustav Sorge, who evidently valued his contributions to the clique's cruel attacks, Schubert was considered crazy by SS comrades as well as the inmates.⁶² Based upon this and his evident sadism, Andrea Riedle considers Schubert to have been mentally disturbed, a categorisation generally considered to have applied to no more than between five and ten percent of KL perpetrators.⁶³ What is interesting in the case of Schubert, however, was that despite being known as an especially unrestrained perpetrator by the standards of the SS, he showed the capacity to behave relatively normally around prisoners when he was outside of his circle of colleagues.⁶⁴ Neurath saw similar behaviours from guards in Buchenwald, asserting that when the guards accompanied prisoners alone, they mostly left them be. He added, "lack of publicity for acts of abuse seemed to decrease considerably a man's desire to mistreat his charges".⁶⁵ Schubert certainly appears to have fit this assessment. This example once again goes some way to underlining the nature of socialisation in the Camp SS. Even the most ruthless abusers were evidently affected by Hans Buchheim's concept of camaraderie; whilst alone Schubert could function with some humane morality but in the company of other SS, his sadistic behaviours would emerge to impress the group. One of the most feared members of the group, *SS-Hauptscharführer* Richard Bugdalle, born in 1907, was nicknamed 'Brutalla' by the gang's victims. In July 1940, Bugdalle ordered a prisoner named Georg Adler to play "sports" before proceeding to kick him to death. The death certificate announced that he had died from an "enlargement of the heart" which, preceding the establishment

⁵⁹ Riedle, *Angehörigen des Kommandanturstabs im KZ Sachsenhausen*, 204-207.

⁶⁰ Morsch, *Die Konzentrationslager-SS 1936-1945*, 183 and 189.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁶² Riedle, *Angehörigen des Kommandanturstabs im KZ Sachsenhausen*, 208.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 255-256.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁶⁵ Neurath, *Society of Terror*, 75.

of the SS registries, again showed that the SS were able to manipulate death records to some extent before 1941.⁶⁶ Bugdalle was an amateur boxer and was known to punch prisoners to death. He was able to kill because he was “extremely strong”, in the words of Sachsenhausen survivor Harry Naujoks, and he knew where to land killing blows, as was seen in his murder of Adler. During Bugdalle’s trial after the war, echoing Naujoks observations, Sorge testified to the pugilist’s value to the gang, saying that “Schubert and I always took Bugdalle with us when a man had to be liquidated. He was a head taller [than us] and much stronger”.⁶⁷ A psychiatric expert at the trial concluded that, whilst the death toll of his actions could not be determined, witnesses had accused him of six hundred murders.⁶⁸

Wachsmann links the actions of the ‘Death Squad’ to the advent of the SS courts as well as the intensification of the SS camp executions by postulating that “the guards knew that their superiors pushed for the murder of individual prisoners, so why should they hold back?”.⁶⁹ Though this makes sense, it is also true that the guards had a tendency to act against the intentions and expectations of their leaders. The many SS vices, examined in Chapter Two, and the propensity of the guards to ignore certain orders, in direct contradiction of the *Führerprinzip*, showed that a lot of guards, often the cruellest amongst their ranks, cared more about pleasing themselves than what their superiors were doing. This is not to say that the Camp SS were not influenced by their superiors, the indelible impression that Eicke left upon his men was one such example where the SS were motivated by their leader’s words and actions. Yet, the increase in camp murders owed more to the opportunism of shrewd perpetrators who attacked for selfish gratification than it did to guards’ perceptions of contributing to their leaders’ plans.

In summary, the advent of SS courts and the internal documenting of KL fatalities allowed the Camp SS to enjoy far greater freedom to abuse and kill prisoners. These changes were not inherently responsible for the guards’ desires to attack, nor do they explain the viciousness of murders from particularly cruel members of the Camp SS. However, this increased protection served to enable the individuals who hitherto had often measured their violence for fear of consequences. The Sachsenhausen ‘Death Squad’ were just one group of perpetrators who capitalised upon their opportunities to terrorise prisoners in the early war period. The three central figures discussed above were each young men when they joined the Camp SS – Schubert was still a very young man when the group’s atrocities peaked between 1940 and 1942 – and they shared a narrow worldview

⁶⁶ Morsch, *Die Konzentrationslager-SS 1936-1945*, 61.

⁶⁷ Naujoks, *Mein Leben im KZ Sachsenhausen*, 179.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Wachsmann, *KL*, 224.

and sadistic passion for abuse. Replicated across the KL amongst other SS killers, the mindsets like those of the 'Death Squad' promised to cause immense suffering due to the increased legal immunity of the camps. For the SS leadership, the Führer's support of the KL's legal independence represented real progress as it negated the potential for unwanted prying from Himmler's rivals. However, the freedom to act and the disguising of prisoner deaths fostered further vices amongst the guards. In protecting his KL from the rest of the country, Himmler inadvertently fuelled the Camp SS' poor discipline.

Waning Authority in the IKL

It would be a serious oversight to fail to assess the impact Eicke's departure from the Camp Inspectorate at the start of the war had upon the KL. As the previous chapter underlined, Eicke's influence upon the KL was unparalleled and Himmler's system of oppression would not have developed so effectively without him. Raul Hillberg identifies Eicke's move to the field with some of the SS-TV as the mark of the midpoint in the development of the concentration camps.⁷⁰ Whilst this coincided almost precisely with the outbreak of the war, Hillberg's decision to focus on Eicke's exit, instead of the war itself, as the key factor marking the midpoint in the camps development is interesting. This is a small, albeit important, nuance which contrasts with Höss' identification, and in turn, this study's acceptance, of the outbreak of the war as the turning point in the KL's existence. Hillberg's acknowledgement of the significance of Eicke's exit is reasonable, however, and this section will examine the impact that his successor, and former protégé, Richard Glücks had upon the camps.

Born in 1889, Glücks was a career military man having served and actively participated in the Great War during the battles of Verdun and the Somme. His post-war life, like many other future National Socialists, took him into the *Freikorps*, before he served in the Weimar *Reichswehr*. However, Glücks found himself unemployed in 1931, and in November 1932, having been a Nazi Party member since 1930, joined the SS as an officer. Eicke was impressed by Glücks and subsequently appointed him his chief of staff in April 1936, making him the second most senior person within the IKL.⁷¹ In November 1939, he officially replaced the popular Eicke as the Inspector of Concentration Camps. As such, until Himmler allowed Pohl to absorb the IKL into the WVHA in 1942, Glücks formally held the most influence over the management of the concentration camps.

Whilst a mainstay in the IKL, serving as its chief for a longer period than his predecessor Eicke, Glücks impact was much more muted and marked by mediocrity. Indicating Glücks' relative insignificance in

⁷⁰ R. Hillberg, 'Bringing the Jews to Death' in Hayes, *How Was It Possible?*, 464.

⁷¹ Wachsmann, *KL*, 193.

the history of the camps, Max Williams' impressive *SS Elite* trilogy, a compilation of biographies of the most significant senior SS leaders, overlooked Glücks whilst including both Eicke and Pohl. The idea that Glücks was not a success in the IKL is supported by one of his most prominent officers. In his capacity as commandant at Auschwitz, Höss became frustrated with Glücks and bemoaned both his disinterest in Auschwitz' administration and his seeming endorsement of managerial inactivity:

Glücks refused to accept my objections that in Auschwitz I had certainly the worst material as far as subordinates were concerned, and that it was not just their inability, but also their deliberate neglect and maliciousness which simply forced me to do the most urgent and important things myself. In Glücks opinion, a commandant should direct and control the whole camp from his office by issuing orders and using the telephone. It would be enough if he would occasionally walk through the camp. What simple mindedness! He had this attitude only because he had never worked in a concentration camp.⁷²

This portrayal of Glücks paints him as being the antithesis of his mentor Eicke who had applauded proactivity from his leaders and detested the thought of the Camp SS being inactive "pencil-pushers".⁷³ It is worth noting that, foremost, Höss was unhappy with the quality of his SS guards but, from his point of view, Glücks was responsible for this.

Moreover, Höss, who worked closely with Glücks at the IKL following his first period at Auschwitz-Birkenau, complained that Glücks' attitude toward commandants could best be summarised as "do what you want. Just do not let Himmler find out".⁷⁴ Höss wrote about Glücks' fear of Himmler and inability to cope with his position to some length, conveying his evasiveness by remembering that the inspector would reply to commandants saying "don't ask so many questions! You know much more than I do about these things".⁷⁵ This hands-off attitude to camp administration can be seen in documents from the time. On 20 February 1942, Glücks wrote to the commandants of each of the official concentration camps on the topic of labour allocation. He opened with "I turn the execution of the entire labour allocation in the camps over to the camp commanders", and at multiple points chooses to reiterate this grant of autonomy relating to day-to-day labour management.⁷⁶ It is logical to deduce that while Eicke was the key figure in energetically centralising the system, Glücks showed

⁷² Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 122-123.

⁷³ From T. Segev, *Die Soldaten des Bösen: Zur Geschichte der KZ-Kommandanten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1992), 145 in M.T. Allen, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 47.

⁷⁴ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 258.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁷⁶ HLS, NTP, NO-2167, Regulations for concentration camp commandants concerning control over allocation of inmate labour, 20 February 1942, 1, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Regulations for concentration camp commandants concerning control over allocation of inmate labor \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed on 2 June 2023]

a determination to deflect people away, contributing to the reversal of Eicke's progress and the strengthening of localised KL management.

There is also evidence to support the view that Glücks was to some degree bypassed in his role as camp inspector. In his orders to Glücks on 25 January 1942, Himmler informed the IKL chief that 150,000 Jews would be sent from Germany to the concentration camps over the next month. Despite the vast number of prisoners, verifying the importance of these orders, Himmler ended his message thus: "The concentration camps will have to deal with major economical [sic] problems and tasks in the next weeks. *SS-Gruppenführer* Pohl will inform you of particulars".⁷⁷ The logical inference from Himmler's wording is that Pohl was more aware of the coming events in the camps than Glücks, and as such Glücks' position in the camp hierarchy was becoming unclear. That these orders, and their seeming undermining of Glücks, preceded the IKL's subordination to Pohl by a couple of months suggests that Himmler may have already considered the economist to be more suited to administering the camps. Höss' opinion was that Himmler "never really trusted Glücks" and that he was hoping to reassign him to a different position.⁷⁸ This is corroborated by Michael Thad Allen who has written on Pohl and the WVHA. He has justifiably criticised Glücks' ability to administer the camps, stating that "in contrast to Glücks, Pohl seemed to be a nimble organisation man and a model of competence".⁷⁹ Whilst Pohl lacked Eicke's cult of personality within the KL and did not prove to be as impactful as its former leader, as the next chapter will show, he was indeed a more attractive administrator for Himmler than the overwhelmed Glücks.

Glücks was thus willing to allow his commandants a great deal of leeway providing that this neither caused him hassle nor prompted reaction from Himmler. One place where this was especially dangerous was at Buchenwald under commandant Karl Koch. Koch, whose misdemeanours and corruption have been discussed previously, was particularly adept at finding ways to make his camp unbearable for its captives. He had a habit of enforcing camp-wide fasting as a reprisal for minor transgressions. According to Kogon, *SS-Hauptscharführer* Planck, mentioned above, was one of Koch's reliable thugs who liked to take these enforced fasts further with his own extra restrictions. The outcome of these ration withdrawals could be devastating; in November 1939 prisoners were only fed on 18 days of the month.⁸⁰ Officially, camp labour was still focused on crushing spirit, rather

⁷⁷ HLS, NTP, NO-500, Heinrich Himmler orders to Richard Glücks concerning 150,000 Jews sent from Germany to the concentration camps, 25 January 1942, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Orders to Richard Gluecks concerning 150,000 Jews sent from Germany to the concentration camps \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed on 2 June 2023]

⁷⁸ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 258.

⁷⁹ Allen, *Business of Genocide*, 175.

⁸⁰ Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 194.

than supporting the war effort as was the case after Pohl acquired the IKL, and thus Koch's freedom to act arbitrarily meant that at Buchenwald people were often radically underfed and then subject to unnecessarily arduous labour as well. Planck's emulation of Koch's behaviour showed that the commandant's poor example greatly influenced his subordinates. It is easier to understand the growing death rate at Buchenwald after 1939 when one considers that its commandant acted without consideration of consequences. Had Glücks been even remotely concerned about productivity prior to Pohl's acquisition of the camps, he may well have curtailed Koch's starvation of prisoners, whilst simultaneously preventing Buchenwald guards from growing emboldened to follow their commandant's cruel example.

Under Koch's watch in the cell block at Buchenwald, where interrogations were conducted and prisoners were held in isolation, *SS-Hauptscharführer* Martin Sommer killed at leisure. One survivor of his methods, Pole Richard Gritz, recalled that Sommer "derived particular pleasure" from driving prisoners into the corridor, making them do knee bends until collapsing and then kicking their heads. He also forced the prisoners to stand to in their cells at attention from 5am until 10pm with any movement punished with 25 lashes; being caught peering out of the window risked death at the *Hauptscharführer's* hands.⁸¹ Sommer enjoyed utilising the 'Baum' torture method, wherein prisoners were hanged by their arms. This has already been discussed as a reported innovation of Hans Loritz' pre-war Dachau administration. Sommer also had a habit of mutilating genitals with boiling water and iodine suggesting that he too was innovative with his sadism. Moreover, prisoners were killed in the bunker by Sommer through other torturous means such as through severe head trauma caused by a vice, from forced starvation and from being beaten with iron bars. A highly prolific killer, Sommer later admitted having committed 150 murders within one six-month period.⁸² Among these murders were those of the Abraham-Hamber Affair, in which Sommer eliminated more than 30 witnesses to a prisoner's murder in 1940 in groups of three at a time. When an *SS-Scharführer* named Abraham killed a prisoner in front of dozens of onlooking inmates, the victim's brother complained to the camp leadership. Predictably, the complaint was made in vain but, nonetheless, Abraham killed the brother and as many witnesses as possible in retribution, with Sommer's efficient assistance.⁸³ Furthermore, Sommer's individual case is interesting. Though he behaved remorselessly, it is intriguing that on occasion, he gifted tobacco to prisoners he released if he failed

⁸¹ Testimony of Richard Gritz in Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, *Buchenwald Concentration Camp*, 109-110.

⁸² Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 225-228. See 225-230 for a more complete account of Sommer's activities at Buchenwald.

⁸³ Kautsky, *Devils and the Damned*, 85-89 and 286. For further information on Sommer's crimes in the bunker, see 94-95.

to force a confession from them.⁸⁴ Such contrasting behaviours are difficult to understand, though his violent exploits point toward Sommer being a mentally abnormal individual who simply enjoyed grotesque violence, without needing to be coerced.

Sommer was eventually arrested during Georg Konrad Morgen's Buchenwald investigation. The SS judge's assessment was that it was "undoubtedly the case that Sommer carried out his task as a torturer and executioner with great pride and passion. He prided himself on being the most feared and most hated person in the camp".⁸⁵ Both aspects of this are echoed by other sources. His satisfaction at his actions was especially visible at his post-war trial where he displayed "noticeable pride" in showing a miniature version of his whipping machine to the court. Sommer also confessed to carrying out "interesting experiments" which included injecting air or petrol into his victims' veins.⁸⁶ Furthermore, Kogon, witnessed that SS guards at Buchenwald feared Sommer as much as the prisoners.⁸⁷ This clarifies, at least, that what Sommer found enjoyable was repugnant to many of his colleagues. There thus appears to have been a line which existed in the facilitatory camaraderie of some SS abusers defining certain behaviours as being too abnormal to endorse. For Sommer, perhaps, seeing as he was content to operate largely independently, it may have been that his radical sadism and willingness to be rejected by the SS social collective combined to unnerve his colleagues. Moreover, the important aspect of this case is that Himmler was adamant that his SS should not, and would not, enjoy their key role in the destruction of Jews of Europe. Sommer was thus failing the Reichsführer in deeply relishing his part in the deaths of so many inmates. This would be a less significant point were Sommer to have just felt pleasure at shooting an escapee, for instance, but he was an unrestrained murderer who sometimes slept with his victims' bodies under his bed.⁸⁸

The causal relationship between Koch's disinterest in rules and Sommer's subsequent reign of terror can be seen especially in the case of a confessional minister named Paul Schneider, imprisoned in Buchenwald. Schneider became a target for Sommer who abused him over an extended period in his bunker. Eventually, having failed to poison Schneider, Sommer resorted to having the camp medical officer apply ice-cold compresses to the pastor, which caused his heart to stop. Schneider's family wished to see his body and Koch, presumably due to Schneider's status, acquiesced and welcomed

⁸⁴ Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 227.

⁸⁵ HLS, NTP, NO-2366, Georg Konrad Morgen brief against Koch and Dr. Hoven for corrupt practices at Buchenwald, 11 April 1944, 59, present author's trans., [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Brief against Koch and Dr. Hoven for corrupt practices at Buchenwald \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed on 2 June 2023]

⁸⁶ ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *The Manchester Guardian*, 4 July 1958, 'The Hangman of Buchenwald – Hard Labour for Life', 9.

⁸⁷ Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 226.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 229.

them to the camp. Koch ensured that Schneider's body was prepared by the SS barber using a wig and makeup. Flowers were positioned around his body which was to lie in state in the troop garage. Koch, upon escorting Schneider's wife to see the fruits of this SS deception, informed Frau Schneider that her "husband was my best prisoner, I was about to tell him of his discharge, when he died of heart failure".⁸⁹ From this story, it is plain to see the extent of Koch's complicity in the actions of Sommer, and consequent protection of him, not to mention the involvement of other SS figures within the camp such as the barber and medical officer. Furthermore, Koch's leeway from Glücks became Sommer's leeway in turn and this facilitated a known, and feared, murderer operating as the SS interrogator in the camp's bunker until 1943.

Koch was proactive in leading his men in violent escapades when the opportunity presented itself. In November 1939, a bomb plot failed to take Hitler's life and was blamed on the Jews which prompted Koch to lead his SS guards on an unsanctioned massacre. On 9 November, the SS selected a group of men from the morning rollcall and led them to the camp gate, leaving the rest of the prisoners locked up for several days without food or water. The guards, some reportedly still drunk from the night before, took their victims to the quarry where 21 Jews were executed. Wachsmann observes the significance of this due to the fact that never before had the local Camp SS killed so many in broad daylight and without direct orders from above.⁹⁰ Koch, however, made a habit of overseeing the murders of inmates in the quarry during his stay at Buchenwald. References to the murders in the quarry, sanctioned by Koch, appeared in the indictment brought against him by Morgen in 1944. The excerpt reads: "A total of 120 prisoners were 'shot when attempting escape' at the quarry of Buchenwald concentration camp alone... The physicians always filed bogus sick reports. Dissection reports also were made up in a way as not to make the true reason of death conceivable".⁹¹ The passage highlights an important issue raised above. Though the internal death registries aided the administration of the KL, the freedom they granted was abused consistently. Killers, medical staff and even commandants, in Koch's case, were guilty of misusing the system for recording deaths.

Furthermore, Koch's unit of executioners became known as 'Commando 99' and, according to Kogon, non-commissioned SS men were assigned to the unit in rotation unless they volunteered.⁹² The significance of this is that more guards, even those who did not show interest in joining the group, were inducted into a murder gang which manipulated members through peer-pressure,

⁸⁹ Ibid., 230.

⁹⁰ Wachsmann, *KL*, 220.

⁹¹ HLS, NTP, NO-2366, Extracts from brief against Koch and Dr. Hoven for corrupt practices at Buchenwald, 11 April 1944, 1, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Extracts from brief against Koch and Dr. Hoven for corrupt practices at Buchenwald \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁹² Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 231.

typical of Camp SS cliques. Guards who may have shared the apprehension of the Dachau SS man Müller, discussed previously, would have to take their turn at pulling the trigger. Though it is unclear what would befall those who refused to participate, it is likely that, akin to the rest of the KL, the inability to join in with SS peers' abuse and murder would severely harm a guard's reputation. This fear of being shunned by comrades was often potent enough to motivate compliance. If one were to consider the nature of the relationships between members of such a group, the aforementioned concept of negative facilitatory camaraderie appears to fit relatively well. Although members of the group were ordered to kill by Koch, diminishing the coverup element of Buchheim's camaraderie, Commando 99's activities were sufficiently unpleasant for relations between its members to be identified by the encouragement and endorsement of violent crimes.

Whilst the above is important to bear in mind, Commando 99 was a brutal group composed of many men who were eager to kill *en masse*. It is interesting to note that a large proportion of these killers had come from the SS personnel of the pre-war Lichtenburg camp considered in the previous chapter. This reinforces the assertion made by Stefan Hördler that Lichtenburg had been an effective 'squad forge'. Hördler remarked of the Commando 99 killers from Lichtenburg, that their former camp "prepared them for mass murder through daily brutalisation and ideological training". Though this is a valid contention, one should bear in mind that transferring from Lichtenburg to Buchenwald was common and therefore the frequency of Lichtenburg SS' membership of Commando 99 may have owed much to their numbers in the camp.⁹³

Commando 99 often utilised trickery to ease the suspicions of their victims who were mostly Russian prisoners of war. Inside the camp stables the killers pretended that they were decontaminating their victims and even got members of the unit to masquerade as physicians in white smocks whilst others called out misdirecting instructions like "the first six men, ready for bathing!".⁹⁴ One SS guard, and Commando 99 participant, Horst Dietrich, who volunteered to testify at the Buchenwald trial after the war, described the elaborate nature of the ruse:

There was a loudspeaker... music came through loudly... a fake examination was made of the prisoner, telling him to lift his arms or open his mouth. After this, the prisoner was taken by an SS officer to this room here and turned with his back toward the wall. The SS officer gave

⁹³ S. Hördler, 'SS-Kaderschmiede Lichtenburg: Zur Bedeutung des KZ Lichtenburg in der Vorkriegszeit' in S. Hördler & S. Jacobeit (eds.), *Lichtenburg: Ein deutsches Konzentrationslager* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2009), 129.

⁹⁴ Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 230-232.

a sign to another SS officer by stamping with his foot on the floor. Then this second officer through a slit in the wall shot his pistol at the back of the head of the prisoner.⁹⁵

Kogon was told by Zbigniew Fuks, a prisoner assisting in the crematory, that a survivor was unknowingly sent to be cremated. The man had been hammered on the head by a killing machine which released a truncheon as prisoners were positioned to have their height measured. Commando 99's *SS-Oberscharführer* Walter Warnstädt, also in charge of the crematory, killed the survivor immediately. Kogon remarked that Commando 99's killers had access to "unlimited quantities of liquor", once again showing the centrality of alcohol to KL atrocities as well as the Camp SS' overreliance upon it.⁹⁶ Dietrich supported Kogon's claim by saying that he and his comrades received sandwiches, cigarettes, and schnapps for their work in Commando 99. When asked at the trial why these bonuses were given, failing to recognise the significance of the alcohol as a tool for plying his comrades, Dietrich simply stated "when I work day and night, I have to eat something".⁹⁷ It was not unusual for SS perpetrators to be oblivious to the role that alcohol played in their murderous actions.

Buchenwald's unofficial unit of executioners operated until 1945; Koch's departure did not end their abuses. Rather, his successor as Buchenwald commandant, *SS-Oberführer* Hermann Pister, continued to use Commando 99 as an execution squad and, during a fiery interrogation at the same trial mentioned above, he defended its operation, albeit passing the blame for authorising executions toward the IKL and then, confusingly, denying any involvement with the unit whatsoever.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, Commando 99 was born in the chaos that Koch's tenure as commandant created. As a corrupt senior officer, in a position of great power, Koch did as he pleased at Buchenwald irrespective of the IKL's regulations and preferences. As Benedikt Kautsky put it, having personally endured Koch's regime, "Koch was too lazy to care about running the camp properly and only intervened where punishment was concerned".⁹⁹ Behaviours of many SS guards in the camp, such as Sommer and the men of Commando 99, were either facilitated or outrightly ordered by their commandant. Whilst Pister's blaming of the IKL for Commando 99's crimes was illogically reasoned, Glücks warrants much blame for the unit's continued existence. He had remained ignorant to Koch's actions for a long period and had consequently allowed the commandant too much freedom to act unilaterally in his camp.

⁹⁵ Testimony of SS guard Horst Dietrich in J.M. Greene, *Justice at Dachau: The Trials of an American Prosecutor* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 250-251.

⁹⁶ Section on Commando 99 from Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 230-232.

⁹⁷ Testimony of SS man Horst Dietrich in Greene, *Justice at Dachau*, 251.

⁹⁸ Testimony of *SS-Oberführer* Hermann Pister in *Ibid.*, 251-254.

⁹⁹ Kautsky, *Devils and the Damned*, 85.

As the main camp inspector, Glücks, according to Höss, particularly disliked inspecting camps. Höss complained that “when he inspected a camp, he saw nothing, and he even said so. He was happy if the commandant did not drag him through the camp too long”.¹⁰⁰ Had he inspected camps more often, rather than purposefully avoided the inconvenience, he might well have seen that Koch was not only acting immorally but acting in direct opposition to values and rules that the SS had in place for the concentration camps. Had the IKL been headed by a more competent leader in the early war period it is entirely possible that the murderous activities of the SS guards in Buchenwald and elsewhere could have been regulated to some degree. However, in failing to halt the intensifying behaviours, the decreasingly competent IKL both helped to increase the death toll and SS malpractice within the camps. Though the guards pulled the trigger, they were exploiting the slack granted to them by their commandants who were in turn being granted free reign over their respective camps providing they did not bother the disinterested Glücks with their issues.

The Arrival of Foreign Prisoners in the Camps

As has been considered to a limited extent already, the evolving nature of KL prisoners in the early years of the Second World War is important in understanding SS behaviours. With the German victories in Slavic countries, including Poland and the USSR, came an influx in non-Germanic prisoners. Whilst prisoners of many Eastern European nations would perish in the KL by the war’s end, this section focuses chiefly on Polish examples due to the large intake of Poles in the early war period. It was not chance that prisoners from Poland, and other Slavic nations, so often received incredibly harsh treatment. Himmler had presented a paper to Hitler in May 1940 entitled “Some Thoughts on the Treatment of Alien Peoples in the East”, which underlined his hopes and beliefs that it must be possible “to make the ethnic concepts of the Ukrainians, Gorals, and Lemkos disappear in our region”.¹⁰¹ Though not defining his use of ‘disappear’, the SS’ leader had himself made his stance clear that these Slavic peoples were not worth treating with respect. This was not a novel sentiment; some Wilhelmine era schoolbooks had argued that Eastern Europe had needed Germany’s civilising influence. Showing similar resentment for Eastern peoples, Julius Streicher’s inflammatory *Der Stürmer*, already shown to be a dangerous xenophobic Nazi propaganda tool, published an article in 1941 on “Bolshevism and Synagogue” identifying a supposedly undeniable link between Jews and the evil USSR. Streicher’s piece concluded with the following assertion:

¹⁰⁰ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 258-259.

¹⁰¹ Document 178 – Heinrich Himmler, “Einige Gedanken über die Behandlung der Fremdvölkischen im Osten”, 15 May 1940 in W. Michalka (ed.), *Deutsche Geschichte 1933-1945: Dokumente zur Innen- und Außenpolitik* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993), 238-240.

The end of the battle against the Bolshevik army in the east is German victory and therefore the victory of non-Jewish humanity over the most dangerous instrument of the Jewish world destroyers. The cause of the world's misfortune, however, will be forever eliminated only when Jewry in its entirety is annihilated.¹⁰²

Whilst Himmler's paper to Hitler was private, and the impact of a unified anti-Soviet and antisemitic propaganda effort cannot be measured, there was clear tolerance at the top of the SS of mistreatment of inferior foreigners as well as encouragement from sections of society to be harder on non-Germans. Kogon states that the SS guards tended to at least glance at news headlines, and read sections of some editorials, particularly when things were going well in the war.¹⁰³ Universal readership amongst the guards was not a necessity for the content of newspapers to circulate; one avid reader could feasibly pass on sentiments, like those of Streicher, via conversations.

Whilst incoming Polish prisoners were not Soviet citizens, by virtue of their Slavic race they were sufficiently foreign to warrant cruel treatment at the hands of the Camp SS. To show the impact of the xenophobic factors above, it is useful to consider a few of the many examples of brutality against Slavic prisoners. At the very beginning of the war, in Buchenwald, only two of 110 incarcerated Poles accused of being involved in the 'Bromberg Massacre' in September 1939 survived the wrath of the SS and lived past Christmas Day of 1939. This was not the first time the SS at Buchenwald had lumped the guilt for external events upon camp prisoners; when Ernst vom Rath was shot by Jew Herschel Grynszpan in Paris in November 1938, providing the pretext for *Kristallnacht*, the guards warned Jewish inmates "if he dies, it will be bad for you Jews". Their subsequent treatment was indeed very hard to endure with food withdrawal and bans from accessing the canteen and infirmary.¹⁰⁴ Thus, the incoming Poles were facing an emotional body of men who were practiced in taking their wrath out upon prisoners who they chose to associate with significant events. The cause of the SS fury in this instance was the deaths of hundreds of ethnic German civilians who were killed in the Polish city of Bydgoszcz (Bromberg in German) as a result of clashes with Polish forces in September that year.¹⁰⁵ Known in Germany as '*Bromberger Blutsonntag*' ('Bromberg's Bloody Sunday'), the deaths of over 250 *Volksdeutsche* civilians were largely a result of Polish retaliation against German subterfuge in the area, which some of the 250 were involved in. The *Wehrmacht* sought immediate revenge and responded in kind, killing many Polish civilians in Bydgoszcz. One

¹⁰² Document 351 – *Der Stürmer*, "Bolshevism and Synagogue", no. 36, 1941, in A. Rabinbach & S.L. Gilman (eds.), *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 724-725.

¹⁰³ Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 293.

¹⁰⁴ P. Wallner, *By Order of the Gestapo: A Record of Life in Dachau and Buchenwald Concentration Camps* (London: John Murray, 1941), 219-226 and 257-258.

¹⁰⁵ Wachsmann, *KL*, 229-230.

eyewitness recalled several local boy scouts, from 12-to-16 years of age, being put against a wall in the marketplace and shot. The witness observed that “no reason was given” and that “a devoted priest who rushed to administer the last sacrament was shot too”.¹⁰⁶

Contradicting the truth of events in Bydgoszcz, the *Völkischer Beobachter* chose to capitalise on these deaths and inspire vengeance from its readers by laying the blame upon Poland. On 10 September, the newspaper wrote that Poles “cut off the left breast of an old woman, ripped out her heart, and threw it into a bowl, which had been used to catch her blood”.¹⁰⁷ Whilst the mortality rate in camps rose at the start of the war, the increase was not severe enough for 108 out of a group of 110 prisoners to die due to the day-to-day occurrences within the camp. Rather, the SS guards had clearly gone to extra lengths to ensure the deaths of as many of these people as possible. It is impossible to deduce how many of the guards were *Völkischer Beobachter* readers, and thus the impact of that publication’s reporting cannot be confidently quantified, but the extremely high death rate amongst this group of Poles showed that the SS targeted them based upon their nationality and reported links to Bydgoszcz. Had the Nazi media, chiefly the *Völkischer Beobachter*, not reported on these events in a sensationalist manner, the group of 110 Poles in Buchenwald may not have been targeted so ruthlessly. This is speculative, of course, but there was a finite number of ways in which Camp SS could have been informed about Bydgoszcz. It is reasonable to suppose that had the guards’ information come directly from Bydgoszcz, they would have heard snippets of the truth that this was not a massacre of Germans. That the Camp SS were abusing prisoners through the reasoning that the Poles had perpetrated unanswered atrocities, however, points to their information coming from the Nazi propaganda machine. This logically leads to the conclusion that media had a significant impact upon life in the camps.

In a similar case to that of the group accused of participating in the ‘Bromberg Massacre’ at Buchenwald, Pole Leon Szalet, mentioned earlier, recalled that when his group arrived at Sachsenhausen in September 1939, they were referred to as the ‘Bromberg Murderers’. The SS’ tying of Szalet’s group to Bydgoszcz surely played a key role in their food withdrawal and isolation. On top of this, Szalet noted:

We were also not allowed to sit outside of working hours. We were not allowed to buy anything in the canteen, have any books, or read the newspaper. We had to spoon tea and

¹⁰⁶ R. Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 6. For a summary of ‘Bromberg’s Bloody Sunday’ see M. Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 225-229.

¹⁰⁷ Quote from T. Kees, “‘Polnische Greuel.’ Der Propagandafeldzug des Dritten Reich gegen Polen’, MA Dissertation, University of Trier, 1994, in Wachsmann, 230.

coffee from our lunch bowls. We were only allowed to use the toilets for a certain period of time, which led to the most appalling situations. At first, we were not even allowed to talk to each other. We were forbidden even to pray.¹⁰⁸

The suffering of Szalet's group in Barrack 38 was finally ended on 29 September, 16 days after the group's arrival at Sachsenhausen. This coincided with the capitulation of Warsaw which underlines the influence that external events had upon camp life and the survival chances of prisoners. The result of the torment of the supposed 'Bromberg Murderers' was the death of 35 prisoners across the period of isolation.¹⁰⁹ In Bavaria, Dachau prisoner Karl Röder remembered a "crowd of excited SS men" rushing to welcome Polish prisoners from Bromberg. Even as a prisoner, Röder was aware of the 'Bromberg Massacre' since "all the newspapers were full of it", indicating that the SS in the distant German south were already stirred into a furore by the reported crimes of their imminent arrivals. A firing squad was assembled for the 80 Poles, with Röder comparing the eager, heavily armed, SS to "loud bulldogs looking out from under steel caps". An administrative error meant that the prisoners were not to be shot at Dachau and were in fact moved on elsewhere, but Röder's brief account shows that the SS guards identified the Bydgoszcz prisoners as warranting special handling.¹¹⁰ Had the *Völkischer Beobachter* not twisted the truth of the German deaths in Poland, it is feasible that the Camp SS would not have been so motivated to get revenge for a fictitious massacre at Dachau, as well as preventing the deaths at Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen.

In 1941, SS anger over perceived race defilement of German women by Polish men was taken out on Poles in Buchenwald. Guards based at the camp took selected inmates on tour around Thuringia to hang their fellow Poles found guilty of the suspected crime. Kogon recalled from his time working with a young Polish hangman in Buchenwald that he and the other prisoner hangmen were sworn to silence by the SS and, not knowing the geography of the region, were not able to give reliable information on where these executions took place anyway.¹¹¹ The SS used some intuition in their utilisation of prisoners as middlemen for executions, showing that they were aware that limiting their direct involvement in murder was practical on occasion. However, there were other examples of SS retribution against Poles within the Buchenwald camps; whenever violent acts in the local

¹⁰⁸ CJH, LBI, Leon Szalet Collection, AR 10587, Experiment "E" (German, 1-340), 39-40, quote from 4, [Experiment "E" \(German, pp. 1-340\), undated | The Center for Jewish History ArchivesSpace \(cijh.org\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

¹⁰⁹ Wachsmann, *KL*, 231.

¹¹⁰ Röder, *Nachtwache*, 47-50.

¹¹¹ Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 196-197.

region were attributed to Polish perpetrators, guards would take up to 30 Polish inmates to the scene of the disturbance and hang them.¹¹²

Whilst the Monowitz subcamp at Auschwitz was not opened until late 1942, placing it slightly beyond the scope of this chapter, the varying treatment of inmates illustrated that the SS responded to influxes of different nationalities and social groups in the camp, making the following particularly relevant to this section. Cruelty to prisoners was commonplace at Monowitz, despite its production focus, as Norbert Wollheim's testimony shows. A welder in Monowitz, Wollheim gave evidence that during the latter part of the war, as the Allies started to carry out air raids, prisoners were forbidden to take cover from bombs, and they were beaten regularly by SS guards. The prisoners were comprised chiefly of Poles and Jews, helping to explain the abject lack of concern from the overseers. However, upon the arrival of 1,200 British prisoners of war "conditions somewhat improved" and "the beating of workers was officially forbidden".¹¹³ To attribute this to the British prisoner of war status would be incorrect, after all Karl Röder's recollection of more than 8,000 Soviet soldiers being executed at Dachau showed that being captured in battle offered no safety against the brutalities of the camps. Rather, the fact that these men were British and thus seen as members of the Germanic race, neither Jewish nor Slavic, prompted the SS to improve the conditions at Monowitz. This evidences that the war's introduction of different races and nationalities to the KL system was a significant factor in influencing interactions between the SS and the prisoners of the camps. In the case of the British at Monowitz, the SS were evidently conditioned to differentiate wartime foe from mortal enemy, indicating that the SS were able to contemplate broader ideas of identity and scales of punishment.

This conclusion gains more credence when one considers that, in the KL, prisoner Kapos were generally chosen from the ranks of the German criminal or political inmates. Logically the non-Jewish German prisoners were the least alien of the prisoners, evidencing the Camp SS' ability to calculate the degree of hate they should show their charges, with foreign non-Aryans generally at the top of their list of enemies. These deductions contrast with Kogon's assessment of the KL guards. He observed that intelligence was neither common amongst, nor ideal for, the SS camp men. Elaborating, Kogon wrote that "critical thought would have required the power to discriminate and make comparisons, which in turn meant an expanding mental horizon". Moreover, they needed only to discern between friend and foe, and to know they were at the top of society – further knowledge risked diminishing their striking power.¹¹⁴ Having witnessed SS malice first-hand, Kogon's opinion

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 19.

¹¹⁴ Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 293.

should not be dismissed but it oversimplifies the psyche of the typical SS guard and implies that they only functioned thinking in absolute terms, unable to recognise grey areas in the KL. The SS guards were in fact regularly able to assess the degree of loathing, and subsequent extent of cruelty, they felt was necessary to show to different prisoners. Rather than the marked unintelligence Kogon diagnoses, the guards showed cunning in both identifying their prey and then, when excuses were still necessary, finding justifications to torment them. Had the guards only been capable of interpreting facts and values that were instilled in them by their superiors, clandestine vice and corruption would surely not have been so prevalent amongst the Camp SS. Their poor conduct was often the result of their exploitation of camp life in displays of significant criminal intelligence, common amongst the guards. Moreover, the Camp SS' common vulnerability to the dissemination of Nazi propaganda and SS values should not be confused with an inability to think independently about aspects of their camp service, like the measurement of suffering different groups should experience in the KL.

Undoubtedly, the rise in the number of foreign prisoners in the KL in the early years of the Second World War coincided with an increase in violence and maltreatment from the Camp SS. The nature of the abuse discussed above help draw links between propaganda and the KL and indicate the complex targeting mechanisms of the guards. Whilst German prisoners were not safe from SS attacks by any means, even in the pre-war period, non-Jewish Aryans faced more favourable odds in the KL. The foreigners that arrived attracted SS attention for various reasons including their inability to speak German, their culture and, as this section showed, the involvement of their nation or social group in events which could fuel SS enmity. The Poles, the first of Germany's war enemies to arrive in the camps, were exposed to the SS' pent-up rage and subsequently faced terrible cruelties as the KL became increasingly deadly.

Conclusion

The middle period of the KL system was a time in which the camp guards, and their leadership, were testing the water to see how much freedom they could secure for themselves. The early camp system, under Eicke, had shown a trend of increasing centralisation which was intended to be continued under Glücks' tutelage. Having been a trusted deputy to Eicke, Glücks offered a good chance of administering the KL in the same dominant fashion as his teacher. Yet, a combination of several factors saw the IKL's effectiveness stutter which helped the rank-and-file gain more freedom than was beneficial to the system. Himmler and his IKL leaders in Oranienburg failed to handle the camp population boom brought by the war which underpinned a great many of the other problems that started in this period. Overcrowding and the haphazard creation of new camps prompted

disease outbreaks which made the KL more deadly through careless mismanagement rather than intentional policy. In securing the KL's independence from the legal system through establishing courts and internal death registries, SS leaders provided camp perpetrators the means to abuse without consequences. Whilst Himmler could now realistically eliminate Nazi enemies gradually without having to fear the civilian authorities, his guards were more difficult to keep under control and rebelled against their restraints. The emergence of notorious guard gangs like the Sachsenhausen 'Death Squad' and Commando 99 proved that many guards were eager to raise the intensity of their persecution of KL inmates. Even though their superiors could sometimes exploit having organised murder cliques in their camps, their existence, and the upturn in the number of independent killers like Martin Sommer, pointed to the SS rank-and-file often pushing to radicalise SS handling of prisoners. Under the watch of the steely Eicke, the KL may not have become so chaotic, but Glücks wilted in the face of the task bestowed upon him and diverted his subordinates away from his office. This hindered the IKL's relationship with diligent SS commandants like Höss and empowered rogues like Koch. Glücks' administrative reticence ultimately offered no benefit to the camp system. Furthermore, the increasing diversity in the KL encouraged the evermore bold and unconstrained guards to embrace their education and show their victims that Germans were superior. The resulting attacks on different nationalities and ethnicities were far more common and generally more savage than in the pre-war years which heavily contributed to the surging death toll in the KL.

Overall, SS mistakes in this period were responsible for the growing fracture in the relationship between the leadership and the lower ranking camp guards, facilitating the growth in the latter's willingness to abuse. As the following chapter examines, the Camp SS' increasing independence of action severely crippled the KL's productive potential. Ultimately, the KL grew increasingly deadly in the early war years and control over the ground level units was severely undermined. Despite this, the camp system's murderous potential only peaked when Pohl took charge of the KL from March 1942 until the end of the war.

**Chapter Five – ‘From Burden to Asset: The Reaction of the SS Guards to the Evolving Status
of KL Prisoners, 1942-1945’**

Introduction

The previous chapter of this study identified the KL as becoming increasingly lethal in the early years of the Second World War because ineffectual management led to waning control and granted excessive freedom to Camp SS guards. Due to the intensification of SS behaviours in the KL, those inside the camps, and those studying them, could be forgiven for believing that the leadership would make no effort to halt the process in the later war years. However, following then *SS-Gruppenführer* Oswald Pohl's announcement of the incorporation of the camps into the financially focused WVHA on 13 March 1942, a reorientation of the camps' emphasis from destruction toward production was planned. Somewhat contradictorily, this plan was made at a time when the Nazis' Final Solution was well underway. The KL population was vastly heterogeneous by 1942, and not all the prisoners were intended to be eliminated. Rather, many political opponents and less dangerous ethnic enemies were long seen as potential assets by the regime. After Pohl's takeover, however, prisoners who were at the highest risk of annihilation in the camps, like the Jews, were now also seen, by the WVHA at least, as valuable manpower. As the introduction to this study discussed, from this point onward, many prisoners should be defined as slave labourers, such was the extent of their repurposing into essential workers for SS enterprises. This significant change in thinking was driven by the Nazi German economy's need for extra support for its taxing war efforts as its fortunes started to falter in the increasingly drawn-out conflict. The KL was therefore seen as a realm of potential which had to be exploited if the economy was to remain steadfast in the face of an undesirably long war.

Ultimately, Pohl's goal to convert the KL into a powerful centre of industry was not achieved. Efforts to reduce the mortality rate to preserve labourers were unsuccessful. Mauthausen for instance, showed a decrease in deaths from 4,429 in 1942 to 3,209 in 1943 before rising to 7,075 the following year. Gusen, meanwhile, experienced an increase from 3,890 deaths in 1942 to 5,116 in 1943 though saw a decrease to 4,004 in 1944.¹ This shows that different camps followed different trends and they did not experience a continual decrease in mortality as intended. Nonetheless, due to the increasing populations, Nikolaus Wachsmann surmises that though the KL's death toll grew with its population

¹ *Harvard Law School* (HLS), Nuremberg Trials Project (NTP), PS-499, Report on the killing of inmates at Mauthausen concentration camp, 1-2, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Report on the killing of inmates at Mauthausen concentration camp \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

there was a reduction in the system's relative death rate.² However, this is not sufficient to consider the WVHA's effort to lower the death toll amongst camp slaves effective. The WVHA was itself frustrated at the figure of 70,610 inmate deaths between June and November 1942 prompting it to order all SS medical officers to do more to reduce the counterproductively high mortality rate.³ The policy to curtail the growing death toll thus met with little success. On top of this, there is agreement amongst historians including Marc Buggeln, Daniel Goldhagen, Wolfgang Sofsky and Wachsmann that the SS' endeavour to become a key contributor to the wartime economy, particularly in areas such as armaments production, was an overwhelming disappointment.⁴ These conclusions are sound and will not be challenged because the productivity of the KL consistently fell short of Pohl's expectations. However, the reasons for this failure have not been adequately considered. This is problematic because much of the evidence suggests that Pohl faced both passive and active Camp SS resistance to his aim of making the KL a more productive, less deadly place. This resistance reveals more about the nature of the camp perpetrators in the KL's most deadly period, making it a crucial element of this study. Therefore, the conflict between Pohl's WVHA and the Camp SS is the central focus of this chapter and is important to address because it showed that control over the KL was too low for its leader to make meaningful changes to its function. The KL's decentralisation, accelerated by Richard Glücks' lacklustre management in the previous years, was thus unable to be reversed by the more capable Pohl. Furthermore, Pohl's failure showed that despite the opportunity arising to stifle the blossoming violence of the camps, in favour of Germany's economic benefit, most of the SS chose to reject it.

The observation that the KL was difficult to change is shared by Wachsmann who supports the idea that Pohl was up against the odds. He remarks that Camp SS veterans were "steeped in a culture of cruelty", resulting in their resistance to top-down efforts to decrease violence.⁵ However, Wachsmann argues that the KL system was not out of the leadership's control and that "just as SS leaders in Berlin had escalated terror in the past, they could also rein it in", emphasising Pohl's

² N. Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (London: Abacus, 2016), 426.

³ B. Kautsky. *Devils and the Damned (A True and Damning Exposé of Nazi Concentration Camps...)* (London: Brown, Watson LTD., 1960), Appendix 8, Order from the SS-WVHA Department D-III to camp medical officers urging them to do more to reduce the mortality rate in the camps, 28 December 1942, 301-303. Note that this has most likely been signed by Richard Glücks but only the rank of the signatory (*SS-Brigadeführer*) has been included in the transcript due to an illegible signature.

⁴ See M. Buggeln, 'Were the Concentration Camp Prisoners Slaves?: The Possibilities and Limits of Comparative History and Global Historical Perspectives', *International Review of Social History*, 53:1 (2008), 101-129, 125, M. Buggeln, *Slave Labor in Nazi Concentration Camps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 17, D. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Abacus, 1997), 322, W. Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 167-169 and Wachsmann, *KL*, 403-406.

⁵ Wachsmann, *KL*, 425.

“WVHA was able to set the general direction for its camps”.⁶ Though his first contention that the centre had contributed to the escalating camp terror is valid, the second assertion that the SS leadership, notably the WVHA, was in control of the camps will be shown to be incorrect in this chapter. Karin Orth, meanwhile, contends that once the SS had set the terror of the camps in motion, the leadership could not reverse this.⁷ There is thus some difference in opinion over how much leverage Pohl and other SS leaders had over the KL as it developed in the late war period. Orth’s view is more accurate, particularly regarding the irreversibility of the situation in the camps. However, an important point to raise is that though the SS invariably set the terror in motion, a significant amount of this, barring, for instance, the active extermination in camp murder facilities, was the result of appalling management that allowed barbarity to flourish. The intention was indeed for the prisoners to suffer, but as the early war years showed, reality outstripped design. It is thus true that the SS leadership kickstarted camp terror, as far back as 1933 in Theodor Eicke’s Dachau, but they were unable to reverse the state of things, as Orth stipulates, because, by 1942, camp terror was organic and no longer purely the result of planning. Essentially, the SS could not reverse something that was being pulled along by ground-level perpetrators. As this chapter shows, Pohl’s inability to reshape the KL was testament to this assertion; he could not undo a process of camp radicalisation that was the product of a miscellany of contributory factors.

Because Pohl’s huge labour drive coincided with the extermination of the Jews and other minorities, historians have seen the two policies as being intertwined. This viewpoint is supported by the term ‘extermination through labour’ appearing in Nazi documents. For instance, on 18 September 1942, Minister of Justice Otto Georg Thierack and Heinrich Himmler held a meeting at which they agreed anti-social elements in prisons would be transferred to the KL for “extermination through labour”.⁸ Nonetheless, disparities exist between such a policy and Pohl’s aim for camp productivity. Despite this, extermination through labour has been viewed as an intentional SS camp policy by Michael Thad Allen, who viewed *Mittelwerk*, an off-shoot of Buchenwald’s subcamp Mittelbau-Dora, as one example of the SS allowing a “twofold division of labour” to evolve “that accommodated efficient production and extermination through work”.⁹ Wachsmann has also considered the “basic SS approach” to the handling of Jewish prisoners, particular in Majdanek and Auschwitz, to equate to a

⁶ *Ibid.*, 427.

⁷ Karin Orth in W. Benz, B. Distel & A. Königseder (eds.), *Der Ort des Terrors: Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager – Band 1* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2005), 137.

⁸ HLS, NTP, PS-654, Minutes of a conference of Himmler and SS and Justice officials concerning the treatment of criminals, Jews, Gypsies, Russians and Poles, 18 September 1942, 2, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Minutes of a conference of Himmler and SS and Justice officials concerning the treatment of criminals, Jews, Gypsies, Russians, and Poles \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁹ M.T. Allen, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labour, and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 227.

policy of annihilation through labour.¹⁰ Similarly, he argues that “it is clear that ‘annihilation through labour’ was an intentional policy of extermination of former state prisoners” who were transferred by Thierack after 1942 but adds that “Hitler’s role in the ‘annihilation through labour’ program was absolutely central”.¹¹ Wachsmann does, however, clarify that the majority of state prisoners were transferred to Mauthausen but were regularly severely beaten en route and often died upon, or shortly after, arrival.¹² Conceding that this likely partly owed to the rank-and-file guards’ pervasive violent abuses, it does appear that the consistency of the brutal attacks on non-Jewish German prisoners considered criminals, a better tolerated caste in the KL, were encouraged or at least accepted. As such, it would seem that for the senior Nazis who masterminded the transfer of prisoners to the KL, extermination was the primary concern, a supposition Wachsmann gives credence to. He suggests that Thierack himself felt productivity was a secondary priority to eliminating these undesirable elements.¹³ Evidently, the extermination through labour of state prisoners transferred to the KL was pursued by Thierack, with support from Himmler and Hitler, but that Pohl is not mentioned in Wachsmann’s article suggests that the WVHA chief’s goals, namely his own productivity policy, were distinct from Thierack’s mission.

Goldhagen has also supported the idea that the SS pursued a dual-purpose policy. For example, he argues that, in Poland at the Lipowa labour camp, the SS “did everything in their power to prevent Jews from staving off enervation and disease”. He also identified the 1943 increase of rations at the *Flughafenlager* subcamp, near Lublin in Poland, as proving the SS had hitherto been pursuing a policy of extermination through labour at the site.¹⁴ Others like Buggeln and Sofsky have identified the extermination through labour as an unofficial policy which occurred in practice.¹⁵ Buggeln considers the high mortality rate amongst the KL labourers, particularly in late 1942, as evidence that an unsanctioned strategy to work the prisoners to death existed. Similarly, Sofsky diagnoses the policy as an inadvertent result of a devastating system, stating that “even if labour was not defined by the private beneficiaries as a means of annihilation, it was nonetheless a major cause of mass death”.¹⁶ This is echoed by Andrea Riedle who diagnoses the failure to improve the prisoners’ chances of surviving immediately after Pohl’s takeover as the result of increasingly severe working

¹⁰ Wachsmann, *KL*, 427.

¹¹ N. Wachsmann, “‘Annihilation through Labor’: The Killing of State Prisoners in the Third Reich’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 71:3 (1999), 624-659, 652 and 657.

¹² *Ibid.*, 650.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 643.

¹⁴ Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, 297 and 305.

¹⁵ Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, 19-20 and 63-64.

¹⁶ Sofsky, *Order of Terror*, 170.

conditions because unauthorised guard attacks initially showed signs of decreasing.¹⁷ Therefore, it was the labour itself posing a greater threat to inmates' lives.

The idea that extermination through labour was, after 1942, unofficially practiced in the KL is convincing to some degree as prisoner labour was extremely destructive, eroding the workers' health as they strived to meet the demands of their captors and, as Wachsmann shows, plans for murderous labour were made for certain groups. Benedikt Kautsky, who experienced specialised work camps like Auschwitz III (Monowitz), also stressed that the "effort to make greater use of manpower came into sharp conflict with the urge to exterminate".¹⁸ This first-hand observation suggests that productive work could evidently be corrupted by those unwilling to adjust. In this regard, the Camp SS, particularly veterans of the Eicke system who had been forged in the ethos of 'tolerance means weakness', were manifesting stubbornness, or - to use Alf Lütke's concept discussed in the introduction - their *Eigen-Sinn*, to defend their way of working against unpopular interference in their labour from above. It is imperative to underscore that Pohl wanted a large, efficient prisoner work force to exist, and this required the preservation of life, which represented a concerning reordering of priorities for those who were comfortable with the freedom to abuse of the early war years. Furthermore, although apathy, particularly from the guards as will be seen later, undermined this preservation, Pohl's policy, unlike the one pushed by Thierack, was one which mainly sought to sustain life rather than extinguish it. This, of course, had little impact upon the intentional extermination in the gas chambers of the Nazi camps, a separate policy pursued intently by Himmler. Thus, contrasting the views of the historians above, namely Allen, Wachsmann and Goldhagen, the logical deduction is that Pohl's official camp policy, contributed to inconsistently by the Reichsführer, was one of extermination *and* labour. The reality, which was a result of the continued lack of control over the camps and their guards, was the pursuit of an unauthorised ground-level tactic of extermination *through* labour.

Though the Final Solution was a huge aspect of the late-war KL, this policy was independent of Pohl's labour mission. As a result, the Final Solution should be acknowledged as a crucial but peripheral element of the topic of discussion. Nonetheless, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that the implementation of genocide by the Camp SS, who were the main perpetrators of exterminations in the KL, was very likely to influence guard behaviours as murder reached an industrial scale around them.¹⁹ In turn, even prisoners who were not specifically earmarked for extermination were in

¹⁷ A. Riedle, *Die Angehörigen des Kommandanturstabs im KZ Sachsenhausen: Sozialstruktur, Dienstwege und biografische Studien* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2011), 40-41.

¹⁸ Kautsky, *Devils and the Damned*, 10.

¹⁹ For an overview of the Wannsee Conference and its significance see P. Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 305-310 and L. Rees, *The*

danger, as their SS overseers became more adept at taking lives. It would also be an oversight not to accentuate that Germany's failing fortunes in the war were intertwined with aspects of KL life during its final period. The necessity for Pohl's mission to mobilise camp labour became more imperative following Joseph Goebbels' 'Total War' Speech on 18 February 1943 which informed the public that Germany faced very real danger in the draining battle against the Allies. The Camp SS men were, logically, affected to varying degrees by the events on the frontlines. The previous chapter discussed the impact that the supposed 'Bromberg Massacre' had upon the camp guards and Soviet prisoners of war were pre-emptively viewed in similar terms to the wrongly accused 'Bromberg Murderers'. This was partly due to Nazi propaganda disseminating reports of Bolshevik atrocities after Operation Barbarossa commenced.²⁰ Both examples showed the likelihood of the SS' receptivity to Nazi press messages which they appeared to internalise above unfiltered, more objective, reports from the front. Genuine news, unmanipulated by Goebbels' media empire, did reach the camps but instances where propaganda corrupted information that was topically connected to KL reprisals suggest Camp SS behaviour was susceptible to being manipulated by wartime events. Going forward, it is useful to bear in mind how the most devastating period of the KL coincided with Germany's impending defeat. Whilst the influence that the collapsing war effort had upon SS guards will not be considered more closely until the next chapter, it was a subject of concern for the SS guards. Anxiety surely grew in the KL after the German Sixth Army was encircled at Stalingrad in November 1942, signalling the turning of the tide of war in Eastern Europe. Naturally, as the threat of invasion of German territory grew, and with it the threat posed to the camps, particularly those in the East, the SS became concerned for their own futures and risked becoming more erratic in their behaviour.

This chapter will start by focusing upon the Camp SS leadership's failure to work in tandem with Pohl which undermined his changes to the KL from 1942 until the end of the war. Subsequently, the chapter must consider how resistance to Pohl's production priority manifested itself on the ground-level of the camps. This can be seen most clearly in the escalation of the Camp SS' apathy towards the suffering of the prisoners. Already a central factor in the growing death toll of the early wartime KL, the apathy of the guards was only deepened by the new emphasis on exhaustive production. Hunger and illness, already deadly before 1942, also grew more out of hand which furthered the torment of the camp slaves. This section will show that in many situations, the SS could have

Holocaust: A New History (London: Viking Press, 2017), 241-270. For information on the specialised extermination camps see Y. Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps: Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka – Revised and Expanded Edition* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), Sofsky, *Order of Terror*, 259-275 and Rees, *Holocaust*, 295-313.

²⁰ See Wachsmann, *KL*, 229-232 for information on SS reaction to events in Bydgoszcz and 271 for information relating to the SS response to Nazi propaganda during Operation Barbarossa.

alleviated the issues but did nothing, thus undermining Pohl's aims to maintain the working capacity of the prisoners, leading to an inordinate number of deaths. The final theme to consider is the more sinister development of Camp SS behaviour in the KL's industrial experimentation period. Whilst the apathy of the guards caused immeasurable pain and misery, their active torment of prisoners further escalated in this period, becoming bolder than in the past. These behaviours should be considered separately, chiefly because the apathetic option often amounted to an absence of action, whilst the physical abuse was definable by an excess of action. The above issues, in tandem with one another, helped to see to the failure of the WVHA's plans to make the KL an efficient producer of armaments and other valuable products for the German economy. At the same time, the KL continued to become an increasingly untenable home for its victims with ever more inhumane treatment of prisoners by the SS overseers. This chapter will show, unequivocally, that after 1942, the behaviour of the SS guards became more radical than ever before in the history of the camps.

Resistance to Pohl's Economic Mission from Senior SS Figures

On 30 April 1942, Pohl sent a report to Himmler, updating him on the situation within the camps following his absorption of the IKL into the WVHA. Pohl wrote the following in reference to the evolution of the purpose of the SS camps:

The war has brought about a marked change in the structure of the concentration camps and has changed their duties with regard to the employment of the prisoners. The custody of prisoners for the sole reasons of security, education, or prevention is no longer the main consideration. The mobilisation of all prisoners who are fit for work, for purposes of the war now... come to the foreground more and more.²¹

Pohl's observation will have come as no surprise to Himmler who was, indeed, the architect of the movement of the IKL under the economic umbrella of the seemingly astute Pohl. This section of the report underlines that Pohl's belief in the mobilisation of camp labour was sincere, something corroborated by his career history which included work in naval pay offices starting in 1912, leading to multiple other postings as a paymaster. He was later poached by Himmler who placed him in charge of Department-IV (Commercial Administration) on the Reichsführer's staff in 1934. This was his first of numerous administrative economic positions in the SS, culminating in becoming the head of the newly consolidated WVHA in January 1942.²²

²¹ *The Wiener Library* (WL), London, 1655/2930 Report of Pohl for Himmler, concerning the incorporation of the Inspectorate of concentration camps into the WVHA, 30 April 1942, 2.

²² M. Williams, *SS Elite: The Senior Leaders of Hitler's Praetorian Guard, Vol. 2* (Stroud: Fonthill Media, 2017), 329-332.

Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss, who was particularly familiar with Pohl, especially after his own transfer to the IKL in 1943, observed that the WVHA leader was an immensely effective handler of finances who shook up SS practice when economic concerns prevailed. Höss remarked that “even the most obstinate and pig-headed among the higher SS officers, like Sepp Dietrich and Eicke, had to swallow their arrogance and beg Pohl for money... Pohl’s bloodhounds found every penny which had been spent over or under budget”.²³ Additionally, Höss supported the idea that Pohl was genuine in wanting to improve the function of the KL. He wrote, “Pohl’s principal demands were: treat the prisoners decently; stop the arbitrary and high-handed treatment by subordinate SS soldiers; improve the food wherever possible; get warm clothing for the prisoners in the cold seasons; provide adequate housing and improve all the sanitary conditions”.²⁴ A key signifier that Pohl’s production-driven KL management strategies were different to Eicke’s punishment-centred system can be seen in Höss’ highlighting of the strained relationship between the two, who had “unresolvable disagreement[s]”.²⁵ Their strained relationship illustrated that Pohl posed a threat to the predominantly punitive institution passionately built up by Eicke in the 1930s. Höss also believed that Pohl “definitely did not enrich himself personally” even though he enjoyed the privileges that his position afforded him.²⁶ Pohl reportedly agreed a deal wherein the ‘Canada’ department at Auschwitz-Birkenau, responsible for collecting prisoner clothing and belongings, would send clothing to the managers of the IG Farben plant at Auschwitz III in return for luxury items from the Belgian black market.²⁷ Though perhaps questionable for a diligent economist, this deal appeared to enrich the SS, rather than Pohl individually. Nonetheless, at the Nuremberg Trials, Gerhard Hoffmann of the WVHA testified that there had been attempts to manufacture false evidence to incriminate Pohl for corruption in order to devalue testimony he gave at trial.²⁸ It is fair to deduce that, despite indications Pohl enjoyed some benefits in his role, he was genuine in his economic anxiety, he was intolerant of financial corruption, and he was honest in his quest to utilise slave labour effectively.

Despite his own dedication, others in the SS leadership did not aid Pohl’s cause and he was mistaken in believing that his views were shared by his officers. In the same April report to Himmler, he wrote that “the collaboration of all authorities goes on without any friction, the abolishment of lack of

²³ S. Paskuly (ed.), *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 312.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 315.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 314.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 317.

²⁷ J.R. White, “‘Even in Auschwitz... Humanity Could Prevail’: British POWs and Jewish Concentration Camp Inmates at IG Auschwitz, 1943-1945”, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 15:2 (2001), 266-295, 269.

²⁸ See HLS, NTP, Gerhard Hoffmann, Affidavit concerning an attempt to manufacture false corruption charges against Oswald Pohl, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Affidavit concerning an attempt to manufacture false corruption charges against Oswald Pohl \(harvard.edu\)](https://www.harvard.edu/nuremberg-document-viewer-affidavit-concerning-an-attempt-to-manufacture-false-corruption-charges-against-oswald-pohl) [Accessed 2 June 2022]

coordination in the concentration camps is hailed everywhere as the shedding of the fetters hindering progress".²⁹ This erroneous belief that his changes were embraced by the Camp SS leadership contributed to the failure of his mission. In fact, he inadvertently went some way to undermining the above statement about abolishing the lack of coordination in the KL, in his meetings with camp commanders between 24-25 April. The discussions with commandants led to new orders becoming active on 1 May 1942. One such order stated that "the management of a concentration camp and of all the economic enterprises of the SS within its sphere... is in the hands of the camp commander. He alone is therefore responsible". Another read "hardly any camp is like any other one, therefore no uniform instructions shall be issued. But the whole responsibility is shifted on to the initiative of the camp commander".³⁰ Rather naively, Pohl, in the face of the challenge of kickstarting camp productivity, managed to consolidate camp autonomy and accept the increasing lack of uniformity, a useful characteristic of the pre-war KL, the decline of which had adversely affected camp management. This was undoubtedly a mistake because these two concessions effectively justified many unilateral actions from commandants and tolerated diversity in camp operation, which, as will be seen in relation to camp medical care, for instance, led to varying results.

When considering the undermining of Pohl's restructuring of the KL's purpose, it is logical to start at the top with the Reichsführer. The nature of Himmler's relationship with Pohl has received scrutiny in the past. Heinz Höhne considers Himmler to have harboured "permanent mistrust" toward Pohl, but this is unconvincing, especially when considering the correspondence between the two men.³¹ Himmler's letters to Pohl were generally signed "*Ihr HH*" ("Your HH"), but on occasion the Reichsführer signed off with even warmer sentiments such as "*Herzlich Ihr HH*" ("Sincerely yours, Heinrich Himmler").³² Informal greetings from Himmler did reach other recipients but he commonly relied upon "*Heil Hitler! HH*" and similar variations. It is Höss' own emphasis upon how Himmler signed off "every letter and even the telegrams" to Pohl with "Your faithful H. Himmler", which makes this point more curious. Himself a favourite of Himmler's, having been asked by the Reichsführer to join the SS directly, Höss evidently recognised, perhaps even envied, Himmler's affection being directed elsewhere. Moreover, Höss added that Himmler held the WVHA leader "in the highest regard", and that Pohl was "the most willing and obedient executor" of all his superior's orders. Despite this, Höss remembered that Pohl chose not visit Himmler unless explicitly

²⁹ WL, 1655/2930, Report of Pohl for Himmler, 30 April 1942, 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

³¹ H. Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's SS* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 385

³² H. Heiber (ed.), *Reichsführer! Briefe an und von Himmler* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1968), see 150 and 245 for examples of Himmler's greetings to Pohl.

summoned.³³ The reasonable conclusion to make is that Himmler and Pohl had a good relationship and, if anything, Himmler was the more affectionate party.

Although both Pohl and Himmler saw the importance in utilising camp labour to support the war economy, they did not fully agree on how best to achieve this evolution. Whilst Pohl sought extensive reordering of KL priorities, as his report for Himmler on 30 April showed, the latter was determined that the camps should not lose their original purpose. In his reply to Pohl on 29 May 1942, Himmler wrote “overall I’m fine with all things [mentioned]. However, I believe that it must be stressed that there is no change... in the purpose of re-educating the re-educable in the KL. Otherwise, the thought might arise that we arrest people... or keep them inside to have workers”.³⁴ The wording of this is intriguing because the Reichsführer appeared to suppose that the KL was still the NSDAP’s political re-educational tool that it had aimed to be in 1933, rather than the primarily destructive institution it had become by the 1940s. Furthermore, whilst Himmler’s response appears to show only mild disagreement, the point of contention was the nature of the KL environment. Himmler made it clear that the camps must retain their supposed re-educative focus, to keep up appearances and prevent external parties from assuming the SS camps were softening and redirected toward production. Supporting this, Kautsky observed from inconsistencies in camp policy that Himmler “could just as easily be convinced that unnecessary hardship... [was] destroying valuable manpower... as that a free and easy policy made the camp look too much like a rest centre”.³⁵ This was crucial to the failure of Pohl’s aims and facilitated further horrendous treatment within the KL. Himmler was, on the one hand, pro-economic productivity but simultaneously unwilling to allow a milder ethos to exist amongst the Camp SS to facilitate this. The agreement between Thierack and Himmler to allow the extermination of state prisoners through labour in the KL encapsulates the confused stance that the SS leader took regarding labour. The results, as will be seen, led to an unprecedented drive for labour efficiency in the camps, zealously championed by Pohl, and a continuation, although in many cases an escalation, of the horrific living conditions and rough guard behaviour, defended by Himmler. The marriage of merciless slave-driving and terrible treatment made the camp system much more deadly, in absolute terms, over the next three years.

The Reichsführer was also motivated by the prestige that could be gained from success in the SS slave industry for both himself and his organisation. This led to exaggeration about productivity from Himmler, largely inspired by his intention to keep Reich Minister of Armaments and War Production, Albert Speer, and General Plenipotentiary for Labour Deployment, Fritz Sauckel, from interfering in

³³ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 317.

³⁴ Letter from Heinrich Himmler to Oswald Pohl, 29 May 1942 in Heiber, *Reichsführer*, 121

³⁵ Kautsky, *Devils and the Damned*, 53-54.

his camp empire.³⁶ An example of this exaggeration can be seen in Himmler's speech to German generals in June 1944, wherein he claimed that one-third of German fighter planes, one-third of German gun barrels, and "countless other things", including precise optical instruments and "enormous quantities" of munitions, were being produced by KL slaves.³⁷ Success of this magnitude was never reached and there was a huge amount of waste, hardly surprising given the conditions that the prisoners had to contend with. Furthermore, Himmler's unjustified exaggerations were in part caused by his ridiculously high expectations of the labour in the camps, which led to unrealistic projects being planned. *The Buchenwald Report*, an invaluable compilation of first-hand accounts from the camp, contains information on a railroad Himmler ordered built, by KL slaves, from Weimar to Buchenwald. The order for the railroad's construction was given on 18 March 1943, and Himmler stated that its first test run would occur on 21 June 1943, regardless of any setbacks. The SS drafted in a renowned slavedriver, *SS-Obersturmführer* Alfred Sorge, who brought two of his henchmen along. The timeline for completion was unrealistically short, prompting the KL workers to be driven ferociously by the SS. Fatalities reportedly numbered in the hundreds, with dozens of accidents being reported daily. By 20 June, the railroad was finished, provoking jubilant celebration from the SS and the distribution of promotions and medals. However, despite the successful test run, the track, which was built haphazardly due to the short deadline, and the SS' employment of non-specialist labourers who were badly treated, was unfit for proper use until late summer 1944.³⁸

The Weimar-Buchenwald railroad is an important example for several reasons. It showed that Himmler was impressed by grand projects that defied reasonable labour expectations; the disastrous reliability of this railroad track did not detract from the impressive speed of its completion. Furthermore, the Camp SS men used to drive the slave labourers were undeterred by a high mortality rate so long as the job was completed. This is not surprising considering the reverence the SS gave to the *Führerprinzip* in certain circumstances. Failing a direct order, given by the Reichsführer himself no less, was inconceivable despite the SS' propensity for bypassing generalised orders relating to conduct. Höss' memoirs discuss his personal perception of the significance of a direct order from Himmler, stating that "Himmler's person was sacred. His fundamental orders in the name of the Führer were holy. There was no reflection, no interpretation... they were carried out ruthlessly, regardless of the final consequences".³⁹ Whilst it is undoubtable that Höss' zeal was an

³⁶ Wachsmann, *KL*, 393-394.

³⁷ *Birkbeck University of London* (BUL), The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 45 – "Heinrich Himmler on Armaments Production in Camps, June 1944", [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](https://www.bbk.ac.uk) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

³⁸ Document 132 – Theo Eckert, "Railroad Construction to Buchenwald" in D. A. Hackett (ed. and translator), *The Buchenwald Report*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 300-302.

³⁹ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 153.

extreme, creating the image of a sycophant, one must suppose that others still took Himmler's orders very seriously, especially someone like Sorge who was drafted in specially to fulfil them. Therefore, Himmler's direct order for the railroad was not one that could be falsely accepted and later sidestepped like an order not to steal prisoner belongings, for example, which could be covertly violated with ease. The railroad had to be finished, and failure to meet Himmler's expectations would reflect badly on the SS men attached to the project and possibly cause them sincere disappointment at failing their leader. SS men who received direct orders to oversee production jobs and labour projects were thus in a position where failure represented overt disobedience of the *Führerprinzip*. To prevent this, SS guards regularly drove their slaves at alarming speeds to protect themselves in the long run.

The railroad mentioned above was not the only disaster created by Himmler's warped mindset on the goals of prisoner labour. His desire to complete megaprojects saw the movement of V-2 rocket production underground in the face of Allied bombing. In December 1943, Himmler ordered Pohl to begin building underground works in all available quarries "with the greatest possible speed". His demand was tremendous enough before he added that he wished for tunnels to have a ceiling "of at least 50 metres above them wherever possible, and 100 metres when feasible".⁴⁰ The ferocious pace of the tunnel digging, already underway prior to Himmler's orders to Pohl demanding huge dimensions, led to the SS guards driving KL slaves in horrible conditions in their determination to get the job done. Cecil Jay, who survived Mittelbau-Dora, the vast subcamp which was granted independence from Buchenwald in 1944, remarked that there was "no water in these tunnels at no time at all when they were being built... we worked in the tunnels all day long from morning until evening. We were driven... to work as fast as possible".⁴¹ The prisoners were often required to rest in the tunnels as well. Survivor Josef Ackermann testified at Nuremberg that about 90 percent of the camps slaves were forced to sleep in the tunnels in unventilated rooms wherein about 3,500 prisoners resided together in beds that were stacked five high. Ackermann, a journalist of 30 years, made efforts to record and preserve as much incriminating information about the camp as he could. Whilst stationed in the prisoner hospital, Ackermann was responsible for completing death certificates and thus was able to inform the Nuremberg tribunal about the mortality rate. He claimed that the death toll rose monthly and that in February 1944 the number of fatalities was about 3,500

⁴⁰ Letter from Himmler to Pohl regarding tunnel construction, 17 December 1943 in Heiber, *Reichsführer*, 247.

⁴¹ BUL, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 32 – "The Survivor Cecil Jay on Life and Death in the Dora Tunnels", [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](https://www.bbk.ac.uk/documents/the-nazi-concentration-camps) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

whilst by March 1944 it was 5,000.⁴² Considering the standing population of the camp was around 50,000, this was a massive death rate for a site that was supposedly geared towards productivity rather than destruction.⁴³ Ackermann's testimony lays the blame for the death toll on numerous factors such as starvation, poor sanitation, lengthy commutes and long rollcalls but chiefly blames exhaustion from painfully long working hours. The prisoners who did not sleep in the tunnels, according to Ackermann who had read a memorandum from the SS camp physician, often returned from work at 11.30pm in the evening, were then fed and allowed to sleep for two hours from 12.30am in the morning before rising for work at 2.30am.⁴⁴ This work rate was obviously unsustainable and motivated by urgency.

Himmler's expectation that underfed weak prisoners could construct gigantic underground weapons facilities surely contributed to both the unyielding pace of work and the growing death toll in tunnelling sites like Mittelbau-Dora. Moreover, illustrating that Himmler was driven only by results, he stated in his speech at Posen on 4 October 1943 that "whether 10,000 Russian females fall down from exhaustion while digging an anti-tank ditch interests me only so far as the anti-tank ditch for Germany is finished".⁴⁵ This mentality was picked up on by Höss whose annoyance at Himmler's determination to send prisoners to inappropriate jobs can be seen in his memoirs. He complained that:

Himmler ordered the deployment of prisoners over the rejection of the camp commandant, the work commando leader and even [WVHA Office] D-II because of its importance to the war effort... this was done even though the housing and food were totally inadequate, or the work was totally unsuitable to prisoners. Himmler got his way even over the objections of Pohl and paid no attention whatsoever to anyone.⁴⁶

Höss was certainly no humanitarian, and his frustration was caused by being overruled by Himmler and observing inefficiency rather than the prisoner health risk, but it shows that the SS leader's interest in productivity was not aligned with Pohl's. Pohl accepted that prisoners would die, he was certainly not averse to prisoners dying once their strength had gone, but he wished for them to be

⁴² HLS, NTP, Josef Ackermann affidavit concerning the Buchenwald and Dora (Mittelbau) concentration camps, 6-7, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Affidavit concerning the Buchenwald and Dora \(Mittelbau\) concentration camps \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁴³ See *ibid.*, 7, and WL, 612/25, Komitee Ehemaliger Politischer Gefangene, Statistical report: Numbers of prisoners/genders/deaths/murders in all major concentration camps, 1, for estimation of Mittelbau-Dora's population.

⁴⁴ HLS, NTP, Josef Ackermann affidavit, 7-8.

⁴⁵ HLS, NTP, PS-1919, Extracts from speeches concerning the SS and the conduct of the war, speech of Himmler at Posen, 4 October 1943, 1, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Extracts from speeches concerning the SS and the conduct of the war \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁴⁶ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 220.

treated with some semblance of humanity whilst working so that their labour potential could be maximised.

Whilst Himmler was the highest-ranking SS leader to undermine the evolution of the KL, he was not the only senior person in the camps to cause Pohl's labour reorientation to facilitate worse treatment and more deaths. Several SS commandants were guilty of clinging to the old style of camp management, an issue compounded by the fact that Pohl relied on camp leaders who had learned their trade in the Eicke era. For instance, some commandants put up resistance to working with the Pohl's economic offices prior to his takeover of the IKL. These included Karl Koch at Buchenwald and Alex Piorkowski at Dachau. Both were Eicke men and showed hesitancy toward Pohl's intended changes to the KL's punitive function.⁴⁷ By October 1942, all but four of the official main SS concentration camps had new commandants appointed by Pohl, but there were still five commandants who had trained under Eicke: Höss at Auschwitz-Birkenau; Max Koegel at Majdanek; Martin Weiss at Dachau; Franz Ziereis at Mauthausen; Egon Zill at Flossenbürg.⁴⁸ Pohl's shakeup of personnel did remove characters who he deemed to be a liability – five commandants were removed from the Camp SS altogether – but some old faces remained.⁴⁹ Hans Loritz, the merciless successor to Heinrich Deubel in prewar Dachau, was one of those who paid the price. Whilst corruption on his part had harmed his reputation, his replacement at Sachsenhausen was Anton Kaindl, an administrative expert who had headed a department in the WVHA, again showing the sincerity of Pohl's transition from brutality to economic-focused camp management.⁵⁰

Pohl also asked commandants to compile lists of SS block leaders who had served at their respective camps for extended periods and Pohl reassigned them to new locations to break up established gangs and cliques. It was through this effort that the Sachsenhausen 'Death Squad', discussed in the previous chapter, was split apart.⁵¹ Gustav Sorge, the group's forceful leader, had shown himself to be unable or unwilling in 1942 to take seriously the planned protection of valued labourers under Pohl, his upbringing and training in the Eicke style was too deep-rooted.⁵² Yet, he was appointed leader of Sachsenhausen's subcamp, Berlin-Lichterfelde, which essentially empowered a known murderer, raising some questions about the effectiveness of this rearrangement.⁵³ Having

⁴⁷ M.T. Allen, 'The Banality of Evil Reconsidered: SS Mid-Level Managers of Extermination Through Work', *Central European History*, 30:2 (1997), 253-294, 273-274.

⁴⁸ See Wachsmann, *KL*, 401-403 for a comprehensive breakdown of Pohl's changes in leadership personnel within the KL. Note that Weiss succeeded Piorkowski at Dachau but had himself learned his trade under Eicke.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 401.

⁵⁰ Riedle, *Angehörigen des Kommandanturstabs im KZ Sachsenhausen*, 40.

⁵¹ Wachsmann, *KL*, 401.

⁵² Riedle, *Angehörigen des Kommandanturstabs im KZ Sachsenhausen*, 191-192.

⁵³ H. Naujoks, *Mein Leben im KZ Sachsenhausen 1936-1942: Erinnerung des Ehemaligen Lagerältesten* (Cologne: Röderberg, 1987), 128-129.

established himself as a viable candidate for subcamp leadership, Sorge headed Kaiserwald's subcamp Dondangen from 1944 where Jewish survivor Werner Samuel described him as "an animal... a sadist, a real born sadist". Samuel added that sometimes during rollcalls he would order "'all down' and we had to lay on the wet or frozen ground, and he laughed his head off. We had to stay there for 10, 15, 20 [minutes] sometimes half an hour".⁵⁴ Evidently, Sorge's behaviour did not soften when away from his murder clique, though one might suppose his influence upon others was diluted in smaller satellite camps. Yet, Pohl had shown a willingness to act, which Glücks had not done previously. The ease of Pohl's reshuffling of KL staff makes Glücks' failure to act more damning. In spite of his efforts, Pohl's hopes that his reposting of commandants and block leaders might help to reform the camp system were misplaced. His reformation did not materialise. The commandants were arguably the senior authority figures with the most influence over the Camp SS guards, based upon their proximity and frequent visibility in their respective camps. Himmler, Pohl and Glücks were hallowed guests on occasion, but the commandants were the most senior SS figures the guards saw in day-to-day life in the KL. The behaviour of the commandants, in relation to prisoner treatment, is thus worthwhile examining in order to determine the sort of example that was being set for the rank-and-file guards.

A notable element of commandant behaviour that set a bad example for their subordinates was the language used to describe KL prisoners. Höss' memoir reveals his own sentiments, tainted with apparent disgust, towards the Russian prisoners of war sent to Auschwitz. One such group of prisoners, who Höss remarked had been told to "graze", like cattle, in fields on their way to the camp, descended into starved desperation at Auschwitz. This caused vicious fighting over scraps and instances of cannibalism. The commandant's appraisal was that "they were no longer human. They had become animals".⁵⁵ This observation did not acknowledge the SS' agency in causing the Russians' instinctive survivalist violence. What Höss witnessed, if entirely true and not corrupted by established prejudice against the supposed 'Judaeo-Bolshevik' enemy, served to endorse the belief that the ethnic minorities in the camps warranted poor treatment. One must suppose that logically it was counterintuitive to treat the Red Army captives with such neglect. After all, a huge influx of young, military-fit men might have been identified by the SS as their best chance to maintain a healthy workforce in the KL. Many non-military prisoners were ill-suited to the demanding camp labour on account of their sedentary careers, but the Soviet soldiers had the potential to manage physical work better. However, this opportunity was not exploited. The mortality rate of the Soviet

⁵⁴ *University of Southern California (USC), Shoah Foundation, Visual History Archive (VHA), Testimony of Werner Samuel, segment 114, [Werner Samuel - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](#) [Accessed 5 April 2023]*

⁵⁵ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 132-134.

prisoners of war was kept high by intentionally crushing tasks and mass extermination. This was not helped by senior figures like Höss viewing their pitiful actions, driven by their hopeless situation, as those of animals.

Christian Wirth, better known for holding the role of commandant at Bełżec extermination camp and for being the inspector of the death camps, oversaw the *Flughafenlager* from late 1942. A multipurpose labour camp, the *Flughafenlager's* main function was to produce clothing for the WVHA. Wirth therefore fell under the jurisdiction of the IKL whilst at *Flughafenlager*.⁵⁶ In a 1971 interview, Franz Stangl, who had been commandant at the extermination camps of Sobibor and, later, Treblinka, claimed that Wirth once asked him “what shall we do with this garbage?” whilst looking upon pits of dead victims.⁵⁷ Wirth placed no value upon the SS’ prisoners and the ramifications of this for the KL will be discussed shortly. Moreover, Himmler himself referred to the KL slaves as ‘subhumans’, so there is perhaps little surprise that derogatory language filtered down from the summit of the SS to the camp leaders.⁵⁸ The Sachsenhausen ‘Death Squad’ leader Gustav Sorge’s describing of prisoners as “typical Jewish subhumans” whilst having them photographed in bleak settings, helped to underline that both leaders and followers shared terminology relating to the KL.⁵⁹ Similarly, *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Karl Sommer, head of WVHA Department D-II-1, which was responsible for KL slave labour deployment, used the term “material” to refer to the camp prisoners.⁶⁰ The view of prisoners as an insentient commodity travelled down the hierarchy; Anna Bergmann, incarcerated at Auschwitz, placed special emphasis in her testimony upon the infamous Dr Josef Mengele’s statement that the camp was receiving “very good material” when her transport arrived.⁶¹ It is, of course, impossible to assert whether camp staff were emulating their superiors, after all, both commandants and guards were exposed to various stages of the militaristic and xenophobic German education system as well as the Third Reich’s propaganda. It is thus feasible that, rather than a top-down dissemination of ideology through terminology, both leaders and subordinates thought alike due to shared background factors. What this evidence does show,

⁵⁶ Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, 300-305.

⁵⁷ Stangl attributed the development of his own view that the prisoners were “cargo” to Wirth’s comments upon the corpses in front of them. If one takes Stangl at his word, this suggests that Wirth had influence over his colleagues as well as his subordinates. – T. Segev, *Soldiers of Evil: The Commandants of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), 201-202.

⁵⁸ For an example of Himmler using this language see BUL, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 45 – “Heinrich Himmler on Armaments Production in Camps, June 1944”, [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁵⁹ Naujoks, *Mein Leben*, 95.

⁶⁰ BUL, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 44 – “SS Officer Karl Sommer on “Renting Out” Ravensbrück Prisoners”, [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁶¹ Testimony of Anna Bergman in L. Smith (ed.), *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust: True Stories of Survival – From Men, Women and Children who were There* (London: Ebury Press, 2006), 176.

however, is that KL commandants could not or, more likely, would not reform their thought process in relation to prisoners. SS men who were perhaps more susceptible to being influenced by their commandant were set a bad example to follow. To this end, a significant number of commandants and senior officers were incompatible with Pohl's efforts to reform how prisoners were viewed, thus failing to support his goal of reorientating the KL to favour productivity over destruction.

From time to time, commandants themselves played a direct role in the atmosphere of arbitrary violence in the KL. Amon Göth, commandant of Kraków-Płaszów from February 1943 until September 1944 and known for his antagonism toward Oskar Schindler's lifesaving efforts in the war, was infamous for regularly shooting prisoners from his villa balcony overlooking the camp. Survivor Josef Perl claimed that Göth sometimes claimed 20 victims before breakfast. Perl himself was once struck in the face by Göth for looking in the commandant's direction.⁶² Göth's demoralising efforts went further; Płaszów prisoner Taube Biber recalled a day when Göth was unsatisfied with work productivity so selected 25 young girls to each receive 25 lashes at rollcall. Biber described this trauma as being very damaging to the residents of her barrack. She said, "we saw these girls all black and blue and with their blood running, we just yelled. We weren't human anymore – the yelling, the screaming, the crying!"⁶³ Göth's wanton sniping of prisoners with his Mauser carbine was unquestionably in breach of SS rules and epitomised the rogue behaviour of a violent individual. His active role in selecting young girls for lashings, however, is a little murkier regarding SS practice. His supposed intentions were to spark better productivity, keeping with Pohl's ethos, but his actions clearly led to severe injury and caused deep damage to prisoner morale. The inference must be that Göth's example to the Camp SS was a toxic one. He completely devalued prisoners' lives, legitimising their murder for entertainment purposes, shrinking Pohl's available workforce in the process. He also used corporal punishment to damage the workers and underpinning it all was the permanent instilment of absolute fear and misery into prisoners who were surely too terrified to meet the commandant's labour demands. Göth's tenure as commandant was cut short by the SS who charged him with numerous misdemeanours, including crimes related to prisoner treatment, yet he still managed to hold a position of power and influence over SS guards for over a year and a half.

Göth's example was extreme but he was not the only abusive commandant. Having had experience in extermination camps, Wirth carried murderous behaviours into the KL sphere in his time at the *Flughafenlager*. His extensive record of abuses at the camp included riding his horse into gaggles of prisoners causing injury and death, as well as grooming a young Jewish boy to accompany him

⁶² Testimony of Josef Perl in *ibid.*, 169-170.

⁶³ Testimony of Taube Biber in *ibid.*, 169.

around the camp, forcing him to shoot fellow Jewish prisoners.⁶⁴ Wirth's influence upon the *Flughafenlager* was significant with many other cases of serious violence occurring, committed by the commandant's underlings.⁶⁵ Undoubtedly, Wirth's management, a hybrid style created by experience in death camps and the KL, was disastrous for the population of the *Flughafenlager* and his own insatiable malice heavily undermined the WVHA's goals. Not all commandant violence was deadly; at times an outburst could be measured to cause injury rather than death, but these assaults could undermine prisoner productivity just as easily. Bergen-Belsen commandant Josef Kramer ordered Israel Ketellapper to decorate his house but whilst the prisoner was up a step ladder, Kramer came home accompanied by the sadistic wife of Karl Koch, Ilse, called out "ah, the Jew!" and tipped the ladder over before walking off laughing.⁶⁶ Several facets of this attack are interesting and fit with wider Camp SS habits: Kramer diluted his violence to suit the situation; there appears to have been an element of showmanship to entertain Koch which supports Elissa Mailänders view that gender dynamics were important in camp violence; Kramer found the situation amusing, a key consideration that will be explored thematically later. Though Ketellapper survived this milder assault, he could have been severely injured by Kramer and rendered incapable of working.

Another manifestation of the commandants' disregard for Pohl's new orders can be seen in the handling of healthcare in the KL. The inconsistencies of camp medical care are somewhat easier to rationalise when considering that commandants, responsible for their camp's infirmaries, often struggled to view their prisoners as humans and assets. Unsurprisingly, even in camps which can be considered to have had 'good' medical facilities for prisoners, the conditions were still far from decent for human use. However, regardless of Pohl's claims that the "abolishment of lack of coordination" was proceeding effectively, prisoner healthcare could not have been more inconsistent. It should be noted that camp medical care had long been riddled with contradictions. At Dachau, for instance, in the months before the war, suffering with chronic toothache, inmate Fred Pelican snuck into the SS doctor's office despite the SS forbidding prisoners from doing so. The doctor gave Pelican an injection and quietly invited him back for a check-up despite being able to demand the inmate's punishment, not least to protect himself from appearing soft.⁶⁷ Conversely, in the same camp, Karl Röder reluctantly received treatment for toothache from an SS doctor when the prisoner physician was absent. Röder's SS doctor chose to practice a root resection on a healthy

⁶⁴ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 307-309.

⁶⁵ See *ibid.*, 301-310 for examples of camp violence during Wirth's tenure as commandant.

⁶⁶ *Freie Universität Berlin* (FUB), Universitätsbibliothek/Center für Digitale System, Interview-Archiv "Zwangsarbeit 1939-1945: Erinnerungen und Geschichte", Israel Ketellapper Interview, [Interview za422 | Interview Archive „Forced Labor 1939-1945“ \(zwangsarbeit-archiv.de\) \[Accessed 2 June 2023\]](#)

⁶⁷ F. Pelican, *From Dachau to Dunkirk* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1993), 21.

tooth rather than treat his toothache. In fact, the doctor found the impromptu surgery practice funny, laughing as he boasted to his colleagues. Röder remarked that this was part of a wider culture of SS medics practicing random surgeries on prisoners. One toothache sufferer had his stomach removed whilst another with abdominal pains had all his teeth removed.⁶⁸ Dachau was not alone in seeing malicious mistreatment; at Buchenwald SS doctor Hans Eisele was known to amputate inmates' limbs when they were suffering from minor wounds.⁶⁹ Whilst a minority of SS doctors loosely abided by their professional duty to help the sick, many saw their ideological duty as justification to torment them instead.

At Mittelbau-Dora healthcare was treated seriously by the camp leadership. The camp, as discussed above, was to be one of the crucial underground sites for rocket production and its importance to the war effort increased as time went on.⁷⁰ Tuberculosis was very common at Mittelbau-Dora and, although there were many flaws, the treatment facilities for sick prisoners improved over time at the camp. This was essential bearing in mind the camp's high death toll, attested to by Ackermann after the war. From initially only having a sick tent, the SS established a sick block and then, finally, created a tuberculosis department exclusively for those afflicted.⁷¹ The SS stayed out of the way, for their own safety, and let prisoner functionaries run the hospital. Inherently, this was a manifestation of apathy, but it inadvertently allowed the prisoner medical staff to work without SS harassment. The treatment was not bad by KL standards, the prisoners were washed, given a coffee substitute, received X-rays, had sputum samples taken, and received lunch and dinner with plenty of bed rest.⁷² Of course, the SS leadership's permitting of this treatment was not compassionate, it was motivated by the need to get prisoners back to work as quickly as possible. This was successful to some degree. In January 1945, for example, 38.7 percent of admitted tuberculosis sufferers were discharged back to the camp population; 27.7 percent died during their treatment; 18.8 percent were transported away, considered beyond saving and thus exterminated, and the records for the final 14.7 percent are lost.⁷³ To better place the treatment of tuberculosis at Mittelbau-Dora, it is worth considering its treatment at another camp. In the female KL Ravensbrück no medication was used for tuberculosis sufferers and their quarantine department was permanently overfilled. Sufferers received an extra mucus suppository diet only if their prognosis was promising.⁷⁴ As far as the SS treatment of sick

⁶⁸ K. Röder, *Nachtwache: 10 Jahre KZ Dachau und Flossenbürg* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1985), 332-333.

⁶⁹ Kautsky, *Devils and the Damned*, Appendix 4, 285-286. Further instances of mistreatment of infirmary patients are also mentioned on these pages.

⁷⁰ P. Kiosze & F. Steger, 'The Everyday Life of Patients with Tuberculosis in the Concentration Camp of Mittelbau-Dora (1943-1945)', *Frontiers in Medicine*, 7:1 (2020), 1-10, 1-3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

prisoners goes, Mittelbau-Dora's commandants Otto Förchner and, later, Richard Baer oversaw an effort which intended to cure the ill, subsequently maximising the labour pool at the camp, resigning them to extermination only if treatment failed.

Accepting that Mittelbau-Dora's medical treatment represented a benchmark for the KL, the often chaotic and clearly uncoordinated healthcare in other camps should be considered to see how commandants veered away from Pohl's aim of maintaining prisoners' working capacity. One camp that served as a particularly poor example of prisoner healthcare was Auschwitz-Birkenau. Olga Lengyel arrived in the women's camp in Birkenau in 1944 and remembered there being no specialist facilities to care for sick women until Barrack 15, "the most dilapidated in the camp", was converted into an infirmary.⁷⁵ Prior to this, according to a report from *SS-Sturmbannführer* Albert Gricksch to Himmler in May 1943, upon the arrival of new prisoner transports "the curably ill [were] sent straight to a medical camp and are restored to health through a special diet. The basic principle behind everything is: conserve all manpower for work".⁷⁶ This supposed conservation of manpower was poorly reflected within the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp system itself. Beyond the industrial scale of murder conducted at the gassing facilities of Birkenau, the prisoner medical facilities were awful. Even upon Barrack 15's conversion into a supposedly adequate infirmary, the roof leaked, there were holes in the walls, and there was no running water. Due to the lack of equipment, specifically boiling water, Lengyel and four other women who staffed the infirmary cleaned the floor with cold water, bereft of disinfectant. Lengyel added that the camp's sick population grew after the infirmary's creation but that the camp leadership refused to allow the infirmary to take on more staff.⁷⁷ This refusal was inexplicable, considering that adding more prisoner workers to the infirmary would come at no cost to the SS. Extra medical personnel would have gone some way to helping the situation, perhaps increasing the chances of more KL slaves return to work. As it was, senior officers at Auschwitz-Birkenau facilitated the catastrophic overcrowding of the camp's infirmaries. Sima Vaisman, an imprisoned infirmary doctor, remembered the sick being cramped together in pairs on straw mattresses full of pus and blood, with up to four patients having to share dirty cots.⁷⁸ The desperate situation in the Auschwitz infirmaries was summed up by Höss, one of the main

⁷⁵ O. Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz* (Chicago, IL: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1995), 69-70.

⁷⁶ *Jewish Virtual Library*, "Report entitled "Resettlement of the Jews" written by *SS-Sturmbannführer* Gricksch for *SS-Col. Von Herff* and *Reichsführer-SS* Himmler, after inspection of Auschwitz camp on 14-16 May 1943", citing G. Fleming, *Hitler and the Final Solution*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 142-143, [Documents Regarding Auschwitz \(jewishvirtuallibrary.org\)](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁷⁷ Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 69-72.

⁷⁸ BUL, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 35 – "The survivor Sima Vaisman on the Auschwitz-Birkenau infirmary, writing in 1945", [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](https://www.bbk.ac.uk) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

contributors to the situation. He believed that an order from Pohl in 1944 to give sick prisoners more time to recover, and more food and care, was “sheer idiocy”. He bitterly claimed that he did “not believe that a single Jew was ever made fit again to work in the arms factories”.⁷⁹ Höss showed himself to be part of the problem that Pohl faced regarding improving labour potential.

Unlike at Mittelbau-Dora, wherein prisoners deemed to be too burdensome to treat were sent to other KLs on transports, at Auschwitz selections for extermination from the ranks of the sick were quickly dealt with on site. Sometimes the victim’s heart would be injected with phenol, at other times the SS made use of the Auschwitz network’s gas chambers. Lengyel’s memoirs discuss a *Durchgangszimmer* (passageway), a room measuring nine by 12 feet, where especially sick prisoners, often with contagious conditions, were sent to lie on the bare floor and left without food.

Understandably, she referred to this room as “a real antechamber of death”.⁸⁰ This notion echoed the sentiments of Alfred Wetzler, an Auschwitz escapee and co-author of the revealing Vrba-Wetzler Report in 1944, who became chief attendant of another infirmary located in Block 7 in mid-1942.⁸¹ Wetzler claimed that Block 7 was a dreadful place and that in fact “this building was nothing else than an assembly centre for death candidates. There was no question of medical attention or care”. The escapee report added that 150 died in this infirmary each day and, on Mondays and Thursdays, the SS selected around 800 more to be gassed with *Zyklon B*.⁸² Interestingly, Lengyel describes the inconsistency of SS orders regarding treatment of diseases as “stupefying”. One day, contracting an affliction like diphtheria would be tantamount to a death sentence leading to automatic extermination selection, whilst on another day the SS would permit treatment of diphtheria sufferers in isolation.⁸³ This inconsistency shows that on top of a lack of uniformity between the healthcare of different camps, treatment policies within one camp could arbitrarily change from time to time. Moreover, the appalling situation at Auschwitz-Birkenau was only exacerbated by activities in the experimental block. Simon Umschweif, a member of the *Sonderkommando* (literally ‘special unit’, comprising prisoners who laboured in the crematoria of the gas chambers) recalled how “strong men” between the ages of 18 and 24 were specially selected and castrated. Sometimes the procedure was carried out over two stages.⁸⁴ The inhumane testing at Auschwitz-Birkenau,

⁷⁹ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 38.

⁸⁰ Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 73-75.

⁸¹ The ‘Auschwitz Protocols’ are a collection of documents, which included the Vrba-Wetzler Report, which were smuggled out of Auschwitz-Birkenau by two Slovak Jews in April 1944. The documents revealed to the Allies a great deal about the camp’s operation.

⁸² *Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library*, Digital Collections, Records of the War Refugee Board, 1944-1945, Box 7, “German Extermination Camps”, Folder 1 of 2, 7, [hol00522.pdf \(marist.edu\)](https://www.marist.edu/ol00522.pdf) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁸³ Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 75.

⁸⁴ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account by Simon Umschweif, Austria, of working in the ‘*Sonderkommando Krematorium*’ in Auschwitz concentration camp, 3.

including the activities of Mengele, contributed to the quota of sick prisoners unfit for work. This experimentation was permitted by the commandant and by higher SS leadership. The seemingly omniscient Pohl was aware of camp experiments, which shows that, on occasion, even he contradicted his own ideology.⁸⁵

Whilst Auschwitz was a high-profile example of drastically different medical treatment to that of Mittelbau-Dora, other camps also showed the inconsistency of Camp SS leadership in relation to prisoner healthcare. Polish Jew Stanley Faull referred to Majdanek's camp 'hospital' as a "staging area for the gas chamber" due to the absence of doctors and nurses and limited availability of medicine.⁸⁶ In Bavaria, Hermann Langbein blamed the SS leadership's anti-intellectual sentiment for the forbidding of doctors to work in Dachau's camp hospital. This rule was dropped but medical professionals continued to be prevented from managing it.⁸⁷ The refusal to acknowledge these professionals served as an endorsement for the camp guards' targeting of prisoners with learned professions, or those unlucky enough to wear spectacles, for extra torment.⁸⁸ This exemplified how the camp's leadership could influence guard malpractice by failing to manage camp healthcare appropriately. Nonetheless, Dachau was relatively liberal, by KL standards, in tolerating infirmary stays of up to four months in some cases. This length of treatment was also seen in the more deadly Mauthausen. The Auschwitz camps, by comparison, often only between two and four weeks of treatment.⁸⁹ At Monowitz, prisoners grew wise to this fact, leading them to avoid the hospital and work until they collapsed.⁹⁰ When the sick rate in Monowitz' infirmary exceeded five percent of the prisoner populace, the SS camp doctor, Friedrich Entress, carried out extermination selections to reduce this figure.⁹¹ Whilst such selections were theoretically justified through necessity, some SS physicians, like Kaiserwald's *SS-Sturmbannführer* Dr Eduard Krebsbach, carried out selections for different reasons. Krebsbach was known to select people for extermination for minor imperfections including varicose veins and scars from medical treatment.⁹² Likewise, Eva Baron's aunt was selected for extermination at Auschwitz-Birkenau by Mengele because she had a hysterectomy scar. Despite her aunt being 35 years old and relatively healthy, the SS were looking to justify selection based on

⁸⁵ Evidence of Pohl's awareness of camp experiments can be seen in a letter from Pohl to Dr Brandt regarding nutritional experiments involving feeding prisoners a new foodstuff, 16 August 1943 in Heiber, *Reichsführer*, 225.

⁸⁶ Testimony of Stanley Faull in Smith, *Forgotten Voices*, 172.

⁸⁷ H. Langbein, 'Work in the Concentration Camp System' in W. Benz & B. Distel (eds.), *Dachau Review: History of Nazi Concentration Camps Studies, Reports, Documents – Vol. I* (Dachau: Verlag Dachauer Hefte, 1988), 108.

⁸⁸ Langbein in Benz & Distel, *Dachau Review – Vol. I*, 106.

⁸⁹ Kiosze & Steger, 'Tuberculosis in the Concentration Camp of Mittelbau-Dora', 8.

⁹⁰ White, "'Even in Auschwitz... Humanity Could Prevail'", 273.

⁹¹ Langbein in Benz & Distel, *Dachau Review – Vol. I*, 113.

⁹² WL, 649/1 List of Gestapo and SS War Criminals, 5.

surgical imperfections. More surprising was that the selection Baron experienced was not in the infirmary but in general population showing the obscurity of the selection criteria.⁹³ Kaiserwald commandant Albert Sauer's and Auschwitz-Birkenau commandant Richard Baer's permitting of selection based on such nonsensical pretexts is made less startling by the fact that they had both learned their trade under Eicke in the pre-war KL. Pohl greatly disliked Eicke's KL and, conversely, as mentioned earlier, Eicke's supporters were often stubbornly loyal to their teacher's view that the camps should be punitive, not productive. This weakened Pohl's reformation greatly and showed how great the ideological divide was between the WVHA and some Camp SS officers.

French former inmate Aimé Bonifas gave a detailed summary of the catastrophic healthcare in Buchenwald's subcamp Laura. The first infirmary was rudimentary and saw tubercular patients mixed in with the other sick, threatening to spread contagious disease. Bonifas remarked of the infirmary that "the filth was repulsive; used bandages, mucus, and a nauseating odour of pus and of excrement were everywhere".⁹⁴ On 1 November 1943, the prisoners were moved to more permanent fixtures and infirmary conditions initially improved. However, things soon worsened again; filth built up, overcrowding became an issue and the absence of equipment forced Bonifas, one of the attendants, to clean dysentery patients without soap. Like at Dachau, trained medical workers were not permitted to run the infirmary leading to a French doctor being subordinated to a German Kapo with no medical training. This Kapo took charge of diagnoses and treatments himself, but reserved medicines for his cronies. Bonifas blamed the Kapo for carrying out "abracadabra experiments" including an appendectomy that he witnessed personally:

I saw the Kapo approach, make an incision with his scalpel, rummage around with his forceps, and then withdraw for a cigarette break... a Pole took his turn at manipulating several instruments in the abdomen of the young Russian...the patient lay on the table for three hours, his abdomen open, and yet the 'surgeons' never succeeded in finding his appendix... finally the Russian showed no signs of life.⁹⁵

In Laura's infirmary, patients' food was stolen by the prisoner staff, leaving them to go hungry.⁹⁶ This was, in fact, common in the infirmaries; Edith Kaufmann recalled during her time in an Auschwitz

⁹³ FUB, Universitätsbibliothek/Center für Digitale System, Interview-Archiv "Zwangsarbeit 1939-1945: Erinnerungen und Geschichte", Eva Baron Interview, [Interview za562 | Interview Archive „Forced Labor 1939-1945“ \(zwangsarbeit-archiv.de\) \[Accessed 2 June 2023\]](#)

⁹⁴ A. Bonifas, *Prisoner 20-801* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 45.

⁹⁵ Section on the new infirmary at Laura and the example of medical mistreatment from *Ibid.*, 51-58.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

hospital in 1944 that “the girls who were the so-called nurses used... to deprive the patients of their food”, stealing half of their bread ration and often their clothes.⁹⁷

Although it would appear that the prisoners who dominated the new Laura infirmary were largely responsible for the disastrous treatment within, this is only partly true. The Kapo and his helpers were murderous, but the SS empowered him and supplied him with alcohol which he relied on to commit his misdeeds. Particularly obscure was the fact that after prisoners recovered from their hospital stay, they were invariably assigned to the *Walbrecht Grube*, a work commando performing the most arduous labour in the camp’s quarry and mineshafts. This prompted Bonifas to refer to this as the perfecting of “exterminating human beings by forced labour”.⁹⁸ Indeed, giving medical treatment prior to assigning a patient to an intense labour project appears entirely counterintuitive. Nonetheless, were extermination the goal, the SS could easily have ensured it by denying ill prisoners any treatment in the first place. Rather, the situation at Laura encapsulates the mismanagement of KL infirmaries and their inherent contradictions. Contrastingly, when Bonifas was transferred to the Mittelbau-Dora subcamp Mackenrode, he found that the SS commandant had willingly appointed a French veterinarian as camp physician. The commandant also went as far as to issue an order that guard brutality must cease, in response to a complaint from the French physician that he was dealing with unnecessary injuries. This proactive response, which showed support for the productivity prioritisation, was quite out of step with the usual incompetence that defined the leadership’s handling of infirmaries and showed that pro-labour medical care could be established with common sense.⁹⁹

The inconsistencies of the infirmaries and hospitals of the KL must be attributed to the camp commandants as well as Office D-III within the WVHA which focused on camp medical matters. This office had the smallest quota of staff out of the KL-focused sub-offices, and its leader, Dr Enno Lolling, was also involved in instigating killing programs within the camps. Moreover, Lolling’s standing was poor, and he was known to be addicted to morphine and alcohol.¹⁰⁰ It was because of Lolling’s vices that he was supposedly an ineffective operator; Höss remarked that “he was so easy to deceive during inspections... especially, as happened most times, when he had been plied with alcohol”.¹⁰¹ Auschwitz’ especially bad situation regarding medical treatment was likely partially

⁹⁷ USC, Shoah Foundation, VHA, Testimony of Edith Kaufman, [Edith Kaufman - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](#) [Accessed 5 April 2023]

⁹⁸ Bonifas, *Prisoner 20-801*, 58-60.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰⁰ Wachsmann, *KL*, 396.

¹⁰¹ From *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* (IfZ), Munich, F 13/8, Bl. 486-87: R. Höss, “Dr. Enno Lolling,” November 1946, quote on 487; IfZ, Interview with Dr. Kahr, 19 September 1945, ND: NO-1948, 4 in Wachsmann, *KL*, 396.

related to Höss' awareness of how to manipulate the unreliable Lolling. After all, Höss' memoirs indicated, as discussed above, that he found Pohl's recommendation that Auschwitz worked harder to save sick prisoners to be idiotic. It seems that the usually compliant, and unfalteringly zealous, Höss rejected the idea of conserving manpower through good healthcare and thus outmanoeuvred Lolling in order to protect Auschwitz' methods.

Clearly, whilst Pohl was sincere in implementing policies which supported productivity, other SS leaders failed to share his enthusiasm. Himmler seemingly agreed with Pohl's desire to make the KL a potent asset in buttressing the German economy but, in practice, could not adjust to reordering the priorities of his prison system. In short, he preferred the Eicke KL model to Pohl's. Had Himmler supported Pohl wholeheartedly, his commandants may have been more amenable to changing themselves. Pressure from Pohl was not as daunting as pressure from Himmler and had the power of their personalities complimented one another in the pursuit of productivity other senior SS figures might have buckled and subscribed to Pohl's reformation. As it was, camp leaders chose to ignore the WVHA chief's efforts and made no serious inroads in their leader's quest to reduce the KL's mortality rate. This represented resistance to the orders from above, showing a disinterest in respecting the *Führerprinzip*. The SS' habit of bypassing orders that were indirect has been seen previously in Chapter Two in relation to SS ignoring of rules to commit misdemeanours and adopt vices. Again, as seen here, unless given a direct order which, for example, demanded a certain job completed in a specific timeframe, the SS could, often in good conscience, circumnavigate the order. In relation to productivity, Pohl's orders were frequently general and gave his subordinates room to move around them. Moreover, Buggeln has claimed that in this period of the KL's history, SS attitudes did not soften and nor did the SS divert from their view that the camp prisoners were the enemies of the German people.¹⁰² The evidence seen in this section validates Buggeln's view; the leadership's failure to repress their disregard for their prisoners was a crucial misstep which allowed old habits to endure. Unable, and unwilling, to change, the Camp SS leaders were not invested in Pohl's mission and watched on as it came undone.

Apathy of the Camp SS

Thus far, this chapter has considered how Pohl's labour evolution in the camps was resisted by the camp leadership, but it is imperative to consider how the behaviour of the guards on the ground developed in this period. Apathy to the increasing suffering of prisoners not only furthered the loss of life in the KL but it contributed to the undoing of Pohl's efforts. However, the Camp SS' actions, or lack thereof, that can be seen as apathetic are too diverse to consider exhaustively here. As such this

¹⁰² Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, 31-32.

section will examine displays of apathy that fit into a limited range of categories including prisoner hunger and exhaustion, the SS handling of the prisoner Kapos, and the guards' reaction to Allied air raids over the KL. These themes cover a broad enough area to show that the apathy of the camp guards was ubiquitous within the concentration camps.

One crucial factor in the huge upturn in KL mortality after 1939 was hunger, exacerbated by the reduction in camp rations at the dawn of war in Europe. The impact of low rations was increased as Pohl's new regime demanded that commandants ensure prisoner labour be "in the true meaning of the word, exhaustive, in order to obtain the greatest measure of performance".¹⁰³ Exhaustion struck the hungriest prisoners hardest and was also caused by the intense work schedule demanded by Pohl. It is important to note that, like medical care, commandants could have made greater efforts to limit hunger and exhaustion but where guards were essentially unable to remedy the situation with camp infirmaries, they could, to certain degrees, act to alleviate the situation with hunger and exhaustion. This is not to say that the guards were influential enough, nor had access to enough food, to eliminate these issues, but, as this section will show, their apathetic responses served only to worsen the situation in the camps.

Generally, prisoner food was appalling but Odd Nansen, a Norwegian Sachsenhausen inmate, testified to its declining quality as time went on. This was partly attributable to the Ministry of Food's regular reduction of food supplies to the camps.¹⁰⁴ The failing war effort put pressure on Germany's food supplies and, naturally, the regime chose to make the KL prisoners feel the strain the most. In November 1943, Nansen described the lunchtime soup as "degenerating more and more", consisting of boiled swede, cabbage, and potato. He added that the soup was cold by the time it reached the prisoners and that it was so bad that "we should hesitate to give [it to] the animals".¹⁰⁵ Nansen's diary mentioned the presence of the desperately famished *Muselmänner* in his work commando, emphasising the damage that was done by the terrible nutrition at Sachsenhausen. Also interred at Sachsenhausen was Polish scholar Władysław Kuraskiewicz, who recalled in his 1947 memoirs that the *Muselmänner* were often pushed to the back of the lunch line, receiving no food before the work gong sounded.¹⁰⁶ Whilst the prisoners were responsible for barging past those who were too weak to compete for food, the SS overwhelmingly did nothing to prevent the suffering, and were fundamentally the cause of it. When, on occasion, a guard might

¹⁰³ WL, 1655/2930, Report of Pohl for Himmler, 30 April 1942, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 38.

¹⁰⁵ BUL, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 33 – "Diary Entry by the Norwegian Prisoner Odd Nansen, 3 November 1943", [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](https://www.bbk.ac.uk/documents/the-nazi-concentration-camps) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

¹⁰⁶ BUL, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 34 – "The Survivor Władysław Kuraskiewicz on the 'Muselmänner'", [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](https://www.bbk.ac.uk/documents/the-nazi-concentration-camps) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

lash out at prisoners who shoved too much or would use a hose to break up prisoners, this would serve only to add injury to prisoners' hunger.¹⁰⁷ Likewise, at Majdanek in 1942, Slovakian Jew Dionys Lenard, recalled that the receiving of breakfast before leaving for work details hinged upon the adherence to the principle of "push[ing] forward and shout[ing]", although Lenard conceded that "we tried various ways of sharing out the food fairly... but we never managed it".¹⁰⁸ In the situation at Majdanek, the absolute rule that work must start at 7am led to the breakfast rush which, as Lenard implies, left hungry prisoners to start their arduous day in a weakened state.

The KL demand for maximum productivity did not tolerate exceptions to the rule but one might expect that to prevent prisoner starvation the SS guards from the examples above may have consented to *Muselmänner* taking a few minutes longer to be served after mealtime ended. This sympathy would have required SS guards to accept the risk of being rebuked for potential delays in mobilising prisoners for work. It was ultimately easier for the SS guards to watch on as dying prisoners missed out on food than it was to bend the rules and allow them to eat. The trend would appear to be that the SS guards adhered to rules, such as Pohl's desire to minimise mealtimes, most vehemently when they had no personal stakes in the rule's success or failure. In Auschwitz, Janka Galambos and her fellow female labourers were forced to eat a vile soup in which swam hard and inedible threads; the general opinion was that these were broom bristles. More unpleasant was the way they had to eat. Galambos wrote that the unpleasant concoction "was brought in large, dirty troughs, whereby a trough came for every five women. Without cutlery or spoons, we had to slurp the pulp from these nauseating troughs".¹⁰⁹ There was no need for the SS guards to facilitate this animalistic display. Cups, bowls, or cutlery would have been easy to source, but the desperate behaviour of the women, reduced to eating like pigs, validated the unkind treatment that the prisoners deserved in the minds of the guards. This encouraged guards to accept and adopt the cruel vocabulary, discussed earlier, to label prisoners which, in turn, served only to make the SS divorce the prisoners from human status in their minds, further endorsing their apathy.

Aware of the insufficient food rations in the camps, in December 1942 Himmler encouraged Pohl to: Try in 1943 to buy raw vegetables and onions in large quantities to feed the prisoners. During the vegetable season, give out large quantities of carrots, kohlrabi, turnips and whatever other

¹⁰⁷ Bonifas, *Prisoner 20-801*, 49.

¹⁰⁸ BUL, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 30 – "The Prisoner Dionys Lenard on Early Mornings in Majdanek", [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](https://www.bbk.ac.uk/documents/the-nazi-concentration-camps) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

¹⁰⁹ WL, Testimonies, Janka Galambos account from Auschwitz and other places 1944-45, 5.

vegetables of this kind, and store enough for the prisoners for the winter so that the prisoners can get enough of them every day.¹¹⁰

Wachsmann has criticised the logic behind Himmler's idea to distribute raw vegetables with so many KL prisoners suffering from intestinal issues due to their extreme hunger. As such the Reichsführer's "preposterous plan" would serve only to compound the misery of the starving.¹¹¹ Himmler's suggestion of injecting a vast quantity of raw vegetables into the KL's food supply underlined the SS leader's disconnection from the reality of how to maximise labour productivity in the KL. Moreover, this resembled a token gesture when, at the same time, SS officers were still dining luxuriously in the camps. SS doctor Johann Kremer recorded the food he consumed at Auschwitz in later 1942, including pickled duck liver, chicken with vegetables and ice cream, whilst ironically commenting upon the poor physical state of prisoners he encountered. Similarly, SS guards were given additional food for participating in liquidation actions in the camp.¹¹² Further showing the failure to ensure prisoners were appropriately fed, at Buchenwald in 1944, one SS man was gifted 18 tortes and "an enormous quantity" of biscuits for his wedding anniversary with the ingredients taken out of the supplies in the prisoners' warehouse.¹¹³ Even if Himmler was not aware of these examples, it was his failure, and the failure of his WVHA leaders, that food was not controlled and distributed more rationally. It should be noted that Himmler would be unlikely to consider the better feeding of prisoners to the detriment of the SS' larders, but this oversight precluded sustaining essential slave labourers.

Yet, despite the numerous contradictions undermining Himmler's idea to distribute raw vegetables, it showed that he was willing to entertain the idea of mitigating the damage caused to KL labour by starvation. Undoubtedly of more benefit to the thousands of hungry SS slaves, however, was Himmler's announcement to Glücks and Gestapo director, Heinrich Müller, a couple of months prior, in October 1942, that prisoners would be allowed to receive food packages from the outside world. Himmler announced that there was no limit on the number of packages that could be received but if a prisoner could not consume all the edible contents within two days, the remainder must be shared amongst other prisoners. Moreover, this was not exclusively applicable to Germans, but to all prisoners who could receive parcels from relatives. In a hellish environment like the KL, this new

¹¹⁰ Letter from Himmler to Pohl regarding feeding prisoners more vegetables, 15 December 1942 in Heiber, *Reichsführer*, 172.

¹¹¹ Wachsmann, *KL*, 422.

¹¹² Diary entries of SS doctor Johann Kremer in E. Klee, W. Dressen & V. Riess (eds.), *"The Good Old Days": The Holocaust Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 256-269.

¹¹³ Document 10 – Carl Gärtig, "Luxurious Living at the Expense of the Prisoners" in Hackett, *Buchenwald Report*, 127-128.

policy meant a great deal to struggling inmates.¹¹⁴ Bonifas described his response to receiving a package from home in 1944; “the contents of this beautiful package nourished my body and gladdened my heart. I felt strong and happy. Suddenly, because I sensed the love of family, I forgot the cold and the pain”.¹¹⁵ Out of the SS leadership’s efforts to reduce the mortality rate, this was one of the very few to offer reprieve to prisoners who might receive packages.

Himmler stated, possibly revealing his awareness that the SS’ discipline was not as exemplary as he claimed, that “any member of the SS who attacks a prisoner’s food package is punished with death”.¹¹⁶ Despite the Reichsführer’s warning, Anna Mettbach, a gypsy in Auschwitz, found that one of her food parcels had been emptied by the Camp SS and the contents replaced by rotten items.¹¹⁷ At Buchenwald, a prisoner’s testimony accuses *SS-Oberscharführer* Emil Brettschneider, in charge of the customs office in Weimar, of pilfering Red Cross packages on their way to the camp. The accusation asserts that from 11 to 22 August 1944, Brettschneider oversaw the seizing of 5,000-6,000 Red Cross packages which contained eggs, bacon, and sausages amongst other lifesaving essentials. An *SS-Unterscharführer* named Visser was reportedly arrested by the SS at the beginning of March 1945 for theft of packages addressed to prisoners in Buchenwald.¹¹⁸ Once again, in the wake of Himmler’s permitting prisoners to receive food parcels, the SS guards found a way in which to selectively apply the *Führerprinzip*. After all, ignoring the Reichsführer’s insistence that parcels be left untouched promised the guards rich pickings and the limited risk of punishment was evidently acceptable. The decision to pilfer the lifesaving contents of parcels enhanced the suffering of KL inmates and must be considered as another manifestation of guard apathy to the struggles of prisoners in their care.

In the same vein as hunger, exhaustion crippled KL slaves and was often exacerbated by apathetic SS attitudes. Pohl’s demand for exhaustive labour was met by guards across the camp system, though many SS men showed a clear disregard for prisoner safety in the process. One example of this was the continued usage of punitive prisoner rollcalls which lasted hours. Prisoners of the early camps have revealed the detrimental nature of the twice daily occurrence; at Dachau Peter Wallner lamented that each day at least 75 minutes would be reserved for rollcalls with the evening

¹¹⁴ Letter from Himmler to Glücks and Müller regarding allowing prisoners to receive food packages, 29 October 1942 in Heiber, *Reichsführer*, 166.

¹¹⁵ Bonifas, *Prisoner 20-801*, 65 and 91.

¹¹⁶ Letter from Himmler to Glücks and Müller, 29 October 1942 in Heiber, *Reichsführer*, 166.

¹¹⁷ A. Mettbach & J. Behringer, “*Wer wird die nächste sein?*” *Die Leidensgeschichte einer Sinteza, die Auschwitz überlebte – “Ich will doch nur Gerechtigkeit”: Wie den Sinti und Roma nach 1945 der Rechtsanspruch auf Entschädigung versagt wurde* (Frankfurt: Brandes & Apsel, 1999), 37.

¹¹⁸ Document 140 – unsigned testimony, “SS Robs Red Cross Packages” in Hackett, *Buchenwald Report*, 314-315.

assembly being especially drawn out. Once the prisoner count was done, the SS left the prisoners waiting and when spent workers collapsed, the guards kicked them on the ground.¹¹⁹ Pohl had explicitly identified such long rollcalls as an issue detracting from daily working hours in his orders to commandants in April 1942. He announced that they should thus be “restricted to the minimum which cannot be condensed any more”.¹²⁰ Yet, evidence shows that the SS guards again displayed passive resistance to measures which could have made daily life marginally less torturous.

Overlap in the style in which SS guards countered Pohl’s order can be seen in the following examples. Bonifas, in Buchenwald from 1943, was forced to stand, starving after work, at rollcall for hours on winter evenings in temperatures below freezing.¹²¹ When he was transferred to the subcamp Laura, the SS again enforced hours-long rollcalls in freezing conditions, with sick prisoners suffering from dysentery forced to relieve themselves where they stood. One day the SS counted a corpse at rollcall but as the register had not been updated to reflect the victim’s passing, they ordered the labourers to carry the body to the camp quarry and back again on the evening. As Bonifas aptly noted, “such callous and brutal orders were given to destroy our morale”.¹²² The prisoners who had to carry the body would, logically, be further fatigued before work, reducing their efficiency. At Bergen-Belsen, an *SS-Scharführer* named Kuhn also forced prisoners to stand for hours on end in winter, leading to cases of pneumonia. Particularly noteworthy was Kuhn’s insistence that sick prisoners, including those suffering from typhoid fever, attend rollcall.¹²³ Kuhn was thus undermining the labour potential of prisoners, threatening the survival of those already at heightened risk of death and, most detrimentally, showing no concern for spreading contagious diseases further. This helps to illustrate how the general failure of camp commandants to establish effective infirmaries could lead to the sick being treated with contempt by the rank-and-file guards. Maria Ossowski was subjected to a three-hour rollcall at Auschwitz-Birkenau when a young Greek girl went missing in May 1943. It was typical of the SS to force comrades of escapees to brave long rollcalls to deter from future escape attempts. In this case, the young Greek girl had collapsed unnoticed from exhaustion and illness into a ditch whilst in a work commando. The resulting three-hour rollcall was immensely taxing for the prisoners present and again showed the SS guards’ disinterest in easing the suffering of prisoners. In this story, the missing Greek girl was found alive in

¹¹⁹ P. Wallner, *By Order of the Gestapo: A Record of Life in Dachau and Buchenwald Concentration Camps* (London: John Murray, 1941), 56-57 and 69.

¹²⁰ WL, 1655/2930, Report of Pohl for Himmler, 30 April 1942, 3.

¹²¹ Bonifas, *Prisoner 20-801*, 39.

¹²² *Ibid*, 53.

¹²³ WL, 649/1, List of Gestapo and SS War Criminals, 12.

a terrible state, brought back to the camp and the SS' dogs were set upon her.¹²⁴ This anecdote proves how easily SS apathy could quickly evolve into SS murder.

Furthermore, Kapos had been a staple of the KL since the pre-war years when Eicke introduced the concept of promoting handpicked prisoners to oversee their peers. The centrality of Kapos, however, to both day-to-day camp life and the rising death toll within the camps increased after Pohl reordered the KL to become a key centre of production. As more subcamps were created and more work commandos were required to be supervised, the KL leadership increasingly relied on Kapos as the SS men were spread thin. Guards were not explicitly at fault for the existence of Kapos, whether they liked them or not they were a mechanic of the camp system that would exist regardless. However, guards were largely responsible for Kapo appointments and, more crucially, for how the Kapos behaved with prisoners. Himmler admitted to *Wehrmacht* generals in 1944 that “we naturally arrange things so that a Frenchman is Kapo in charge of Poles, or a Pole is in charge of Russians, so that one nation is played off against another”.¹²⁵ Bonifas, who endured hostile relations with Russians and Poles, credited the “diabolical genius” of the SS for mixing social groups like this.¹²⁶ Whilst Himmler’s boast was not wholly representative of the situation, as the Kapo system did not always rely upon national and ethnic tensions, it shows that Kapos were expected to be cruel overseers, motivated partly by xenophobia.¹²⁷ They were also driven in part by their awareness that they could lose their privileged positions, and possibly be harshly handled, if they failed to live up to the SS’ expectations. As early as 1938, lenient Dachau Kapos were suspended from the gallows in the ‘Baum’ method which Fred Pelican remembered being sufficient for them to become “masters of brutality” afterwards.¹²⁸ In another situation, four German Kapos were killed by their Russian charges at Buchenwald after their work commando’s months-long project was completed. The SS did not interfere as they did not need the Kapos any longer.¹²⁹ It is feasible that, as this act of

¹²⁴ Testimony of Maria Ossowski in Smith, *Forgotten Voices*, 173-174.

¹²⁵ BUL, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 65 – “Heinrich Himmler on Kapos, Summer 1944”, [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](#), [Accessed 2 June 2023]

¹²⁶ A. Bonifas, *Prisoner 20-801*, xix and 35-36. Also discusses conflict between nationalities on 40-41, 73-74 and 141.

¹²⁷ In the pre-war KL, the SS could not exploit national divisions when selecting Kapos as the non-German population of the camps was minimal until Adolf Hitler’s foreign policy led to the annexation of the Sudetenland and the *Anschluss* with Austria. Moreover, Kapos were often selected based upon their prisoner category rather than their nationality. Himmler’s view that national divisions existed, and could be exploited was not incorrect, however. See BUL, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 62 – “Secret Sachsenhausen Diary Entry by Odd Nansen on Prisoner Hierarchies”, [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](#), [Accessed 2 June 2023] for an example of how Norwegians looked down upon Ukrainians.

¹²⁸ F. Pelican, *From Dachau to Dunkirk* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1993), 13. Pelican writes of a situation which arose where he was threatened with death by a Kapo after inadvertently getting him into trouble with the SS. The SS’ severe punishing of the Kapo with the use of the ‘Baum’ torture served to ensure that the Kapo’s self-preservation would dictate his behaviour toward prisoners be rougher in future, 18-19.

¹²⁹ Bonifas, *Prisoner 20-801*, 36.

vigilante justice became known, it could serve as reminder to other Kapos of the need to become indispensable to the SS. The escalation of Kapo violence in the presence of the SS, as described by Samuel Fogel at Auschwitz who was beaten fiercely for supposedly smiling at an overseer who wanted to show a guard “he was on the ball”, supports the notion that fear of being seen as expendable prompted Kapos to work harder and more brutally for their masters.¹³⁰

Kapo crimes were far too extensive to explore in depth in a study that focuses upon SS perpetrators, but this chapter must consider the link between the camp guards, the Kapos and the suffering of prisoner labourers. For the guards, especially those who were conscious of criminal culpability, the Kapos represented a useful, typically violent, middleman for chaperoning work commandos. They saved the SS men time, effort, and from incriminating themselves unnecessarily. Considering this, the permitting of Kapos to abuse prisoners should be seen as a form of apathy on the part of the SS. However, on the occasions when the SS specifically ordered the abuse, this should be viewed as direct incitation of violence rather than a lack of concern, and this thus falls outside of the remit of this particular analysis. For instance, Auschwitz prisoner Simon Umschweif’s overhearing of an SS man telling a Kapo that “there will only be 900 [prisoners in the Kapo’s work commando] come evening” despite the Kapo reporting 1,000 workers present in the morning, must be seen as direct instruction to murder rather than disinterest in prisoner welfare.¹³¹

An instance wherein SS nonchalance over Kapo activity led to considerable negative repercussions was recorded by Elie Wiesel from his time working at Auschwitz III. Wiesel’s work commando Kapo, named Idek, interrupted the prisoners’ rest on a Sunday – particularly detrimental as the tendency was to allow only two Sundays per month for recuperation – then took the slaves to their work depot for the whole day. Idek disappeared but Wiesel stumbled across him hiding with a Polish girl, invoking the Kapo’s wrath at his motive for mobilising the work commando being revealed. The result was a long rollcall, assembled by Idek, and Wiesel’s receiving of 25 lashes for discovering the Kapo’s selfish plan to enjoy a girl’s company whilst his charges toiled pointlessly.¹³² Idek’s revocation of an invaluable rest day for the prisoners could only make the exhausted weaker, both threatening lives and undermining Pohl’s production goals. That the Kapo could so easily cause such disruption was down to the lack of SS scrutiny over his actions. Simply by failing to keep a Kapo on a leash,

¹³⁰ USC, Shoah Foundation, VHA, Testimony of Samuel Fogel, segment 41, [Samuel Fogel - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](https://www.usc.edu/vha/testimony/samuel-fogel) [Accessed 5 April 2023]

¹³¹ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account by Simon Umschweif, Austria, of working in the ‘*Sonderkommando Krematorium*’ in Auschwitz concentration camp, 2.

¹³² E. Wiesel, *Night* (London: Penguin, 2008), 56-58.

unpredictable outcomes could occur. In short, SS disinterest offered a platform to self-centred men like Idek which frequently harmed prisoners.

Dutch prisoner Galt van Ramshorst considered Kapo abuse at Buchenwald to be “indescribable”. One Kapo enjoyed ordering labourers to lie down and trampling them to death, and sometimes chased prisoners into the sentry line causing SS guards to fire at them. The latter behaviour is especially interesting since it was a particularly prevalent tactic of the SS guards themselves, suggesting that Kapos directly emulated their masters. Van Ramshorst recalled one conversation wherein the Kapo, known only to Van Ramshorst as ‘Alfred’, told a Jew that “now it is 12 o’clock; by 12:05 you will be with Jehovah”. Subsequently, the Kapo called over his foreman and they chased the Jew into the sentry line’s inevitable gunfire.¹³³ Another example of the freedom Kapos had to abuse comes from the quarry at Buchenwald where prisoner Erwin Kohn was beaten to death by a Kapo after he collapsed carrying a rock. Kohn’s cause of death was recorded as “shot while attempting escape”.¹³⁴ As a Kapo would have been unable to record the death as a failed escape attempt without the SS becoming aware, it shows that the camp guards were quite willing to accept and cover up the murderous behaviour of Kapos. This again exemplifies the guards’ apathy for the KL prisoners. Hermann Langbein concluded from his time in several camps, including Dachau and Auschwitz, that if a Kapo went too far with their beating, he “had only to make sure that the death was properly reported, since the rollcall had to be right. The Kapo was not asked why the prisoner had died”.¹³⁵ Kohn’s death fits into this deduction, as, provided the register was correct, the Kapo could give the SS any reason for prisoner death without being probed by the indifferent SS.

Curiously, Höss, who was critical of the relationship between SS guards and Kapos, laid the blame on “totally inadequate SS soldiers” who badly mismanaged their prisoner functionaries. Höss asserted that these SS guards liked to leave everything to Kapos to handle and became dependent upon them. He went further, arguing that:

This dependence increased steadily, since they were no match for the shrewd and often mentally superior Kapos. This in turn led to a mutual coverup of rampant negligence and abuse. Of course, the prisoners paid for this to the detriment of the camp or to the firms deploying the prisoners. The camp commander constantly lectured the Kapos and foremen about not mistreating prisoners.¹³⁶

¹³³ Document 46 – Galt van Ramshorst, “Death Details in Buchenwald” in Hackett, *Buchenwald Report*, 186.

¹³⁴ Document 45 – unsigned testimony, “The Stone Quarry” in *ibid.*, 184.

¹³⁵ Langbein in Benz & Distel, *Dachau Review – Vol. I*, 106.

¹³⁶ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 221.

Höss' comments show that he was aware that the Kapos were frequently left to their own devices and that they were protected by the SS guards. The coverup element is certainly evidenced in the fact that some Kapos could hide their murders behind the excuse of stopping escape attempts, as seen with the death of Erwin Kohn. The most important part of Höss' inference of Kapo abuse, is that he considered SS guards to often be inadequate and "no match" for the Kapos. This is plausible to some degree, after all the SS guards were frequently SS members who either avoided the frontlines, had been injured, were crippled by alcohol abuse, or actively participated in corruption schemes. Equally Höss permitted criminal prisoners to dominate the Kapo ranks at Auschwitz, whilst at Buchenwald, for instance, Kapos were mostly political prisoners.¹³⁷ It is thus understandable that Höss' identified issues with "shrewd" Kapos at the camp as their criminal backgrounds likely helped many of them adapt well to being pseudo-SS henchmen who could outwit some of their employers. However, Höss' generalisation should not be accepted wholesale. As this study has shown, there was a high level of criminal intelligence evident in many Camp SS perpetrators. It is more likely that the SS guards' lack of care about Kapo behaviour granted them so much freedom at Auschwitz. The diligent and committed Höss may have been unable to contemplate that his control over his own guards was so low that Kapos were unrestrained, prompting him to blame guard stupidity over indifference. The consistent theme in the examples of Kapo abuse above, is the lack of SS concern, the failure to monitor Kapos, and a general disinterest in suffering. Once again, as in other areas of camp life, the SS guards' handling of the Kapos was marked by apathy to the misery of the KL prisoners.

The behaviour of the SS during Allied bombing raids showed how a lack of concern for prisoners directly exposed them to death and suffering. As has been seen with other aspects of KL life, the disinterest in prisoner safety during air attacks came from the SS leadership. Himmler wrote to Pohl and Glücks in February 1943 regarding safeguarding the camps if the Allies attacked from the skies. Himmler was focused on the prisoners but rather than protecting them, he was concerned about the risk of them escaping. The Reichsführer insisted that each section of a camp should be fenced individually, "so that if something should happen to any outer fence due to an air raid, at least there would only be the danger that one camp district could attempt to break out". His letter continued, urging Pohl and Glücks to organise the laying of minefields around the camps and to ensure that guard dogs were trained effectively. The Camp SS were to ensure that the "dogs that roam the outside of the camps must be trained to be such raging beasts... to tear apart everyone but their

¹³⁷ Observation from Paskuly in *ibid.*, 90.

keeper".¹³⁸ The message from Himmler was clear in its intent, the prisoners would, under no circumstance, benefit from the Allied incursions into Nazi airspace. Of course, in the face of the threat of air attack, which rose considerably as the Allies took more and more Axis territory in 1944, the Camp SS themselves were to make efforts to protect themselves. The prisoners, however, were, at best, provided "covered shrapnel protection trenches in a zigzag form or open-air raid trenches to the extent that the terrain allows".¹³⁹ When prisoners were led to safety, the SS appeared to grow annoyed that their slaves were getting a break from labouring. For instance, in 1945, Nicholas Rosenberg, working in Berlin-Haselhorst Siemensstadt, a Sachsenhausen subcamp, painted a picture of the SS being frustrated at prisoner inactivity during the nightly Allied bombing raids. Rosenberg recalled that once the prisoners were safe in a bunker, "in order for us not to spend our time idly, we were chased from here to there by the SS supervisors" completing any task that could be found.¹⁴⁰

At times the SS were unwilling to even make the effort to get prisoners to safety, leaving them in vulnerable situations. In fact, there were instances where the SS were infuriated by prisoners protecting themselves. *SS-Oberscharführer* Heinz Ritterhausen, of Bergen-Belsen, ordered two prisoners to stand for hours with bent backs and hands touching the ground as punishment for catching them not working during an air raid.¹⁴¹ This behaviour went beyond indifference, as Ritterhausen purposefully inflicted suffering, but it shows that the SS guards were intolerant of prisoners trying to protect themselves in a terrifying situation. On 24 August 1944, at the Weimar Gustloff-Werke, attached to Buchenwald, the SS guards channelled Himmler's outlook on air raids directly. As the air raid siren rang out, the guards forbade the prisoners from going beyond the sentry line and some prisoners, in buildings like the boiler room, were forbidden from stepping outside altogether. In the construction yard where prisoners were kept indoors, more than 100 prisoners were killed by Allied bombs. In total 316 prisoners died in the air raid with a further 1,462 wounded. Undoubtedly, as identified by survivor Robert Leibbrand, the "sole responsibility... falls on the SS" for making no effort to move prisoners out of harm's way.¹⁴² The Gustloff SS' reaction showed that during an air attack, adhering to Himmler's wishes, their concern was for the integrity of the camp and ensuring that no prisoners escaped. Whether hundreds of prisoners were killed by

¹³⁸ Letter from Himmler to Pohl and Glücks regarding safeguarding the camps against escapes during the risk of air raids, 8 February 1943 in Heiber, *Reichsführer*, 188.

¹³⁹ From *Bundesarchiv*, Berlin, NS 3/427, 43, Letter from Gerhard Maurer to commandants, 9 May 1944 in Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, 56.

¹⁴⁰ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account by Nicholas Rosenberg entitled 'Forced Labourer for the Siemens-Schuckert-Works in Bobregh Auschwitz', 6.

¹⁴¹ WL, 649/1, List of Gestapo and SS War Criminals, 12.

¹⁴² Document 135 – Robert Leibbrand, "The Bombing Attack on 24 August 1944" in Hackett, *Buchenwald Report*, 304.

bombs was inconsequential providing that nobody escaped the SS. Leibbrand's account does not suggest that the SS sought to put prisoners in the way of bombs, or that maximum destruction was their goal, which serves to underline the key fact that these SS guards just did not care. Doing nothing was their choice, helping required effort, and risked repercussions should prisoners escape in the process of being escorted to safety. As has been seen already, the apathy of the SS often precluded putting in effort and the examples shown here in the event of air raids were particularly detrimental manifestations of that apathy on the part of the SS guards.

This section has shown that in the KL's most deadly period, the Camp SS compounded the suffering of prisoners simply by not caring about their fate. Though intentional violence was devastating, as will be seen shortly, camp guards' inaction was generally deadly in other ways. At the ground-level there was little the guards could do to change SS policy on KL nutrition, labour and the Kapo system but there was ample opportunity to lessen their impact upon struggling prisoners. However, as well as requiring effort, which the guards generally resented having to put in, trying to help improve the prisoners' lot required the rejection of the KL's punitive nature in favour of Pohl's production focus. Fundamentally, this was not attractive to the SS. Moreover, insouciance over fair meal distribution and wanton pilfering of Red Cross packages showed guards had little concern for what went on around them and they pleased themselves. The SS' permitting of cruel Kapos to handle prisoner welfare supports the observation that, so long as their jobs were not made any harder, they were content for their henchmen to do as they pleased. Due to the KL's familiarity with severe suffering and death by the time Pohl tried to reorganise the system, the majority of guards accepted the prisoner deaths as a normality. To the SS, *Muselmänner*, on account of them having been enemies of Nazism, were worthless, they did not invoke pity, which stunted their capacity to see humanity in their victims. Hunger and exhaustion, exacerbated by SS inaction, created more emaciated wrecks but they did not care because, in their eyes, these people deserved to suffer. In summary, apathy was apparent in most aspects of the SS-prisoner relationship and was an immensely deadly killer that owed a great deal to the guards' inability to feel compassion for their victims.

Violence and Murder Undermining the Goals of the SS-WVHA

It is apparent that the extreme apathy of the camp guards contributed to the worsening situation in the KL as the war progressed. However, whilst the result could often be the same, active abuse of prisoners was a step further than apathetic inaction and should be considered in the context of its undermining of Pohl's reformation. This section will show that the murderous actions of certain SS guards was frequently more overt and sadistic than had been the case in the earlier war years. Buggeln has argued that as time went on and Germany's fortunes in the war began to sour, the SS

placed more emphasis upon severely punishing the detainees within the KL.¹⁴³ Demonstrating the SS' tension relating to the war situation, when a prisoner in the Laura subcamp celebrated the Romanian *coup d'état* in 1944 which saw them abandon the Axis alliance, the SS murdered him in a sadistic and bloody assault.¹⁴⁴ Buggeln adds that the Camp SS increased their violence as a response to growing problems caused by a dearth of supplies in the camps, despite Pohl's official banning of commandants from hitting prisoners without permission from the WVHA.¹⁴⁵ These observations do well to identify causes of stress upon the KL system and its staff by the late war but assert that increased violence was chiefly reactionary rather than the inevitable continuation of a deadly institution. Goldhagen offers a convincing insight into the thought process of the Camp SS in the labour-focused KL. He identifies that the SS had a "cognitive prerequisite" which assumed that the Jews must suffer, leading to cruelty that Goldhagen rightly defines as "economically irrational". Moreover, Goldhagen emphasises that the SS held the belief that Jews were parasites who were recognisable by an innate avoidance of work. Forcing them to labour was thus a way of inflicting suffering upon the supposedly lazy shirkers.¹⁴⁶ Whilst Goldhagen's psychological assessment only accounts for antisemitic KL violence, it makes an essential link between SS hatred of Judaism and the nature of Jewish slave labour. This helps to illustrate how, in the late KL period, violence, antisemitic and otherwise, was tied to the camp guards' intention to cause suffering and their habit of viewing labour through a punitive, not productive, lens.

As the population of KL slave labourers grew to unmanageable heights and the centrality of labour to the Nazi cause was increasingly emphasised, the camp guards were in an atmosphere that allowed them to punish the Third Reich's enemies more easily than ever before. Sofsky adds another layer to this discussion which relates to his belief in the influence of "absolute power" as a construct within the minds of the SS. In short, power was everything in the camps and Sofsky identifies the Camp SS' desire to safeguard theirs as the crucial factor in the failure of Pohl's intended KL evolution. As such, forgoing violence and replacing drudgery with productivity would have both contradicted the traditional function of the camps and been tantamount to relinquishing a great deal of power.¹⁴⁷ This again suggests the presence of Lüdtke's concept of *Eigen-Sinn* as an element of the SS' reaction to the labour reformation; in an effort to retain maximum power, the guards displayed an obstinacy toward change that risked curbing their potency. Sofsky's argument, useful in its assessment of power's effect upon the perpetrator psyche, accounts for why the camps

¹⁴³ Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, 55.

¹⁴⁴ Bonifas, *Prisoner 20-801*, 72-73.

¹⁴⁵ Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, 59.

¹⁴⁶ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 320.

¹⁴⁷ Sofsky, *Order of Terror*, 170.

maintained their traditional workaday abuse but does not offer an insight into why the violence escalated in this later period. It must be emphasised how important the IKL's stuttering centralisation of the camp system and lack of control over ground-level activity was in the early war years in contributing to the rampant violence in the late KL. Alongside this, intensifying guard habits, which by this time had been in development for almost a decade, were key to the actions of the SS in the camps from 1942 to 1945. Even as guards came and went, behaviours in the KL endured and evolved on account of Camp SS mainstays spreading Eicke era ideology and habits. As a result, actions which the SS guards had long carried out, such as beatings, advanced in this final period. The key development was confidence. More so than ever before in the KL's existence, longstanding behaviours exhibited a lack of concern, or worry of reprisal, and were carried out boldly with more theatrics than they were previously. Other factors, discussed above, each contributed to creating the fertile ground for the unrestrained guard violence, but it was Pohl's inability to reverse declining centralisation and improve policing of ground-level actions which enabled established guard behaviours to be carried out so boldly by SS who had little reason to fear reprimand during this period.

There are a few significant factors which are worth bearing in mind whilst approaching the assessment of guard violence and murder. The Camp SS were, as mentioned above, expressly forbidden from striking prisoners in the camps. Höss wrote of the constant reminders given to guards, including those outside the camps at arms factories and other work sites, not to strike prisoners in their care, reminders which were often accompanied with printed pamphlets and classroom lectures. Nonetheless, were the guards to ignore the rules and abuse prisoners, investigations into misconduct fell apart as the victims "never remembered who had beaten them".¹⁴⁸ Paul Martin Neurath supports this to some degree. As a former inmate, Neurath believed that "usually prisoners did not recognise the guards unless one had been mistreated by a guard in a rather spectacular way".¹⁴⁹ Many post-war victim testimonies show that prisoners frequently knew who had attacked them, but this is especially notable in more unique assaults as Neurath supposes. Nonetheless, the KL's environment of terror and retribution taught the prisoners better than to trust the SS about anything, including regulating the behaviour of their own men so they knew it would be foolish to complain about their treatment. As Chapter Four showed with the Abraham-Hamber Affair at Buchenwald, informing the camp leadership about SS violence could lead to murderous consequences. Essentially, this lack of self-regulation from the SS was symptomatic of the WVHA's

¹⁴⁸ Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 222.

¹⁴⁹ P.M. Neurath, *The Society of Terror: Inside the Dachau and Buchenwald Concentration Camps* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2005), 76.

poor control over ground-level activity discussed above. Violence was thus as prevalent as it had been in the early war camps but with renewed emphasis from the leadership upon intense slave-driving added to the mix. Also of great importance was a circular sent from Glücks to all KL commandants on 21 November 1942, regarding the recording of deaths in the camp system. The process was streamlined to improve efficiency; one stipulation of the new policy emphasised that “express letters and concluding reports on cases of death of Jewish prisoners are thus dispensed with”.¹⁵⁰ Whilst Jewish deaths were still recorded, unless they were killed before being entered into the camp register at extermination sites like Auschwitz, there was a clear emphasis that Jewish lives were being further devalued.

The Jews were not the only group of KL prisoners whose vulnerability to guard violence was greatly increased by decisions made by SS managers. For instance, after April 1944, prisoners from the USSR who perished in the camps no longer warranted death certificates.¹⁵¹ This was another manifestation of the peculiarly contrasting KL policies of the Nazi regime. Whilst in April the SS granted the camps *carte blanche* in the handling of Soviet prisoners’ wellbeing, by summer 1944 Himmler was convincing Hitler to acquiesce to the formation of the *Russische Befreiungsarmee* (Russian Liberation Army, known otherwise as Vlasov’s Army). The creation of this force, which heavily relied upon captured Soviet troops, was driven by the swiftly worsening war situation. Yet, it shows that decisions taken within the camps, which led to huge Soviet loss of life, were counterintuitive. Sustaining the Soviet prisoners’ health would have both aided the KL slave labour force, as mentioned earlier, and would have provided a greater pool of manpower for the assembly of Vlasov’s Army. That the SS, in the midst of the chaos of an overburdened camp system, allowed for prisoner deaths to occur with even less scrutiny than usual must be seen as a contributory factor to the unrestrained violence of the SS in the late KL period.¹⁵²

Moving forward, it is helpful to divide the SS violence in this period between two distinct categories. This is not to say that KL violence was solely bipolar, there were many motives for SS guards abusing their charges, but it is useful to examine how the violence could be so radically juxtaposed using the following categories. Firstly, there were situations wherein the KL prisoners suffered greatly at the hands of the SS who were abusive whilst working as slave drivers, potentially, though not necessarily, to support Pohl’s efforts to increase labour efficiency. It is naturally incredibly difficult to

¹⁵⁰ WL, 1655/2203, Circular by Richard Glücks of the WVHA to camp commandants of various concentration camps submitting an order by Himmler a simplified procedure with regard to reporting deaths of Jewish prisoners, 21 November 1942.

¹⁵¹ H. Krausnick & M. Broszat (eds.), *Anatomy of the SS State* (London: Granada, 1970), 241.

¹⁵² For information on Vlasov’s Army see, for instance, R.D. Müller, *The Unknown Eastern Front: the Wehrmacht and Hitler’s Foreign Soldiers* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 223-236.

identify whether a slave-driving SS man beat a slow prisoner because he wanted the prisoner to work faster, or, if the slow-working served as a pretext for violent abuse. Nonetheless, by SS standards, these would be instances where the actions of guards would be considered misguided, after all beating was officially prohibited, but not radically outside of the expectations of an organisation which was using slavery to support the war economy. In other words, these were the SS guards who erred from the script, but less so than other guards who committed more arbitrary violent acts within the KL. The second category will show some of the innumerable examples of random SS guard violence, which was regularly sadistic and had no plausible link to the WVHA's demand to boost labour efficiency. These instances of violence and murder were not unprecedented as the actions of rogue guards and murderous gangs like the Sachsenhausen 'Death Squad' had demonstrated in the previous periods. Yet, they sometimes displayed particularly high levels of cruel creativity and usually indicated that the perpetrators were highly confident, evidencing that prisoner abuse in the late camp system was at its most uninhibited.

SS violence which will be considered here as fitting in with the style of the SS' slave-driving practices often appeared, from the outside at least, more punitive than the erratic self-gratifying violence that will be examined shortly. Cases wherein violence was used against prisoners in relation to their work productivity should be considered cautiously, as they do not serve to evidence that the perpetrator was necessarily less radical or cruel than those who committed more arbitrary violence. For instance, Göth's behaviour at Płaszów seemed to fit into both categories; his flogging of young girls for lack of productivity appeared to show some adherence to the WVHA's goal of maximising the pace of work; his errant shooting of unaware camp slaves showed his clear lust for inflicting harm, irrespective of the cost to the KL. Thus, one type of violence was not exclusive from the other. Like Göth at Płaszów, SS man Hans Höffmann at Strassenhof, near the Kaiserwald KL, committed violent acts which fell into both categories. Prisoner Samuel Atlas remembered Höffmann frequently beating prisoners, including Atlas, with a heavy wooden stick whilst they worked, covering them in "bloody bruises". Whenever a report reached the camp commandant that a mistake was made by a slave in the workplace, Höffmann saw to it that they were beaten beyond recognition with a rubber truncheon. These examples suggest that Höffmann was hounding prisoners to work better, but the same survivor testimony showed that Höffmann did kill some of his victims.¹⁵³ Another survivor, Boris Kliotz, accused Höffmann of being a sadist who "found pleasure" in abusing and murdering

¹⁵³ WL, Testimonies, Samuel Atlas statements regarding atrocities committed by 'SS-*Sturmführer*' Hans Hoffmann, 1-2. Note that '*Sturmführer*' had not been a rank used by the SS since 1934, C. McNab, *The SS, 1923-1945: The Essential Facts and Figures for Himmler's Stormtroopers* (London: Amber Books, 2009), 29-30.

prisoners.¹⁵⁴ Both Göth and Höffmann must serve as warnings not to assume that a member of the Camp SS followed one trend of violence over another. The situation within the camps was fluid and guards could quite feasibly support the WVHA's slave-driving one moment, albeit using theoretically proscribed violence, but engage in random murderous violence the next.

It is difficult to accurately relay the story of workplace violence in the KL due to the omnipresence of this abuse. Victim testimonies frequently tend to place most emphasis upon more barbarous and sadistic acts, generally only briefly mentioning the less unique daily physical abuse they experienced as they laboured. One should not, therefore, assume that this abuse was any less detrimental to prisoner welfare. Instances wherein violence was arguably misused as a catalyst for better efficiency include Ladislaus Ervin-Deutsch's experience at Dachau's subcamp Kaufering. The work was extremely taxing, and Ervin-Deutsch recalled that, as was so often the case, his fellow prisoners were reduced to dragging themselves about and stumbling frequently. He remarked that the guards struck members of his group with rifle butts whenever they dropped their tools or made similar errors. On the scale of SS terror this may appear to be at the milder end of the spectrum but, as the survivor recalled, at Kaufering "deaths no longer aroused much interest... they were daily occurrences to which we had become accustomed".¹⁵⁵ This statement reveals the nature of prisoner apathy, a necessary numbness to the suffering surrounding them, which was furthered by incessant violence. In an environment of nagging, demoralising abuse, the Kaufering slaves were unable to do much more than accept the torment and death around them. In such an atmosphere, where the emotional impact of death was muted, the SS were able to beat and bully, safe in the knowledge that their actions would arouse little response. In turn, the SS were confident that they could consistently inflict physical trauma irrespective of the fact that they were forbidden from beating. Though the main camps were not necessarily better controlled by SS officers, guards in the subcamps were further beyond the WVHA's field of view, which would have done little to dissuade guards from bending rules. Confidence to abuse came from a measured self-assurance that no repercussions would come. Nonetheless, the striking of prisoners in Ervin-Deutsch's group appeared to be motivated by the slave labourers' errors, which served as a signal to attack for the SS guards. Irrespective of whether these attacks were spurred on by efforts to improve labour, or to inflict

¹⁵⁴ WL, Testimonies, Boris Kliotz letter regarding atrocities committed by various Nazi criminals in Latvia, 3. Kliotz refers to Höffmann as an *SS-Scharführer* but due to this contrasting with Atlas' erroneous ranking of the SS guard, the text here has opted not to use Höffman's rank.

¹⁵⁵ BUL, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 46 – "The Jewish Survivor Ladislaus Ervin-Deutsch on Night Shifts in a Kaufering Satellite Camp", [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](https://www.bbk.ac.uk/documents/the-nazi-concentration-camps), [Accessed 2 June 2023]

injury upon those unfortunate enough to catch the guards' attention, they undoubtedly contributed to the roughly 50 percent mortality rate in the camp between 1944 and 1945.¹⁵⁶

Premysl Dobias, a witness and survivor of abuse in Mauthausen, echoed Ervin-Deutsch in highlighting how detrimental the less unique acts of violence could be. On their way down the 180 *Todesstiege* ('death stairs') into the Mauthausen quarry, Dobias and his fellow slaves were driven at double-time by the SS who hit the prisoners with their rifles as they went. Rushed down the steps into the quarry by impatient guards, Dobias noted that "we had to run so fast that most of us lost our clogs and had to run barefoot... our feet were bleeding and many of us got infections from the dirt and very soon died".¹⁵⁷ The prisoners were flanked on the sides by guards who continued to hit out at them to keep the rush going, causing many prisoners to tumble into others and knock them down the steps. There is a tendency for the culprits of this sort of abuse, as Neurath postulates above, to blend in with the wider body of SS perpetrators, often going unnamed, since their attacks were not unique and thus did not stand out from the crowd. It thus becomes easier to see why senior SS failed to control and eliminate such extremely common abuse. After all, it would have been difficult for the relatively toothless WVHA administration to identify and deal with perpetrators when testimonies like Dobias' show that involvement was so widespread. Broad participation in violent acts that were too common to stand out helped to ensure that this abuse, whilst hugely detrimental to labour productivity and prisoner wellbeing, could carry on unabated in the reformed slave labour KL.

There were cases where the SS guards showed a propensity to manipulate the rulebook to justify severe punishments against slave labourers, supposedly in aid of the WVHA's cause. The uniformed camp guidelines, relatively consistent since their inception under Eicke, had asserted that death was the only penalty for sabotage during labour and that even "doubtful cases" justified a prisoner's execution.¹⁵⁸ For instance, supposed 'saboteurs' at Lipowa had given themselves away through innocuous mistakes like stealing potato skins or wearing protective undergarments.¹⁵⁹ Their life-saving misdemeanours served only to give the camp guards a pretext to kill them, one that the SS were happy to take advantage of. At Auschwitz subcamp Blechhammer, one Jewish prisoner's 'sabotage' was the concealing of some wire to hold together his broken shoe, he was promptly hanged at rollcall as a deterrent for other likeminded prisoners.¹⁶⁰ It is clear from these examples

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Testimony of Premysl Dobias in Smith, *Forgotten Voices*, 164-166.

¹⁵⁸ WL, 1655/2822, Regulations for disciplinary and penal measures and service regulations for camp personnel at Dachau, 3.

¹⁵⁹ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 306.

¹⁶⁰ Langbein in Benz & Distel, *Dachau Review – Vol. I*, 114.

that just as the SS guards could utilise violence in a manner that might appear to show them driving the labour force, at least in the eyes of their senior supervisory facilitators, they were also able to mete out the harshest punishments to supposedly safeguard productivity, very often against those who had done no wrong.

Although there was clearly a link between a great deal of SS violence and the slave labour in the KL, there were other acts of violence committed by the guards which had no conceivable link to efforts to inspire better work from prisoners. These acts of violence tended to occur randomly, a reflection of the unpredictable impulses of the guards, rather than occurring more consistently like the workplace violence seen above. There were also instances where this sort of violence was carried out through creatively barbaric means which often provoked amused reactions from the guards. Whilst it is difficult to quantify something as subjective as SS barbarism, not least because it can appear to place a measure on the suffering of the guards' victims, the accounts of sadistic attacks in this period often appear to be more overt and more torturous than in earlier years.

In 1942, slave labourer Premysl Dobias saw a group of prisoners perched on the cliffs of the Mauthausen quarry. Positioned in a line, the prisoners pushed the person ahead of themselves into the quarry whilst the SS guards harried them from the back. The prisoners fell about 100 feet, hitting the cliffside on their way down, with some surviving the fall and drowning in the lake beneath the cliff. Dobias made the chilling observation that the SS were laughing and calling these prisoners "parachutists".¹⁶¹ Whilst SS murder had been an everyday facet of camps for years by this point, the theatrical show of making prisoners jump to their deaths, with a quarry full of witnesses observing, underlined how confident the guards had become. There had been instances of the Mauthausen cliffs being used for violent attacks earlier in the war, but Dobias' experience shows how blatantly open the Mauthausen SS' murders had become as time went on. Other KL quarries, which were theoretically crucial to productivity, also proved to be fertile ground for SS sadism. For instance, at Gusen, Jan Nadolny saw *SS-Hauptscharführer* Emil Euler throw three prisoners off a high rock to their deaths on 27 December 1942. As leader of Nadolny's labour commando, and therefore responsible for its inefficiency, across two different days Euler shot a prisoner for removing his cap for a crucifix he saw, tipped out the prisoners' lunch soup, and forced the whole commando to crawl to work.¹⁶² At Buchenwald in 1943, SS guards made bets upon who could kill a prisoner with a stone

¹⁶¹ Testimony of Premysl Dobias in Smith, *Forgotten Voices*, 167-169.

¹⁶² *Arolsen Archives*, Witness statements about the maltreatment and killing of prisoners, correspondence and reports about detachments and the inquiry of José Prunera, testimony of Jan Nadolny, [Search for documents in the Arolsen Archives | 9032900 - Witness statements about the maltreatment and killing of prisoners, correspondence and reports about detachments and the inquiry of José Prunera | 9032900 - Witness statements about the maltreatment and killing of prisoners, correspondence and reports about detachments](#)

thrown from above. If an SS man narrowly missed, he would shoot the victim anyway. On one day, this source of amusement saw 17 dead or wounded.¹⁶³ Furthermore, Dobias noted finding the Star of David upon the Mauthausen victims' uniforms; the SS especially enjoyed activities which caused humiliation for Jews and yielded results which, in their eyes, showed the victims' idiocy. Evidence for this is extensive, for instance Wirth, mentioned earlier in relation to the cruel example he set, organised a Jewish wedding at the *Flughafenlager* which the SS 'celebrated' with the Jews in attendance. Goldhagen aptly draws the link between the event and Wirth's "love of cruel irony", which allowed the SS to inwardly mock the attendees and the shambolic union.¹⁶⁴ Much like the imprisoned attendees of the *Flughafenlager* wedding, the 'parachutists', who the SS celebrated as they jumped to their doom, were stuck in an unbearable position. Were they to resist playing along, the SS' good humour, and frivolous enjoyment of the show they were directing, would turn to vicious retribution resulting in agonising abuse. In which case, based upon the SS' penchant for torment, a swift jump to death would appear the lesser evil.

The SS guards, viewing only the prisoners' compliance with their devious and mocking plans, were thus, in their minds, proved right about the nature of their victims. The Jewish parasite that had blighted the guards, and Germany, for years was crafty but the members of the 'elite' SS were able to reveal the perceived stupidity of their victims. As Chapter One showed, *Der Stürmer* and other Nazi propaganda had long been selling the image of the Jew as a devious creature, but one that could ultimately be overcome by the upstanding German. The Jews, based upon their consistently cruel representations in Nazi propaganda, embodied absolute foreignness. The education systems that the SS guards had experienced had done little to discourage their younger selves from seeing foreign peoples as inferior. Both propaganda and schooling had thus helped to mould the SS guards' view of Jews as scheming creatures who deserved to be tormented for their role in Germany's previous misfortune. The success of malicious ruses served to validate the guards' opinions and evidence that the insidious Jew could be beaten at his own game. Outmanoeuvring the enemy, ironically using the type of intrigue that had supposedly earned the victims their infamy, encouraged the guards to see their prey as dim and gullible. The environment created by the guards of Mauthausen was particularly extreme, even by KL standards, and humour-driven murder was not

[and the inquiry of José Prunera | 9032900 - Zeugenaussagen über Mißhandlungen und Tötungen, Korrespondenz und Berichte zu Außenkommandos und Suchvorgang zu José Prunera | 9032900 - Witness statements about the maltreatment and killing of prisoners, correspondence and reports about detachments and the inquiry of José Prunera | 9032900 - Witness statements about the maltreatment and killing of prisoners, correspondence and reports about detachments and the inquiry of José Prunera \(arolsen-archives.org\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

¹⁶³ Document 47 – unsigned testimony, "May 1, 1943" in Hackett, *Buchenwald Report*, 187-188.

¹⁶⁴ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 309-310.

restricted to the case of the ‘parachutists’ as another of Dobias’ testimonies showed. Believing that the SS were offering a reprieve from crippling labour, Dobias volunteered when a group of camp guards announced to the prisoners that “we are going to form a new commando for that farm over there, to feed pigs”. The SS in question, in Dobias’ mind, were very friendly and took 20 prisoners to the potentially life-saving work outfit to be formed beyond the camp limits. Dobias was initially miserable when he was not selected and pushed back into line. Upon leaving the camp, the SS machine-gunned all the volunteers before returning to Dobias’ work outfit, laughing, and asking “who else knows how to feed pigs?”. Officially, for leaving the camp limits, these prisoners had died whilst attempting to escape.¹⁶⁵ The deception was part of the perverse fun, proving to the SS guards once again that they were superior to the fools who fell for it, the irony begetting the comedy that the SS enjoyed. Once again confidence played a key role as, in this affair, the SS did not merely capitalise on an opportunity to kill, rather, they masterminded the entire charade.

A particularly unpleasant deception occurred at Buchenwald in Spring 1944, which resulted in the slow deaths of two labourers. A prisoner who witnessed the events, recorded as Z. Maszudro, recalled an SS construction supervisor targeting two exhausted Jews and ordering a Pole, named Strzaska, to bury them alive. Strzaska refused and, in a turn of events, the SS man ordered the two Jews to bury him instead. According to Maszudro, the Jews acquiesced to prevent their own deaths. Once Strzaska was buried to his neck, the SS guard stepped in, had him dug out and once again ordered him to bury the two Jews. Strzaska submitted and once they were buried, the guard stamped the ground flat and left the Jews buried for 15 minutes. Upon their exhumation, one was still alive, but the SS man sent both to the crematorium regardless.¹⁶⁶ In this scenario, the SS man had clearly enjoyed luring both parties, the Pole, and the Jews, into a false sense of security at separate times. The SS guard’s stamping of the ground flat, having moments before allowed the Jews to believe they would survive, revealed his deep enjoyment at duping his victims. The SS man appears also, to some degree, to have attempted to show the Polish victim the supposed true nature of the Jews. Whilst Strzaska had gallantly refused to kill the Jews, the SS man’s theatrics showed Strzaska that his humanity had been misplaced and that the selfish Jew would take advantage of it. The whole charade appeared to bear a twisted educative undercurrent, in which the SS guard sought to pass his own worldview onto the Pole. Whilst unclear how the guard justified these deaths, it is important to note that he never dirtied his own hands, choosing instead to play the victims off against each other. By removing his own agency from the burying of the Jews, the guard had kept himself clear of direct responsibility. Luring the prisoners into a situation where they could be killed

¹⁶⁵ Testimony of Premysl Dobias in Smith, *Forgotten Voices*, 170.

¹⁶⁶ Document 54 – Z. Maszudro, “Buried Alive” in Hackett, *Buchenwald Report*, 194-195.

without prompting scrutiny, even less so as the WVHA had simplified death reporting, showed just how the Camp SS could manipulate the guidelines. Their mastery of the KL rules, and how to utilise them insidiously, rather than obey them, allowed the SS to act without fear of punishment from above, letting them unleash unbridled cruelty for their own enjoyment and humour.

Whilst the examples above show that there was a connection between SS violence, the SS' view of prisoner groups as inferior and their clear amusement at the suffering inflicted, humour was not the only driving factor beyond SS cruelty in this period. There were instances where SS alcohol abuse, a recurring issue in this study, contributed to severe prisoner suffering. Following the trend seen above, drunken assaults in this period tended to show a clearer lack of caution in carrying out such bold attacks than had been the case previously. On 1 September 1943, at Mauthausen, SS-*Hauptsturmführer* Georg Bachmayer, who was the *Schutzhaftlagerführer* (protective custody camp leader), thus in one of the most senior positions beneath camp commandant, saw to the agonising torture of three prisoners whilst drunk. In the early hours of the morning, Bachmayer took three labourers named Kolowrat, Katucha, and Zilch whom he had selected from a construction detail and beat them personally, encouraging his Great Dane to join the attack. Bachmayer's assault lasted over an hour until he left the grotesquely mauled victims in the rollcall square to be found in the morning.¹⁶⁷ This attack, particularly its final element of exhibiting the casualties, was marked by an evident disinterest in repercussions and Bachmayer's confidence in his freedom to act negated any concerns about killing covertly. A great number of prisoners and SS would assemble in the rollcall square and see evidence of a gory attack, but in the late KL, Bachmayer had little need to worry about reprimand, his carefree attitude undoubtedly aided by his senior position. Moreover, like the behaviours of commandants discussed earlier, Bachmayer set a poor example for subordinate SS guards by being both drunk and sadistically violent. It is perhaps unsurprising that Mauthausen's reputation was so poor when senior figures like Bachmayer indulged in lustful violence.

In another instance of drunken SS violence, two Soviet prisoners, Sergei Nikolayev and Fedya Fedorkim, lost their lives at the hands of intoxicated SS guards at Buchenwald on 1 May 1943. In a charade that proved how easily the guards could corrupt KL labour, SS men who "could scarcely stand", accompanied by dogs, ordered the prisoners to carry heavy loads of excrement out of the sewage system in the camp's gardening area. The drill itself was reminiscent of the purposefully demoralising labour that Eicke had overseen in his days in charge of the IKL, a practice which Pohl was unable to phase out. Exhausted, Fedorkim stumbled and spilled a load over SS man Fritz Schulz

¹⁶⁷ HLS, NTP, PS-499, Report on the killing of inmates at Mauthausen concentration camp, 3-4, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Report on the killing of inmates at Mauthausen concentration camp \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

who promptly shot him. With the SS' enjoyment apparently spoiled, Nikolayev was killed by the SS dogs. At the same time, other bloody events were occurring in the immediate vicinity. In one attack, Vladislav Schezmit was ordered to shift an immovably heavy rock from the gardening area but failing to meet the challenge, was severely beaten by the SS, tied to a tree, and used for shooting practice. The "orgy" of violence reportedly lasted two hours and led to nine prisoner deaths.¹⁶⁸ This study has already established that in the KL's middle period violence and murder were commonplace, but the nature of the May Day violence at Buchenwald in 1943 showed a clear self-assurance on the part of the SS that was highly developed in the late KL. That in broad daylight, one scene involving sadistic violence could so easily encourage similar brutal attacks nearby must be attributed, at least partly, to the fact that the SS had significant freedom to act without worry of disciplining. Furthermore, alcohol may have played a central role in starting the bloodshed, but the spread of the terror underlined how the atmosphere of peer pressure, through Hans Buchheim's concept of facilitatory camaraderie, and one-upmanship, tied to masculine dominance, amongst the Camp SS could provoke extreme behaviours. As the environment of the 'Dachau School' had shown years earlier, abstention from acts that other guards indulged in could be tantamount to very undesirable self-exclusion from the social collective.

This section has shown that after the KL's reordering in 1942, camp violence was able to flourish more than in the first two phases of the camp system's existence. The heavy emphasis upon labour efficiency and ensuring the productivity of every work commando helped to enthuse guards to be hands-on overseers. A great deal of workplace violence occurred beyond the main camps in external work sites, where the guards were able to act with an even greater degree of freedom. However, the violence linked to labour sometimes represented an anxiety of the perpetrators to act without, albeit immoral, justifications. Violence in work could come with a rationale, an explanation that the guards might give to any who questioned their actions. This was by no means universal, but the beating of labourers was more controlled by the perpetrators who were relatively insured by their supposed adherence to, or rather, manipulation of, the camp guidelines. In general, assaulting workers was a practice that had been a pillar of the KL since the pre-war period, but it was the development of the facilitating factors, the increased drive for productivity and the decentralisation of labour, that allowed it to thrive more in later years. Erratic violence, by comparison, was bolder than the former, its proponents undeterred by concerns for repercussions. The Sachsenhausen 'Death Squad' were an example of sadistic guard violence in the preceding period, there is no doubt that it existed, but it was less commonplace. By the late KL period, control over the camps was

¹⁶⁸ Document 47 – unsigned testimony, "May 1, 1943" in Hackett, *Buchenwald Report*, 187-188.

wavering and, with rethought policies that lessened the scrutiny upon prisoner deaths, murder was easier to commit. Rules of engagement had endured, guards had a deadly tendency to join in with sadistic acts rather than risk shunning by interrupting them, but the playing field was different. In an unrestrained environment, sadistic individuals, motivated by hatred, were able to invent novel forms of torture, aware that they were likely to be encouraged by their peers.

Conclusion

There should be no doubt that, despite Pohl's credentials, and Himmler's confidence, the KL's labour-focused late period was a failure for the SS. On paper productivity should have significantly increased, but Pohl's reorganisation was continuously compromised by SS members from both ends of the hierarchy. Himmler could not accept Pohl's vision replacing his own; the KL was a place of punishment, and it would serve to eradicate the Jewish peoples of Europe, as well as other undesirables. The two visions could not peacefully co-exist, one pushed sustenance and the other sought death. Pohl's commandants, particularly in the hybrid camps of Auschwitz and Majdanek, were thus ruling over paradoxical worlds which were to simultaneously produce and destroy. The guards were the crucial piece of the destructive jigsaw. They were the implementers of this dual-purpose system, in which extermination won out, and it is not surprising that the SS leadership had to try and reduce the mortality rate. The conflicting message from above was not the only cause for the guards' behaviour, rather their apathy and violence in this period was the cumulative result of factors that this study has examined previously. Hatred of those that were different, indifference to their suffering, selective adherence to a principle of obedience, and the gradual and continual intensification of a workplace designed for punitive retribution all played crucial roles. The situation was dire, which helped the final period of the KL to be its most deadly. Yet it was curious that Pohl nominated Glücks for a Silver Cross, which he received in January 1945, for the IKL leader contributing "significantly to war munitions by making continuous use of inmates to produce armaments".¹⁶⁹ Not only did this award commemorate a phantom success, but its recommender had also spent years trying to undo the lackadaisical camp management of its recipient. This suggests that Pohl either did not recognise his failure, or, more likely, that he did not recognise what factors prevented his initiative from working as planned. Presuming that either one of these suppositions is accurate, Pohl was not as effective in his role as Himmler would have hoped. Though he took some

¹⁶⁹ BUL, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 18 – "A Medal for Camp SS Terror: Oswald Pohl Proposes Richard Glücks for the German Cross, 13 January 1945", [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](https://www.bbk.ac.uk/documents/the-nazi-concentration-camps) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

logical steps in reforming the camps, it is fair to say that the enormity of his task outweighed his abilities.

Moreover, the world created by Eicke in the 1930s had withstood efforts to rein in the violence; the first IKL chief's mantra of 'tolerance means weakness' lived on in the actions of the Camp SS between 1942 and 1945. Much of this owed to the continued rebellious behaviour of camp guards and leaders who preferred practicing the methods of Eicke's KL to adjusting to a softer system. These SS men stubbornly clung to a way of working that they preferred. Their *Eigen-Sinn* was such that they wanted to control their own work environment without inference from above. To this end, the Camp SS, particularly in relation to themes discussed here, show that Lüdtké's study of the labour of the German working class has some applicability to the men working in the KL. To conclude, whilst Pohl's accession to the head to the KL was to mark a shift toward separate policies of extermination *and* labour, the legacy of Eicke's punitive system and Pohl's own failures allowed for the devastating existence of ground-level extermination *through* labour. The final chapter of this study will focus upon the last year of the war and will examine how Camp SS behaviours evolved in the face of impending defeat. With the camps closing one by one, and deadly evacuations ensuing, it is crucial to analyse the final actions of the SS guards to complete the picture of their behavioural development.

Chapter Six – ‘Chaos at the End: Examining the SS Management of the Final Period of the KL, 1944-1945’

Introduction

This study has underlined that *SS-Obergruppenführer Oswald Pohl's* intended reformation of the concentration camp system, which hoped to see productivity supersede destruction in the day-to-day priorities of camp life, was an abject failure, continually undermined by individuals at all levels of the SS hierarchy. As such, the KL continued down the path of mass murder with the Final Solution to the Jewish Question toward the forefront of SS policy as the Second World War turned into an unsustainable calamity for the Third Reich. With the specialist extermination camps having been closed in 1943, Auschwitz-Birkenau took on a more prominent role as the main liquidation site of the SS empire, a role which saw the deportation of over 400,000 Hungarian Jews to the camp in mid-1944, the vast majority of whom were gassed on arrival at Birkenau. The KL was thus showing that despite the Allies landing in Normandy, and the Red Army launching the devastating Operation Bagration, in June 1944, it was still an immeasurably deadly institution irrespective of Germany's poor fortune in the war. It is amidst this atmosphere of intensified murder and deep concern for the failure of the war effort that the gradual disintegration of the KL occurred.

The KL's collapse, accelerated by evacuations of hundreds of thousands of prisoners from camps, forms the foundation for this chapter's discussions. The chapter argues that the SS did not intend to systematically exterminate its almost three-quarters of a million prisoners during evacuations. Yet, nor did SS management take anywhere near enough action to prevent the ground-level guards, who still retained great power over life and death, and had a predilection to behave excessively, from killing huge numbers of prisoners. The SS management showed little evidence of having a concerted plan for the prisoners they decided to evacuate and the frenzied and desperate camp withdrawals right up to Germany's surrender showed that a policy of SS retreat was being followed without any logical next step. The leadership vacuum and high level of autonomy within the KL contributed to the hallowed *Führerprinzip* being further weakened in the evacuation period. Whilst covertly bypassing orders had been part of the Camp SS makeup for years, in the last year of the war it became immensely difficult for the leadership to punish dereliction of duty. As such, orders were ignored on a wide scale in the KL's final phase.

The idea that the evacuations were in part driven by economic concerns, particularly the need for labourers in Germany, appears especially illogical when one considers the terrible state that many

evacuation survivors were reduced to by their ordeal. This consideration helps to reinforce the previous chapter's conclusions about the overwhelming failure of the SS to effectively manage potential economic assets. Moreover, this closing examination of SS guard behaviours in the KL will thus show that the foot soldiers of the Final Solution were given inconsistent and often immensely unhelpful guidance from above and that the vast, inestimable, death toll of the evacuations was significantly down to the failed command structure. In addition, evidence from this period shows that the camp guards attained the highest level of autonomy that they had ever had since the KL's inception. Naturally, as the guards' behaviours showed in the preceding years, when the guards gained more freedom to act, their course of action generally became increasingly brutal.

Historians have viewed the subject of this chapter in different ways. Daniel Goldhagen, for instance, has argued that the German guards of the evacuation convoys "knew that they were continuing the work that had begun and had been to a great extent already accomplished in the camp system and in the other institutions of killing: to exterminate the Jewish people".¹ Yehuda Bauer claims that some evacuation marches were intended to kill the marching prisoners because the gas chambers were defunct and mass shootings in Germany threatened to draw negative reactions from the population.² Whilst not asserting that extermination was a uniform policy for the evacuations, Bauer essentially argues that they were used in lieu of other methods of execution. Prisoner deaths were not necessarily an unexpected outcome of marches, rather, prisoners were sent on marches because they were required to die. In other words, it suited the SS to send select convoys on needlessly long treks in dreadful conditions because they knew that thousands would perish. In this scenario, the phrase 'death march', the terminology of which was discussed in this study's introduction, would be appropriately applied to these evacuations.

Others, however, including the foremost historian of the evacuations, Daniel Blatman, have argued that the purpose of these operations was not to kill the evacuees *en masse*. Blatman states that the evacuations "cannot be explained as the ultimate act of ideologically motivated murder within the framework of the Final Solution".³ This is based upon his recognition that the complexity of the period precludes such a straightforward explanation as well as his belief that unlike the genocidal activities of the earlier years of the Nazi regime, wherein entire nations or large groups from within them were targeted for extermination, during the evacuations the ground-level killers sought only to

¹ D. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Abacus, 1997), 271.

² Y. Bauer, 'The Death-Marches, January-May, 1945', *Modern Judaism*, 3:1 (1983), 1-21, 8.

³ D. Blatman, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 10.

kill some of their charges “as dictated by changing interests and circumstances”.⁴ Nikolaus Wachsmann also reached the same conclusion that the murder of Jews and other prisoners was not the main purpose for the evacuations.⁵ Writing specifically on the dismantling and evacuation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Andrzej Strzelecki viewed the SS’ plan as one of damage limitation; the SS sought to empty Auschwitz of valuable assets and to withdraw a useful workforce. He adds that “their actions bore the characteristics of a planned undertaking aimed at retaining as fully as possible the prisoner workforce, concentration camp property... and even the means of returning KL Auschwitz to its former status”.⁶ To Strzelecki, the Auschwitz evacuation was driven by hope of the KL’s recovery, as such extermination of the prisoner population was counterintuitive. Additional factors which are often flagged as influencing the policy of evacuation include the need to prevent witnesses of camp atrocities falling into enemy hands and the desire to destroy the camps and their killing facilities before the Allies found them.

Neither of the main arguments above are entirely persuasive, as the chapter will show. However, although Stefan Hördler’s research has focused on the last year of the war, in which he has identified a concept of *Rationalisierung* (‘rationalisation’) wherein SS mass murder was driven by the aim of reducing the camp population to a more manageable figure, his comments on the evacuation process are interesting. Whilst he concludes that “disorganization, chaos and arbitrariness were not attributes that could be used to accurately describe the last year of the war in the concentration camp system” he conversely considers the evacuation process, beyond the remit of his study, to have been “increasingly aimless, uncoordinated and chaotic”.⁷ The labelling of the process of evacuation as aimless fits especially well because the marches could not have universally been intended to be exterminatory as the SS would have been able to kill almost all their KL prisoners had they wanted to. Yet, conversely, had the SS intended to withdraw usable workers to Germany, they would have been able to limit the deaths on the marches and would have made efforts to preserve the labour potential of the evacuees. It is also wise to consider the perception of the victims of the evacuations who, whilst aware of the SS’ murderous tendencies, often observed that there was an absence of clarity in their guards’ plans. Nathan Moncharsh was evacuated from Auschwitz-Monowitz to Flossenbürg subcamp Obertraubling but from there he noted that “the SS did not

⁴ Ibid., 416.

⁵ N. Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (London: Abacus, 2016), 586.

⁶ A. Strzelecki, *The Evacuation, Dismantling and Liberation of KL Auschwitz* (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2001), 238-239.

⁷ S. Hördler, *Ordnung und Inferno: Das KZ-System im letzten Kriegsjahr* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2015), 14 and 467.

know, nobody knew [where we were going]... they did not know what they were doing".⁸ Josef Kampler also remarked that the "SS did not know where to march us" after getting their evacuation convoy from Auschwitz to Mittelbau-Dora.⁹ Based on these accounts, and the wider trend in the evacuation process, if the SS had a destination for their evacuees, and if this was reached, they lacked subsequent strategies or alternatives if the war situation disrupted the evacuation.

Nonetheless, this chapter accepts that there were occurrences during the evacuations which would support both sides of the above debate. Some evacuations were especially bloody affairs which saw the majority, or, in rarer cases, almost every single prisoner, die from the conditions they were subjected to on the road or due to direct murder from the SS guards and their auxiliaries. Other evacuations proceeded with relatively little bloodshed and the evacuees reached their destinations largely intact. This paradox is a key facet of this chapter's outlook. The KL, as has been established across previous chapters, was an often-unmanageable institution which grew harder to tame as its population swelled and decentralisation destabilised the chain of command. At the end of March 1944, the WVHA listed 22 main camps and 165 subcamps with 300,000 prisoners, a number which would nearly double to 524,000 by mid-August.¹⁰ By January 1945, despite camp closures in late 1944, the KL's population again grew vastly as it recorded its highest figure of 714,211 prisoners. This owed heavily to the broadening of SS arrests both within Germany as well as in territories such as Hungary, which was occupied from March 1944. Overcrowding existed across the entire system; Mauthausen held over 80,000 prisoners in February 1945, 50,000 more than a year previous.¹¹ These statistics tell the story of the unfathomable extreme overpopulating of a system which had already proved incapable of handling its populace prior to the final boom between 1944 and 1945. The KL was managed even more haphazardly in its final year, and this was reflected in the evacuations that the SS organised in the system's end phase.

It is important for the timeline of this examination to overlap with the previous chapter because whilst some camps found themselves vulnerable to the Allied advance in 1944, such as Majdanek, in eastern Poland, which closed on 22 July 1944, other camps were still operating relatively normally until 1945. Thus, the period of Pohl's optimism for productivity did not end across the KL concurrently to be replaced by a final era of chaos and uncertainty. Rather, the end point of one period and the start date of another were different across Nazi territory. Thus, whilst Hördler

⁸ *University of Southern California (USC), Shoah Foundation, Visual History Archive (VHA), Testimony of Nathan Moncharsh, segment 443, [Nathan Moncharsh - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](#) [Accessed 5 April 2023]*

⁹ *USC, Shoah Foundation, VHA, Testimony of Josef Kampler, segment 243, [Josef Kampler - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](#) [Accessed 27 April 2023]*

¹⁰ Hördler, *Ordnung und Inferno*, 9.

¹¹ Wachsmann, *KL*, 543.

supports the examination of the final year of the war as a separate phase in the KL's history, the staggered change in camp function and security hinders viewing it clearly as such.¹² Instead the evacuation phase should be seen as a subchapter of the final KL period. Additionally, Hördler's view that the SS' handling of the evacuations was chaotic but their management of the camps in 1944-1945 was not causes an issue based on the systemwide overlap between camp maintenance and camp abandonment. The complexity of the camp evacuation timeline is seen in the fact that three distinct periods have been identified: the first involved camps in eastern Poland and the Baltic states in summer 1944; the second involved camps in occupied Poland in January 1945; the final stage saw the evacuation of camps within Germany from March 1945 until the end of the war.¹³ These three periods should be accepted as useful sub-divisions when considering the topic of evacuations from concentration camps. A comprehensive study of the evacuation phase could extensively compare the evacuations from western camps with the usually deadlier evacuations from camps in the east, but this would require a much lengthier analysis than can appear in this study.

The appropriate starting point for this chapter is the assessment of the breakdown of command within the Camp SS in late 1944 and 1945. This will show how confused orders and poor communication from the top, and a failure of leadership from the camp commandants led to an unprecedented lack of direction for the KL. This study has already established that the SS was not the elite organisation that Heinrich Himmler viewed it as, and weak leadership at the KL's end provides more evidence for the depth of his delusion. The examination of the failing camp leadership leads into a discussion of how the rules of the KL appeared to evolve as the guards' familiar environment underwent extreme change. The SS tended to enforce new *ad hoc* rules on the road in displays which further evidenced the guards' potential to operate independently. Another factor to consider in the evolution of SS behaviour is the effect of the increasing pressure upon the SS guards caused by anxiety and panic over their situation. With the closing of the camps, guards, both new and old, were now aware that they could face severe consequences for their presence in the camps should the Allies capture them. Finally, this chapter will examine several instances of mass murder on the part of the SS during the evacuations, with the intention of understanding the motivation for these deadly actions which could incriminate the perpetrators so close to the Allied victory. More so than any other killings that the Camp SS carried out in the history of the KL, murders on the eve of Germany's defeat prompt questions about the culprits' rationale. Collectively, then, this chapter will not develop the extant understanding of the routes of evacuation or help to clarify the immensely murky fatality figures on the death marches. It will instead consider evidence

¹² Hördler, *Ordnung und Inferno*, 10.

¹³ Blatman, *Death Marches*, 9.

from numerous routes already identified, with particular focus upon the handling of the more deadly evacuations from eastern camps, to add a crucial final piece to the understanding of Camp SS behaviours seen in this study hitherto. Despite the closure of the camps themselves, the SS guards yield invaluable information about their own natures in the last days of their employment as Himmler's 'elite'.

The Breakdown of the SS Command Structure

On 17 June 1944, 11 days after the Allied Operation Overlord commenced, Himmler issued a general directive which was to serve as the basis of the camp evacuation protocol. With seeming ambiguity, Himmler informed his subordinates that the appropriate regional *Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer* (Higher SS and Police Leader, or HSSPF) would take control over the camps, for their security, in the event of 'A-Fall' ('Case A'). Outside of these circumstances, the commandants would continue to be responsible to the IKL which remained under the umbrella of Pohl's WVHA.¹⁴ Naturally, defining 'Case A' is imperative to understanding where the HSSPFs' jurisdiction began. There is, as the following will show, support for 'Case A' referring to potential prisoner outbreaks and uprisings and, conversely, to the threat of approaching enemy forces.

Blatman has drawn attention to the lack of clarity given by Himmler on the nature of 'Case A', a mystery which was not conclusively deciphered at the Nuremberg Trials.¹⁵ Christine Schmidt and Dan Stone have supposed that, in failing to spell out precisely what 'Case A' included, Himmler confused his subordinates, thus contributing directly to the chaos and brutality of the handling of camp evacuations.¹⁶ Eberhard Kolb has dismissed suggestions of confusion within the WVHA and KL management. He views the assertion of several of the WVHA staff at Nuremberg that 'Case A' meant the enemy's approach as intentional misdirection. After all, he says, it served them well to push the responsibility for the camps, and the deadly marches, onto the HSSPFs during the final stage of the war. Furthermore, to back up his argument, Kolb references a letter from Pohl to Himmler, dated 5 April 1944, which, he emphasizes, shows that "Case A can simply only mean uprising".¹⁷ The letter itself from Pohl gives credence to Kolb's argument; the WVHA chief informs his superior that, at Auschwitz-Birkenau, security measures including electric fencing, watch towers, manned bunkers and an outer ring of sentries were in place. Pohl concludes his summary stating, "I believe,

¹⁴ Ibid., 51-52.

¹⁵ Ibid., 52-57.

¹⁶ C. Schmidt & D. Stone, *Death Marches: Evidence and Memory* (London: Stephen Morris Publishing, 2021), 31.

¹⁷ E. Kolb, *Bergen Belsen: Geschichte des "Aufenthaltslager" 1943-1945* (Hannover: Verlag für Literatur und Zeitgeschehen, 1962), 303.

Reichsführer, that these preparations and security measures will be sufficient in Case A".¹⁸ It should go without saying that these security measures would be illogical and largely ineffective if 'Case A' meant the approach of the enemy. As such it is indeed believable that 'Case A' meant the risk of prisoner breakout or uprising.

Kolb's assessment warrants praise but there are a few drawbacks. Firstly, he endeavors to further show that 'Case A' was not related to the enemy's approach by discussing an instance from 1936 wherein the first camp inspector, Theodor Eicke, informed Gauleiter Fritz Sauckel that the establishment of a KL in Thuringia would be unavoidable in 'Case A'. In this instance, 'Case A' appeared not to refer to prisoner breakouts either, though Kolb argues that we need not concern ourselves with the term's meaning, only that it could not mean the enemy's approach.¹⁹ It is, contrary to Kolb's view, important that 'Case A' appears not to fit with either discussed interpretation in 1936. 'Case A' is not such a unique term that it could not appear in various places referring to altogether different things. This brings us to the second flaw in Kolb's otherwise strong argument; the meaning of 'Case A', amongst the SS in the later stage of the war, may very well have been broader than either narrow interpretation. For instance, the idea that 'Case A' meant any substantial threat to the integrity of the KL in question would allow for both interpretations to fit. This would reconcile the link between the HSSPFs and their jurisdiction over the camps as the enemy approached, whilst also endorsing Kolb's view that the protocol was central to KL security against uprisings.

Although it is possible that the WVHA took advantage of the ambiguous meaning of 'Case A' at Nuremberg, trying to convince the prosecution of their lack of involvement in evacuations, it is clear that the HSSPFs played a key role in the SS withdrawal from numerous camps. Former Auschwitz-Birkenau commandant, Rudolf Höss commented on the HSSPFs' power over the camps at the trials:

At the beginning of 1945, when various camps came within the operational sphere of the enemy... the Reichsführer ordered the Higher SS and Police Leaders, who in an emergency case were responsible for the security and safety of the camps, to decide themselves whether an evacuation or a surrender was appropriate.²⁰

¹⁸ *Harvard Law School*, Nuremberg Trials Project, NI-317, Report to Himmler concerning security measures at Auschwitz, including affiliated labor camps, with Himmler's reply, [Nuremberg - Document Viewer - Report to Himmler concerning security measures at Auschwitz, including affiliated labor camps, with Himmler's reply \(harvard.edu\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

¹⁹ Kolb, *Bergen Belsen*, 303.

²⁰ *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, 14 November 1945 - 1 October 1946, Vol. XI* (Nuremberg: International Military Tribunal, 1946), 407.

This statement establishes that the precedent for the HSSPFs to take charge of the camps was already in place. Taking Höss at his word here, the HSSPFs were able to instigate evacuations by January 1945, but, based upon the nature of the June 1944 directive, it would be reasonable to suppose that they were able to do so from its issuing. With this inference, as argued above, 'Case A' likely included, though was not restricted to, the risk of enemy combatants capturing the concentration camp in question. The critical aspect of the 'Case A' debate, which makes it valuable to this study, was that it led to further muddling of the command structure of the KL, in specific, although increasingly likely, circumstances.

Since March 1942, Pohl had been the main voice in camp governance, but with the insertion of the 'Case A' directive, dozens of voices were inserted into the management hierarchy to add to the decentralisation within the KL. It is reasonable to suppose that decentralisation was an inevitable by-product of the Allied advance as links between Berlin and the camps risked being severed, but the addition of HSSPFs to the mix only enhanced the devolution of responsibility for prisoners at the eleventh hour in the war. Sometimes HSSPFs took the new role given to them seriously. Karl Hermann Frank, the HSSPF for Bohemia and Moravia, toured Flossenbürg's subcamps in August 1944 and fed back useful information to Pohl. Frank was also involved, with the HSSPF of Silesia, Heinrich Schmauser, in ordering Gross-Rosen commandant, Johannes Hassebroek, to submit a report on prisoner numbers and security concerns in subcamps under his influence.²¹ On the other hand, once the situation in the KL grew especially desperate during the later evacuations, the HSSPFs often showed much less interest in the camps beyond transmitting an order to evacuate, leaving the commandants to manage their camp closures.²² As this study has already established, the commandants themselves were often antagonistic elements within the chain of command. Their role in the KL's end period had mixed results but in general the trend from earlier years continued. After a HSSPF gave the order for a camp to be evacuated, responsibility fell upon that site's commandant to see prisoners reach another camp further from the frontlines, which was theoretically predetermined before the evacuation was launched.

Some commandants appeared to relish the fact that they were, in effect, answerable to no one once the evacuations were ordered, and subsequently behaved brutally on the journeys. During the death march from Flossenbürg's subcamp Helmbrechts, starting on 13 April 1945, commandant SS-*Unterscharführer* Alois Dörr personally led the transport himself. Dörr's lowly rank, equivalent to a corporal, would preclude holding the commandant's position in a major KL, but it was not

²¹ Blatman, *Death Marches*, 56.

²² *Ibid.*, 81.

uncommon to see in small subcamps. This owed to the simplified administrative structures of satellite camps – often personnel covered numerous roles – resulting in most matters being settled in the main camp to which they were attached.²³ Thus, senior officers were not essential to the SS administration of dependant camps unlike in the main KL where decisions tended to be made. One could argue that the march which Dörr oversaw was so violent because he was essentially an empowered guard, not a member of the SS officer pool. This hypothesis is supported by other examples of low-ranking SS behaving poorly in commandant roles. As Chapter 5 briefly discussed, when *SS-Hauptscharführer* Gustav Sorge was transferred away from Sachsenhausen to command a series of subcamps, he continued to act sadistically toward prisoners. At Auschwitz subcamp Jawischowitz, *SS-Unterscharführer* Wilhelm Kowol, who became the camp's first commander, had a propensity for getting drunk in his office and then shooting at prisoners arbitrarily.²⁴ Furthermore, Dörr was intensely antisemitic and personally attacked Jews. He even permitted 25 non-Jewish prisoners to become pseudo-guards of the Jewish prisoners for part of the evacuation march.²⁵ Such a decision would have been unheard of inside the KL, but away from the SS leadership, Dörr was able to show that he felt little enmity toward other prisoners; the Jews were his mortal enemies.

At the commandant's trial in 1969, Mina Heller claimed: "I saw Dörr himself shoot my sister", whilst another victim, Libka Lauber, recalled that when she grew too tired to continue marching "Dörr held his pistol to my temple and said, 'I'll shoot you like a dog if you don't get moving'". However, aware of the witnesses around him, he subsequently said "no, I'll shoot you in the next woods I get you to".²⁶ Dörr's comments to Lauber show that, like many other SS, he was keen to abuse during the evacuations but was hesitant to incriminate himself where he could avoid it. Notably, he did not appear to fear SS reprimand but, rather, Allied punishment, reinforcing the idea that the SS leadership had little influence over their men by the end. Other displays of his murderous intentions included Dörr encouraging SS guards to bury prisoners alive. When questioned about this by a German prisoner, Dörr said that "they will perish anyhow. The more Jews perish, the better!".²⁷ His merciless attitude encouraged his subordinates to emulate their leader; when prisoner Sonya Federman had been found to have been badly injured during an Allied aerial attack, the guards

²³ A. Riedle, *Die Angehörigen des Kommandanturstabs im KZ Sachsenhausen: Sozialstruktur, Dienstwege und biografische Studien* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2011), 46-47.

²⁴ T. Friling, *A Jewish Kapo in Auschwitz: History, Memory and the Politics of Survival* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2014), 51

²⁵ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 345-346.

²⁶ *The New York Times*, "Nazi Trial Hears Camp's Survivors", 25 April 1969, 8, [TimesMachine: April 25, 1969 - NYTimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/1969/04/25/archives/nazi-trial-hears-camp-s-survivors.html) [Accessed 5 January 2023]

²⁷ From *Office of the State Prosecutor, Hof*, Investigation and trial of Alois Dörr, 2 Js 1325/62, G.v.E, Zeugen, 1183, in Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 359-360.

reportedly said “there are no hospitals for Jews. Jews don’t deserve to be helped”.²⁸ For Dörr and his guards, the evacuation provided a last chance to add to the Jewish death toll in the KL.

On 14 April, when a messenger from Himmler informed Dörr that no more prisoners should be killed, Dörr passed on the instruction but did not enforce it. Himmler’s order was motivated by his plan to preserve Jewish prisoners to use as bargaining chips as he endeavoured to negotiate his own peace with the western Allies. Coming from the highest authority one might have expected the order to have been adhered to, but it is not remarkable that a violent commandant would ignore an order that could not possibly be enforced by the top. This study has previously shown that lower-ranked SS men were especially cunning when it came to circumnavigating orders, so it is unsurprising that Dörr cared little for Himmler’s command. However, it should be noted the tendency was for the SS to avoid complying with general orders of conduct rather than direct orders like this one. Dörr’s overt rebelling against the *Führerprinzip* owed much to the extreme difficulty Berlin faced in observing whether orders were followed and in disciplining anyone who failed to comply. Combined with his determination to kill his Jewish charges, this made obedience unattractive to the *Unterscharführer*. Essentially, as Dörr showed, the *Führerprinzip* as a tool of control became increasingly ineffectual as the evacuations took place. Once the prisoners reached their destination of Volary and were turned over to the local *Volkssturm* (literally ‘People’s Storm’, German militia formations from October 1944 until the war’s end), they were released.²⁹ Dörr’s decision to remain with the march, permit murder, and personally kill prisoners is peculiar when one considers the proximity of the German surrender. It was evident to the SS that defeat was close and whilst others chose not to incriminate themselves further, Dörr chose to continue the violence of the KL. The last chapter interacted with the influence that commandants could have over their guards’ abuse and this example shows how a violent commandant’s presence on a march could contribute to the prisoner death toll as much as the vacuum left by a commandant’s absence. Curiously, Dörr procured German passports for the remaining non-Jewish German prisoners after the march ended.³⁰ This emphasises that this commandant felt hatred solely for his Jewish charges.

Other commandants were driven by self-preservation, failing to meet the expectations of their superiors when the evacuations began. Höss was dispatched from the IKL by Pohl when Auschwitz-Birkenau commandant *SS-Sturmbannführer* Richard Baer had failed to update his superiors about the progress of the evacuation march to Gross-Rosen. Höss claimed to have written the precise

²⁸ *Yad Vashem*, “The Death March to Volary”, Days 86-95 of the Death March, [The Death March to Volary - Yad Vashem \[Accessed 2 June 2023\]](#)

²⁹ Schmidt & Stone, *Death Marches*, 34.

³⁰ Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, 354.

evacuation plans for Auschwitz and provided Baer two months to familiarise himself with them. However, when he arrived in Upper Silesia, the former Auschwitz chief found that Baer had left Auschwitz for Gross-Rosen in the “biggest and best car he could find”. Höss was furious at Baer’s decision to leave two SS subordinates in charge of the evacuation and emphasised that, had Baer played his part, then the march from the camp would never have descended into such terrible conditions.³¹ Höss’ last comments are unrealistic; had Baer studied the plans intently and seen them through, the prisoners would still have been marching in winter, starving, and poorly clothed. However, his assessment that Baer exacerbated the problems of the camp’s evacuation is entirely believable. For instance, Baer reportedly told Höss that he did not know where the camp prisoners were whilst waiting in Gross-Rosen, showing an abject lack of interest in the success of the retreat from Auschwitz.³² Prior to leaving the SS guards to handle the Auschwitz withdrawal alone, according to one of the evacuation column commanders, *SS-Obersturmführer Wilhelm Reischenbeck*, Baer ordered the guards to shoot any prisoners who tried to escape or fell behind on the march without hesitation. Reischenbeck claimed that the column commanders remarked that the order was ruthless, but Baer replied that the order had to be carried out and that it was also the commanders’ responsibility to eliminate any sick from the convoy.³³ Baer’s attitude was somewhat reminiscent of that of Eicke’s, whose ‘tolerance means weakness’ ideology had been so powerful in constructing the Camp SS mentality in the 1930s. It is perhaps unsurprising that Baer received his KL training in the ‘Dachau School’ under Eicke in 1933 and 1934. Despite this, one must suppose that, had he been alive, the comradely Eicke would have considered Baer’s decision to look out for himself and leave his men to manage a monumental evacuation without guidance to have been a terrible failure of loyalty to his subordinates.

In contrast, commandants infrequently tried to subdue their guards or otherwise improve the lot of the prisoners in their care. Charles Holzer, a prisoner of Mittelbau-Dora subcamp Ellrich-Juliushütte, wrote of the peculiar remorse shown by the camp’s commandant during its evacuation which started on 8 April 1945. A number of the SS guards from the camp had been replaced by older conscripts but numerous SS remained, including motorised escorts. Holzer claimed that one night, during the evacuation, the SS assembled a rollcall amid rumours that American troops were closing in on them. The camp commandant, who had accompanied the prisoners, spoke from a tabletop, and said:

³¹ S. Paskuly (ed.), *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 234.

³² *Ibid.*, 174.

³³ From *Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum* (APMAB), Akta procesowe (trial documents), vol. 12, ref. no. Dpr-Reischenbeck-P/1, 6 (inventory no. 48580) in Strzelecki, *Liberation of KL Auschwitz*, 135-136.

Friends... I will let you go, or you may stay and wait for your liberators. The choice is yours. The guards will get orders not to shoot, and I want you to remember that not all Germans are bad, some are human too. Good luck and may God be with you. I am ashamed to be German.

Holzer said that the commandant proceeded to shoot himself. After this, following a shocked silence, prisoners proceeded to disperse but the guards shouted for the prisoners to fall in and then shot at them despite the late commandant's insistence that the prisoners should be freed.³⁴ The commandant had intended the evacuation to end calmly but the guards oversaw a bloodbath instead. It is possible that the older replacements in the SS ranks panicked or acted in a way that they felt the SS expected them to. Alternatively, the trauma of an SS officer showing such intense remorse could have sparked the SS guards' frenzy. What is clear, however, is that the guards rejected a direct order, once again devaluing the *Führerprinzip*. Like Dörr, these men likely realised that they would not get reprimanded for ignoring a direct order seeing as its issuer had just died. On the other hand, following the orders of someone who had just betrayed the SS' cause may have been illogical for the killers. Irrespective, the commandant had tried, but failed, to influence guard behaviour for the better.

The following testimony shows another instance of a commandant preserving life. The more important aspect of the statement is the assertion that the WVHA continued to play a central role in KL administration when they came under threat, in other words in 'Case A', despite their assertions at Nuremberg. Having been ordered by Camp Inspector Richard Glücks to destroy sensitive camp documents in February 1945, Sachsenhausen commandant *SS-Standartenführer* Anton Kaindl became aware that an evacuation order was increasingly likely. After the war, he claimed that on 4 April 1945 he had suggested to Himmler that the camp ought to be handed over to the International Red Cross, making the Reichsführer "extremely astonished and impatient". Kaindl stated that on 19 April he received orders from Glücks which read "the camp is to be evacuated. Try and obtain the release of several ships in the Westhaven of Berlin or if necessary, requisition them so that the prisoners can be loaded on ships". Kaindl claimed to have queried the purpose of loading prisoners on to ships and reportedly received a response which read "the ships are to travel up the canals to the East or North Sea and are there to be allowed to drift freely". In his statement, the commandant said that he had "the impression that the ships together with the prisoners were to be scuttled". Claiming to have subsequently refused to carry out the order, with Glücks informing Kaindl that this

³⁴ *Center for Jewish History* (CJH), Leo Baeck Institute (LBI), Memoir Collection, ME 1576, Charles Holzer, 'And Suddenly it was Over', 3-4. Holzer does not name the commandant in question, but it seems likely that he is referring to *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Wilhelm Stötzler who held the role of commandant at Ellrich from 1944 until the camp's closure. [And suddenly it was over. \(cjh.org\)](https://www.cjh.org) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

would be reported, a new order was issued to lead a foot march to Wittstock instead.³⁵ The camp was indeed evacuated on foot, on the night of 20 April, heading northwest, possibly toward Wittstock or KL Neuengamme. A small amount of food was given to some prisoners before departure and flagging prisoners were shot along the way. The march was disjointed and fell apart gradually as the guards dispersed. 3,000 prisoners who were unable to march were left alive in the camp and later liberated.³⁶

Kaindl's testimony is problematic since it served to somewhat exonerate him for his role as a KL commandant and, although this was by no means unusual, the absence of written orders to support his claims left him without evidence. If Kaindl's statement is accepted, he endeavoured to prevent the mass murder of tens of thousands of prisoners in the final month of war, probably to protect himself afterwards. If one considers Kaindl's testimony false, either through embellishment or complete fabrication, there is a key element to it which throws the supposed diminished role of the WVHA into doubt. Kaindl does not mention receiving orders from the Berlin-Brandenburg HSSPF August Heissmeyer but rather from Glücks. Sachsenhausen was located close to the IKL offices so maintaining contact with the SS leadership was not as challenging as it was in the eastern camps. However, in the Third Reich's fiercely bureaucratic system, if the WVHA's authority was officially supplanted by the HSSPF then Heissmeyer would have had jurisdiction over Sachsenhausen. There is little reason to doubt Kaindl's identification of the WVHA as the origin of contact over the camp's evacuation which significantly weakens the defence of Pohl and others at Nuremberg when they claimed the HSSPFs took responsibility for evacuations. Altogether, Kaindl's testimony, whilst difficult to validate, is very plausible. Following SS indecision over Buchenwald's fate, which ultimately led to the Allies liberating vast numbers of prisoners, Himmler decided after 15 April 1945, no further prisoners should fall into Allied hands alive.³⁷ Kaindl's argument that he expected he would have to drown the entire Sachsenhausen population at sea rather than allow them to be liberated fits in with the state of SS policy after mid-April. It is likely that, in evacuating Sachsenhausen on a fragmentary foot march, Kaindl bypassed more murderous alternatives.

Clearly, in the final months of the KL's existence, the chain of leadership was complicated by the transference of jurisdiction over camp populations in specific circumstances. There are still

³⁵ *The Wiener Library* (WL), London, 1655/2581a, Statement of Anton Kaindl concerning the evacuation of Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg concentration camp, referring to an order, later withdrawn, to load the prisoners on ships and set them adrift.

³⁶ *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Website*, Timeline of Events, "Evacuation of Prisoners from Sachsenhausen", [Evacuation of Prisoners from Sachsenhausen — United States Holocaust Memorial Museum \(ushmm.org\)](https://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/1945/evacuation-of-prisoners-from-sachsenhausen) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

³⁷ Wachsmann, *KL*, 578-581.

uncertainties over the precise definition of the 'Case A' directive, but there is no debate that it drew the HSSPFs into the KL sphere. The WVHA was not rendered entirely impotent in the event of 'Case A', however, regardless of their claims after the war. The KL may have coped better with the HSSPFs' insertion into the hierarchy had the commandants proved to be more reliable in the final stage of the war. It comes as little surprise that commandant behaviour varied so greatly during the evacuations; throughout the history of the camps numerous commandants had shown themselves to be too zealous, too self-engrossed or too soft for the SS leadership. It was almost unusual for a commandant not to have behaved in excess in one way or another. This addressing of the KL management's handling of evacuations has served to set the scene for the following discussions by underlining that haphazard organisation, which often created a leadership vacuum, undoubtedly opened a window of opportunity for the guards to act with a free hand.

Evolving Rules in the Fracturing KL

There is no evidence to suggest that the SS leadership altered the longstanding camp guidelines, compiled by Eicke in their earliest form in 1933, and distributed new guidelines for the guards to follow during evacuations. Localised rules of conduct were given which were intended to influence guard behaviour, such as the above-mentioned order from Baer to shoot ailing Auschwitz marchers. Conversely, after the war, a West German lawyer examined the evacuation order from the Stutthof KL and found that this ruled that ailing prisoners should be left alive at police stations and then pulled on sledges behind the evacuation convoy.³⁸ Essentially, then, universal KL guidelines were not being circulated but this is not surprising considering the chaos of the evacuation period. There would be immense difficulties involved in creating and disseminating new guidelines to replace entrenched understandings of extant KL rules at such short notice. Wachsmann has questioned whether the evacuation convoys constituted small mobile KL or if they were a separate aspect of the Nazi genocide. He concluded that, ultimately, neither description is completely convincing. This middle ground view comes from the fact that seeing the treks as mobile camps ignores the extensive differences from life within the traditional KL. Yet, the marches were dominated by the Camp SS men, the main actors in the management of the camps, tying the evacuations to the KL's history.³⁹ The issue of guidelines for the evacuations, or, rather, the absence of any, helps to resolve Wachsmann's dilemma. The following shows that, even without bespoke evacuation guidelines, the camp guards were able to think independently, adapt their traditional practices and subsequently help the KL to transition into a mobile institution.

³⁸ Strzelecki, *Liberation of KL Auschwitz*, 134.

³⁹ Wachsmann, *KL*, 577-578.

As evacuations were ordered in their respective camps, guards tended to show an awareness that the existing rules of the KL were now harder to enforce. The guidelines had been written for the SS who were supervising prisoners in a consistent and predictable environment behind barbed wired. Rules which precluded prisoner presence beyond the warning line in front of the electric fences or insisted that prisoners caught outside at night would be shot were obsolete on the road. The guards thus showed disinterest in policing the prisoners in ways that they had done in the past. For instance, prior to evacuations commencing, SS guards distributed small quantities of food to prisoners which was to last them for some time. In numerous instances, however, the prisoners stole extra food. Auschwitz inmate, Olga Lengyel, led prisoners in ransacking a food store in Birkenau during which two SS men cycled past showing no concern for the inmates' actions and leaving them be.⁴⁰ According to the longstanding regulations, "anyone who intentionally causes a fire, explosion, water, or other damage to property in the camps... will be punished with death".⁴¹ Thus, the SS who cycled past would have been acting in accordance with the KL guidelines if they had chosen to intervene with violence. Some might suppose that because the SS showed a lack of willing to stop the ransacking of camp food stores, they were content to let prisoners acquire food for themselves, contrary to the practice of the KL over the last decade. As their general management of the hunger situation on the marches showed, however, their determination to prevent the prisoners from eating adequately endured. One could also be forgiven for thinking that the SS were perhaps acting with a degree of caution in the face of emboldened inmates like Lengyel, since some KL prisoners had recently rebelled out of fear of imminent execution.

Organised revolts became a genuine concern for Himmler, as Pohl's precautionary security measures for 'Case A' proved, and they had been integral to the SS abandoning their extermination camps – both Treblinka and Sobibor had suffered mass revolts in August and October 1943 respectively. Within the jurisdiction of the KL, the most well-known instance of armed resistance was the revolt in Birkenau on 7 October 1944 which saw the prisoners of the *Sonderkommando* destroy Crematorium IV. At the cost of 250 *Sonderkommando* prisoners, and a further 200 who were executed in the aftermath, the prisoners killed just three SS guards and injured a dozen others.⁴² Although seemingly futile, the rebels undoubtedly shocked the SS and added to the guards' concerns for their own safety as the KL's end drew near.⁴³ Despite their wavering morale, the SS were still dangerous and able to

⁴⁰ O. Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz* (Chicago, IL: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1995), 211.

⁴¹ WL, 1988/1, Esterwegen Concentration Camp Rulebook, 6, current author's trans..

⁴² T.H. Halivni, 'The Birkenau Revolt: Poles Prevent a Timely Insurrection', *Jewish Social Studies*, 41:2 (1979), 123-154, 143.

⁴³ For contemporary accounts of the Birkenau Revolt in October 1944, see F. Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), 115-160, M. Nyiszli, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's*

dominate their prisoners in most situations. As one Buchenwald prisoner bemoaned in April 1945, “with a handful of SS men one can force prisoners to do anything deemed necessary”.⁴⁴ Thus, the decision to ignore Lengyel’s group ransacking the food store was not forced by impotence but very likely motivated by a combination of disinterest in enforcing rules which were becoming outdated as well as wariness of the prisoners’ potential to strike back when frenzied.

During the evacuations, SS guards started to enforce new, unofficial, rules regarding prisoner food intake. Prisoners were largely forbidden to scavenge for food and to beg for, or accept, food from settlements they passed through on their journey. There were instances where the SS relented and allowed prisoners to acquire food from settlements, but these situations were relatively unusual and were often influenced by other factors, such as the presence of a leader who was willing to preserve life. For example, during Chayim Gefen’s evacuation from Flossenbürg, the commander of the march sent guards to a village to requisition food for the hungry prisoners.⁴⁵ On other marches, where guards were granted greater free will, prisoners were often killed for trying to acquire food. John Ranz’ Blechhammer evacuation convoy was one in which breaking rank to try to collect food was often suicidal. He added that “sometimes, a good guard quietly tolerated it”.⁴⁶ That these few guards ‘quietly’ permitted these actions gives credence to the idea that most of the guards had decreed that food scrounging was against the rules of the road. The quiet nature of the minority’s permitting of scrounging also reinforces the idea of the power of the SS’ social collective which this study has highlighted previously. The ‘good guard’ had to be cautious not to allow his mercy to be seen by his colleagues unless he wished to risk forfeiting his place in the collective. Such was the nature of the caustic camaraderie that has been seen through this thesis; to belong, one had to exacerbate suffering.

On the Helmbrechts death march, the SS guards beat prisoners trying to accept food from civilians and threatened the latter to deter them from offering more.⁴⁷ Often, however, SS behaviour grew far more insidious. On his march to Mauthausen in March 1945, a Mr Jacobuwics observed another prisoner eating a dead comrade’s liver. Jacobuwics reveals that he had to use force to settle things down afterwards. However, when another prisoner opted to pick a sugar beet in a field, “an SS man of around 18 years of age... ordered him to open his mouth, and put his rifle barrel in. After a while

Eyewitness Account (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), 110-120 and S. Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 113-120.

⁴⁴ Wachsmann, *KL*, 582.

⁴⁵ CJH, LBI, Memoir Collection, ME 1040, Chayim Gefen, ‘My Life’, 14, [My Life. \(cjh.org\)](http://MyLife.cjh.org) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁴⁶ J. Ranz, ‘The Death March to Buchenwald’, *Midstream*, 53:6 (2007), 24-28, 28.

⁴⁷ Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, 347-348.

he pressed the trigger".⁴⁸ Jacobuwics does not mention any SS interference with the cannibalism, only the brutal murder committed by a young guard over a vegetable. One might deduce that the perceived theft of property incentivised this killing, however, it is the lack of action over the first incident which is most curious. It is very likely that, as has been seen previously, the guards' observation of animalistic behaviours endorsed their beliefs about the prisoners. Essentially, this was positive for the guards and thus did not necessitate intervention. As soon as a prisoner found a less degrading method of sating his hunger, the SS were again motivated to act. Similarly, in an effort to prevent the prisoners' lives being made easier, Auschwitz guards shot at Czech civilians throwing their packed lunches into Josef Kampler's evacuation train and even shot a civilian woman in the head for passing water to prisoners in Jan Wygas' convoy.⁴⁹ Such fanatical desire to ensure suffering even prompted the Ravensbrück SS to shoot at *Wehrmacht* troops as they threw chocolate and cigarettes to Eva Fejer's fellow prisoners as they marched.⁵⁰ Interestingly, other branches of the SS could show sympathy to the camp victims; Erwin Jakob's convoy had biscuits thrown to them by a passing *Waffen-SS* unit.⁵¹ These examples show that many, though not all, Camp SS convoy escorts adopted unofficial and, as far as is known, unwritten rules which stipulated that prisoners were forbidden to find or be given food by outsiders during their march. The motivation for this can only be speculated; the SS were in a desperate hurry and resented delays; they were experienced disciplinarians who sought purpose; they often hated their prisoners and enjoyed their suffering whilst they themselves were in a state of insecurity and panic. What is certain, however, is that, regarding food, established KL rules evolved for the road so that the SS could continue to control what their victims consumed.

Not dissimilar to the situation with food distribution prior to evacuation, there were numerous instances of the Camp SS issuing spare clothing to prisoners. Many images from the evacuation period show convoys of mismatching prisoners, the marchers no longer immediately recognisable as KL prisoners from their clothing alone. Unlike food distribution, the handing out of garments corrupted the traditional practice of the KL. Wearing civilian attire was prohibited for most KL prisoners so that the SS could easily identify prisoners by their KL uniforms. The guidelines stated

⁴⁸ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account by Mr. Jacobuwics of his experiences in Hungary and in concentration camps in Austria, 4.

⁴⁹ USC, Shoah Foundation, VHA, Testimony of Josef Kampler, segment 227 and Jan Wygas' testimony from APMAB, Collection of Testimonies, vol. 80, 170, in Strzelecki, *Liberation of Auschwitz*, 151. Also see USC, Shoah Foundation, VHA, Testimony of Max Eisen, segment 149, for corroboration of Kampler's witnessing of SS shooting at aid-giving Czech civilians, [Max Eisen - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](#), [Accessed 5 April 2023]

⁵⁰ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account by Eva Fejer, Budapest, of her experiences during the German occupation of Hungary and in various concentration camps, 23.

⁵¹ USC, Shoah Foundation, VHA, Testimony of Erwin Jakob, segment 286, [Erwin Jakob - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](#) [Accessed 5 April 2023]

that “anyone who wears civilian clothing in the camp without authorisation” would be “punished with five days strict detention”.⁵² Whilst failing to wear appropriate uniform theoretically did not justify the death penalty, the SS were known to use minor infringements as pretexts for more severe punishment. Thus, it was extremely risky for prisoners to be caught purposely flouting the rules in relation to their dress. Before leaving Blechhammer, Ranz observed prisoners smashing windows and breaking down the doors of the clothing depot to take what they could, putting sweaters on over their uniforms. He made a key observation about this “incredible sight”, saying that “in normal times these people would have been hanged or shot on the spot”.⁵³ Ranz was correct both because the prisoners were breaching rules on clothing and, more significantly, from an SS perspective, were sabotaging the camp in the process. As it was, the SS showed little interest in capitalising upon the opportunity to enforce the camp regulations.

Underlining that the adaption of the rules to life on the road was not universal, during Jan Hartman’s evacuation convoy from Czechowice to Buchenwald, the guards beat the Jewish prisoners on the torso with clubs to see if they had hidden layers on to keep themselves warm. If they did, according to Hartman, this surely meant death.⁵⁴ In the preparation for the evacuation from Helmbrechts, Dörr chose to distribute the camp’s spare clothing to non-Jews but ensured that the Jewish prisoners got neither warm clothing nor rations.⁵⁵ These examples show that whilst other SS guards consented to adapting the policing of uniforms, some, like those driven by fiercer antisemitism were either reluctant to allow the camp rules to pass into irrelevance or they were determined to apply them selectively so that Jewish suffering endured. One might argue that the general slackening of the uniform rules showed the SS were marching prisoners with the intention of preserving their labour potential, but the above-mentioned food situation and the SS decision to make evacuees sleep outdoors in open fields suggested otherwise. Without SS testimony to clarify the situation, it is difficult to conclude precisely why the uniform rules slipped into obscurity, but it was likely a matter of convenience for the SS; the warmer the prisoners were as they marched, the quicker the convoys would have moved away from the advancing enemy, thus reducing the risk posed to the SS.

In summary, there were numerous instances of SS guards amending extant rules, and creating new ones, for their prisoners as they marched away from the environments where the traditional regulations had influenced their prisoner management for many years. This chapter does not suppose that the SS guards, over all three evacuation periods, across both western and eastern KL,

⁵² WL, 1988/1, Esterwegen Concentration Camp Rulebook, 1.

⁵³ J. Ranz, ‘Death March’, 25.

⁵⁴ Testimony of Jan Hartman in L. Smith, *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust: True Stories of Survival – From Men, Women and Children Who Were There* (London: Ebury Press, 2005), 251.

⁵⁵ Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, 345.

independently created universal replacement regulations which governed the orderly withdrawals and the death marches. This would have required an impossible degree of mental symbiosis between the guards of the hundreds of camps and subcamps in a chaotic period when they could not plausibly contact other evacuation convoys. What this section has shown, however, is that SS guards were capable of self-governance and displayed the ability to modify the established rules of the KL to better suit the new environments they found themselves in. That numerous marches enforced such similar rules, such as forbidding accepting food from civilians, proved that the guards were proficient in adapting their prisoner management strategies when they needed to.

Wachsmann's uncertainty over the relation between the evacuations and the KL should be lessened by these findings. It is true that life on the road was markedly different to that behind the barbed wire, as he states, but vast differences can also be seen between life in the camps prior to 1939 and after 1942. In finding ways to make the camp regulations more suitable for evacuation convoys, the SS were ensuring the survival of the fracturing system and, crucially, converting it into a mobile institution. The radical change from camps to the marches is not sufficient grounds to consider the evacuations as separate from the KL as the same chief actors remained central to the narrative: the camp guards and their prisoners.

The Reactions of SS Guards to the Collapse of the KL

Whilst Nazi awareness of the irreversible faltering of the Third Reich's war effort predated the evacuation period, the true hopelessness of the SS' position became increasingly apparent to them as they abandoned the concentration camps. This anxiety affected members of the Camp SS differently; Polish Jew Hershl Kruk, who was killed in a Vaivara satellite camp in September 1944, wrote in his diary that guards behaved as though they were jealous of Jews, saying "soon you will be liberated. And our lot is bad. They will slaughter us with no mercy".⁵⁶ In this situation, the SS were resigned and defeated, no longer acting with omnipotence but revealing vulnerability. Oppositely, Nathan Moncharsh was told by the Auschwitz SS accompanying him to Glewitz that "before we all die, you are going to die first".⁵⁷ Indignation defined this interaction, the refusal of the SS to allow their victims to survive at the forefront of their minds. On Roman Halter's evacuation from Pirnau to Dresden, the SS marched Jews through a market square, sat them down and goaded them in front of

⁵⁶ *Birkbeck University of London (BUL)*, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 104, "Diary Entries by Hershl Kruk on Prisoner Hopes for Liberation, 1944", [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](https://www.bbk.ac.uk) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁵⁷ USC, Shoah Foundation, VHA, Testimony of Nathan Moncharsh, segment 423. Statements to this effect were common after the SS became aware that defeat was likely. For another example, see Document 8 – Jan Robert, "Masseur to the SS" in D.A. Hackett (ed. and trans.), *The Buchenwald Report* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 125. Robert was told by Buchenwald adjutant *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Hans-Theodor Schmidt that "you should not imagine that any prisoner will come out of here alive if we are defeated".

the local populace. Halter remembered that the SS sought to show the town “what beasts we were, so they cut up bits of turnip and carrot and threw them in the middle so that we should fight over them”.⁵⁸ In the midst of their full retreat, in the knowledge that their way of life, and the Nazi *Weltanschauung*, would soon collapse, this SS group concerned itself with publicly shaming the subhuman Jewish menace. The inconsistency of SS reactions to the fall of the KL system is the focus of the following discussion, showing that in the final months guard behaviours were extremely diverse.

Some SS guards made efforts to ingratiate themselves with their prisoners as Germany’s defeat neared. A common inference from former prisoners was that the SS intended to manufacture a reputation for kindness at the end which would leave a greater legacy than memories of their abuses in the camps. For example, one witness claimed that as their convoy was travelling to Buchenwald, an SS man “treated us well and expected us to justify his behaviour once we fell into the hands of the Americans”.⁵⁹ There were also instances where humanity was displayed by the SS in situations wherein it would have served them better to retain the cold behaviours they had been taught in the camps. One particularly fascinating interaction occurred between Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* member Filip Müller and Auschwitz guard *SS-Unterscharführer* Johann Gorges when they had both reached Mauthausen. The SS had largely lost track of the *Sonderkommando* amongst the evacuation chaos which was problematic for guards like Gorges who could be identified as accessories to exterminations in Auschwitz-Birkenau. At Mauthausen’s subcamp, Müller was recognised by Gorges who chose to treat him favourably. Müller’s account reads:

Unterscharführer Gorges stood suddenly in front of me, his truncheon held high... he recognised me and stopped in mid-blow to let me run on... did he intend to give me away? Nothing untoward happened until two days later he suddenly loomed up in front of me like a spectre. He inquired how I was getting on and... I perked up and thought that I might as well drop a gentle hint to the effect that I had nothing to eat... Next morning, much to my amazement, there he was again, complete with half a loaf of bread and a handful of tobacco. Why he never informed against me has remained a mystery to this day.⁶⁰

Gorges’ handling of this reunion was entirely contrary to the SS’ expectations of their guards. Instead of killing a dangerous witness, or exposing him to other SS, Gorges protected Müller’s identity and

⁵⁸ Testimony of Roman Halter in Smith, *Forgotten Voices*, 255.

⁵⁹ From *Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság* (DEGOB), Record Number 2160 in F. Laczó, “I could hardly wait to get out of this camp, even though I knew it would only get worse until liberation came”: On Hungarian Jewish Accounts of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp from 1945-46’, *The Hungarian Historical Review*, 2:3 (2013), 605-638, 628.

⁶⁰ F. Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 169.

procured food for him. As Müller's astonishment shows, it is hard to identify Gorges' motives but his decision to go beyond apathetic ignorance of Müller's presence, and to check on him and feed him points towards the presence of some humanity. The risk of protecting Müller almost caused Gorges great misfortune later in life. In 1961, Müller identified the SS guard at a motorway service area and filed a complaint against him. Though interrogated, he remained free and died in 1971.⁶¹ Had Gorges, an accessory to tens of thousands of murders in Birkenau, revealed Müller's identity to the Mauthausen SS in 1945, he would have left one less witness to threaten his freedom after the war. Gorges must have been aware of this, which makes the decision to help Müller survive extremely unusual from an SS standpoint.

There were other instances of unexpected SS benignity which occurred in the last days of the KL. Czech Jew, Anna Bergman, another new arrival at Mauthausen, gave birth soon after entering the camp and feared for her and her child's safety. This was to be expected, as extermination was the general method of handling of both pregnant prisoners and young children. Nonetheless, Bergman had her child in Mauthausen's hospital and was given bread, milk, and pasta by the guards; she deduced that "the Germans had changed from being murderous to being very, very good-hearted people – they knew the war was lost".⁶² It would be wise to take Bergman's statement in context; this prisoner had undoubtedly been aware that the odds were against her and that the SS would likely kill her child. As such, her intense gratitude at being shown mercy must have played a part in her new outlook. Nonetheless, whilst it was unlikely that the temperament of the Mauthausen SS completely reversed overnight, Bergman's testimony showed that she and her child were treated well in incredibly unlikely circumstances. The SS who helped feed Bergman's child chose to go against their ideological training, opting to ensure the survival of one Jewish prisoner whilst bringing another into the world. In this action alone, these SS acted in direct opposition to their organisation's mission. There is no doubt that the SS could have chosen to kill Bergman, or at the very least, leave her to struggle to source food, but their decision to help should be seen as a decent act. Whether this was motivated by genuine warmth or hopes of self-preservation is hard to tell, but the result was the survival of two otherwise doomed KL prisoners.

There also appeared to be other causation for improving attitudes amongst some of the SS, such as the cessation of mass murder around them. Filip Müller, noted that even before leaving Auschwitz-Birkenau, the SS' behaviour began to alter. In the days prior to the evacuation order, Müller described the SS as "nervous and apprehensive, attempting to act professionally and yet oozing

⁶¹ *Sonderkommando Studien*, "Nachrufe.", [Obituaries | Sonderkommando Studien \(sonderkommando-studien.de\)](https://www.sonderkommando-studien.de) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁶² Testimony of Anna Bergman in Smith, *Forgotten Voices*, 257-258.

affability”, stating also that their authority began to disintegrate as discipline slackened.⁶³ Whilst it seems illogical that the SS would grow less intimidating as the Russian frontline drew closer and the threat posed to their safety grew, the closure of the deadliest remaining extermination centre was imminent. As this study has explored, the SS tended to drink heavily, especially around extermination sites, therefore the shutting of Auschwitz offered freedom to guards who were distressed by their centrality to industrial murder. Imprisoned physician, Miklós Nyiszli, supports this idea, recalling that the Auschwitz SS were increasingly drunk during the final weeks in the camp, stating that “it was rare that they had their wits about them for more than a few minutes a day”.⁶⁴ The gas chambers of Birkenau were used for the final time in November 1944 which left the SS with very little to do, but think upon the death that had occurred around them, for the following two months. When one drunken guard, *SS-Oberscharführer* Erich Muhsfeldt, was given orders to execute 100 Polish Christians on New Year’s Day, 1945, Nyiszli concluded that he was “not at all pleased to learn he had been given a bloody job to perform”.⁶⁵ Müller’s view that some SS attitudes had softened was seemingly tied to the fact that, after the gas chambers were put out of use, and following weeks of drunken restlessness, the guards were soon going to be leaving their crime scene behind. This assessment suggests that the SS guards’ zeal for murder stuttered by this point and that they were content to abandon Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Those amongst the SS who began to behave more tamely in the evacuation period were also influenced by the environments they found themselves in. For instance, some prisoners, including Auschwitz evacuee Nicholas Rosenberg, witnessed a marked change in SS behaviour when Red Cross representatives were nearby. Having only sporadically received warm soup from the SS at other points on their journey, Rosenberg observed that the Red Cross “distributed a few parcels amongst us; the SS, who immediately treated us more humane [sic] at the sight of the Red Cross, divided us into groups of 5 and each group received a food parcel weighing between 4 to 5 kilograms”. Despite this tame display from the SS, they returned to shooting weak evacuees later the same day.⁶⁶ In returning to their killing activity after the Red Cross disappeared, these SS guards showed that they were fully aware of the criminality of their actions, especially now that the Third Reich was on the verge of capitulation but were willing to pursue them in the absence of external witnesses.

Similar examples exist of the SS suppressing their violent tendencies, at least for a time, in hostile environments. Marching between the Flossenbürg subcamps of Zwodau and Neurohlau, Ruth

⁶³ F. Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 165.

⁶⁴ Nyiszli, *Auschwitz*, 145.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁶⁶ WL, *Testimonies*, Eyewitness account by Nicholas Rosenberg entitled ‘Forced Labourer for the Siemens-Schuckert-Works in Bobregh Auschwitz’, 8.

Alton's convoy passed a village wherein an inhabitant openly cursed and derided the SS who neither reacted, nor defended themselves.⁶⁷ On other occasions the SS showed little hesitation in attacking civilians who tried to help prisoners, yet in this case they chose to accept the negativity without risking escalation. Perhaps this villager's outburst influenced SS behaviour for the rest of Alton's journey as she recalled that the SS did not shoot prisoners who collapsed, choosing to leave them behind instead, and that when she failed in an escape attempt, she was beaten rather than killed.⁶⁸ Importantly, though still unpleasant, these behaviours were less murderous than the SS would typically tend to exhibit. That Alton's SS escorts' behaviour was more subdued prompts deeper consideration of the role of peer pressure in more savage convoys where sadistic guards consistently influenced their colleagues. Alton's account shines some light on the subject. After a second, successful, escape attempt, she crossed paths with a solo SS man dressed in uniform. A fellow escapee found the confidence to approach the man, to ask for directions, to which he replied that he too was a stranger in the area, but nonetheless gave rough guidance.⁶⁹ Without knowing more about this SS man, conclusions can only be speculative, however, it can be said with confidence that had the interaction with Alton occurred within view of her convoy, the individuals would have occupied different roles. As it was, they met away from the evacuation route, and thus away from the social restraints of the mobile KL. The SS man, unless entirely unobservant, should have noticed two starving KL prisoners in front of him, strangers, like himself, to the area, even in the twilight hours. Away from the KL, it is probable that this SS man did not care who he was talking to, his own presence in the wilderness an indication that he himself may have been fleeing. Nonetheless, without the peer pressure from bloodthirsty comrades, this SS man acted entirely neutrally.

Chapter Two showed that the Camp SS were inherently unremarkable, rarely displaying exceptional traits and frequently succumbing to vices. It is therefore unsurprising that the pressure of the evacuations prompted panic and fear to dictate the behaviour of many SS guards. One common manifestation of this fear was desertion, a problem which was no doubt compounded by the unclear instructions and poor leadership in the evacuation period. Ranz recalled guards disappearing from his convoy when orders were issued for *Panzerfaust* (literally 'tank fist', anti-tank weapons) carriers to move up the column in preparation for encounters with Soviet armour. In referring chiefly to "the older ones" disappearing, it is unclear if Ranz meant the guards who were of an older age or if he meant the guards who had spent more time in the camps with the prisoners.⁷⁰ Either is equally

⁶⁷ CJH, LBI, Memoir Collection, DM 277, Ruth Alton, 'Deported by the Nazis', 53, [Deported by the Nazis. \(cjh.org\)](https://www.cjh.org) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁶⁸ Ibid., 54 and 55-56.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 58.

⁷⁰ Ranz, 'Death March', 26.

feasible; the number of older guards increased significantly as Hitler empowered Himmler to recruit men over the age of 40 into the KL from May 1944. These conscripts were often not officially inducted into the SS and were largely discernible from the Camp SS veterans because the latter were generally wary of the new “necktie soldiers” in their ranks. A key distinction between the new conscripts and the career SS men was the ideological indifference shown by those brought in after May 1944.⁷¹ Equally, unlike the true Camp SS, masculine peer pressure seemed to affect these draftees less. Unlike the KL men who abused and killed to secure their colleagues’ acceptance, a product of Hans Buchheim’s facilitatory camaraderie and the National Socialist *Männerstaat*, mentioned in Chapter Three, the generally more mature and unmotivated conscripts cared little for belonging to the SS’ collective which often diluted their violence.

Such a lack of passion for SS service was displayed by Hugo Behncke, a 56-year-old draftee working in a Neuengamme satellite camp in early 1945, who wrote his wife a letter emphasising his lack of dedication to the Camp SS’ function: “Today I’m on duty from 10 to 12, though without anyone relieving me and without the NCO, so I’ll be able to cut a few corners... In the SS, everything apart from breathing is forbidden, but if you don’t break a few rules, you’re not a soldier”.⁷² In spite of evidence that many old conscripts were not formally granted SS rank and were disinterested in SS values, these guards should be viewed equal to their career counterparts as they both served the same purpose and committed crimes against prisoners during this period. The lack of morale amongst the draftee KL guards surely played a role in desertions on the marches. On the other hand, the ‘older’ guards, those who had been in the camps for a long time, were surely aware that they were at greater risk of being identified after the war and took their leave to protect themselves. Both interpretations of Ranz’ words lend further validity to this study’s emphasis upon the mediocrity of the troops of this ‘elite’ organisation.

Other SS guards chose not to desert their post, but their fear manifested itself in other ways. Some of these expressions of fear saw the SS become dependent upon their victims for protection. This was sometimes uncreative, such as the SS’ use of prisoners as physical shields to protect themselves from projectiles. In one such instance, Chayim Gefen and his fellow prisoners were being transported across Germany in open cargo wagons when Allied aircraft attacked their locomotive. Gefen, aware of the irony, wrote that, in the face of the threat, some of “the brave escort soldiers

⁷¹ Blatman, *Death Marches*, 371-380.

⁷² BUL, The Nazi Concentration Camps Website, Document 27, “Letter by Guard Hugo Behncke to his Wife, 28 January 1945”, [Documents | The Nazi Concentration Camps \(bbk.ac.uk\)](https://www.bbk.ac.uk/documents/the-nazi-concentration-camps) [Accessed 2 June 2023] See also Blatman, *Death Marches*, 371-378 for further information on the intake of older conscripts into the SS from mid-1944.

ordered us to lie on top of them, and thus to save their lives with our bodies".⁷³ The SS, who had long touted the worthlessness of the Jew and had subscribed to the vehement antisemitic messages of *Der Stürmer* and films like *Der ewige Jude* now found themselves cowering beneath their long-suffering victims for safety. This did not mean that the SS viewed the prisoners as any less worthless than they had done hitherto, but their willingness to be buried amongst, and owe their survival to, Jews demonstrated a radical departure from acceptable SS conduct.

Some guards did utilise more cunning methods, however, including efforts to hide their SS identity. Prisoner Andrew Romay noticed that a band of SS who arrived at Mauthausen, shortly after his own convoy had arrived, had swapped their own uniforms for *Afrika Korps* outfits salvaged from Erwin Rommel's North African campaign.⁷⁴ SS guards on Ruth Alton's convoy were only recognisable by their caps and their guns; the SS men wore striped prisoner attire whilst the female *SS-Helferin* dressed as civilians. Alton's observation was that the SS knew "that 'it's five minutes before midnight' and feel that they can save themselves at the last minute in this kind of dress".⁷⁵ This again showed that although the SS were trying to translate the longstanding guard-prisoner relationship from the camps into the mobile KL, they were now relying on their victims to guarantee their survival. Whilst the SS escorting Olga Lengyel away from Auschwitz were not in disguise, they displayed a similar concern for themselves which destabilised the evacuation convoy. One morning, Lengyel wrote, "we had hardly formed our row when the first five ranks ahead of us, led by the SS, moved off separately. Cries to halt were shouted at them, but this dissident group continued determinedly".⁷⁶ Fracturing the transport, and leading a vanguard of prisoners, these SS had been too impatient to wait for the whole convoy to prepare. Knowing that the Soviets were behind them, these guards took the prisoners nearest to them and set off. In their ill-disciplined panic, the SS created a gap between the two sections of the convoy which Lengyel and others capitalised upon to escape.

The transforming relationship between some SS guards and their prisoners may well have contributed to the SS' declining striking power. Undoubtedly, as alluded to by a Buchenwald prisoner mentioned earlier, a small number of SS could physically force their will upon prisoners, but their actions showed that their confidence was shaken during the evacuation period. This faltering self-assurance can be seen in several elements of SS behaviour during the evacuation period. There were instances where the Camp SS showed a hesitance to kill in situations where they were expected to.

⁷³ CJH, LBI, Chayim Gefen, 'My Life', 14.

⁷⁴ CJH, LBI, Memoir Collection, ME 998, Andrew Romay, untitled memoir [1944-1945], 7, [No title : \[1944-1945\]. \(cjh.org\)](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁷⁵ CJH, LBI, Ruth Alton, 'Deported by the Nazis', 55.

⁷⁶ Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 217.

Collapsed death march prisoners were not to be left behind, prompting the SS to shoot them most of the time, but some guards, like those in Alton's convoy, chose not to pull the trigger. In April 1945, on a months-long death march starting at Auschwitz, Judith Altmann's fellow prisoners begged SS men to shoot emaciated women who collapsed while walking to save their suffering. Whilst the SS would sometimes acquiesce, they mostly refrained and left them behind.⁷⁷ During Gertrude Deak's evacuation from Auschwitz-Birkenau, she collapsed shortly before the Allies reached her convoy. Deak's testimony emphasises that the SS "knew that the end was near", which likely contributed to how an SS guard reacted to her falling over. Her testimony describes the guard kicking her a few times before announcing that "she is no longer worth a bullet" and moving on.⁷⁸ Ruth Foster, in a different evacuation convoy, crawled into a ditch with two friends when they became exhausted. The guard who spotted them announced that "they're not worth a bullet" and walked away.⁷⁹

The identical language used by both guards is important to these interactions. At first glance, it would appear these guards sincerely viewed the prisoners as worthless, so bereft of value that the use of a bullet to finish them would amount to a complete waste. This itself was a crucial narrative for these potential perpetrators to create; in using disparaging language, these guards would not risk shunning from their colleagues. This supposed intention to cause emotional hurt and prolonged suffering as well as claiming munition frugality is not convincing. There was little else for the guards to preserve ammunition for; were they to be caught by the Allies, surrender would be more likely to ensure survival than armed resistance. It appears far more likely that these guards chose to try and save face by berating their victims, an essential consideration in the competitive social environment the SS colleagues were a part of, whilst internally acknowledging that it favoured their own future not to participate in murder if it could be avoided. It is particularly notable that the excuse that their victims were not worth the use of ammunition was also used in the pre-war camps where guards sought to cover avoidance of murder for fear of repercussions with hateful bluster.⁸⁰ Logically, the evacuation guards experienced a similar inhibition. In similar displays of hesitation, the SS

⁷⁷ *Freie Universität Berlin*, Universitätsbibliothek/Center für Digitale System, Interview-Archiv "Zwangsarbeit 1939-1945: Erinnerungen und Geschichte", Judith Altmann Interview, [Interview za570 | Interview Archive „Forced Labor 1939-1945“ \(zwangsarbeit-archiv.de\) \[Accessed 2 June 2023\]](#)

⁷⁸ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account by Gertrude Deak, Szombathely, of anti-Jewish measures in Hungary, Birkenau concentration camp, slave labour, a death march and liberation, 17.

⁷⁹ Testimony of Ruth Foster in Smith, *Forgotten Voices*, 255.

⁸⁰ Imprisoned in Dachau and Buchenwald in 1938, Paul Martin Neurath once observed a 72-year-old prisoner reply with the affirmative when an SS guard asked if he wanted to be shot in the head. Perhaps surprised by this, the SS guard retreated from the threat and said "costs about a nickel. You aren't worth that much". P.M. Neurath, *The Society of Terror: Inside the Dachau and Buchenwald Concentration Camps* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2005), 75. Similarly, as mentioned in Chapter Three, inaugural Dachau commandant, Hilmar Wäckerle told Communist Hans Beimler that he was not worth a bullet in 1933 when the commandant could not overtly execute prisoners without crafting a cover story. See H. Beimler, *Four Weeks in the Hands of Hitler's Hell-Hounds: The Nazi Murder Camp of Dachau* (New York: Workers' Library Publishers, 1933), 38.

occasionally chose not to kill evacuated prisoners when they frenzied and broke ranks, generally in areas where the starving detected food. Kitty Hart-Moxon's convoy marching from Gross-Rosen overwhelmed German civilians with goods carts and, in the process, evidenced their guards' shattered confidence. She wrote that "ten thousand women suddenly overran this area, and the soldiers couldn't shoot because of the civilians around".⁸¹ Fear of hitting civilians and, surely, anxiety about committing atrocities in public rendered the SS toothless in this situation.

In some instances, the SS even showed their fractured confidence when facing noncompliance from prisoners. The prisoners of Falkensee, a Sachsenhausen subcamp, outrightly refused to assemble for evacuation as the Red Army approached Berlin. Prisoner Peter Fahron's account of events stated that the SS attempted to shoot into the camp from the outside resulting in a few deaths but that they disappeared before the Russians arrived.⁸² Buchenwald's final days saw similar SS apprehension. Survivor Eugen Kogon reported that after the SS called out a list of prisoners to be executed, the condemned went into hiding within the camp. The camp's underground resistance movement agreed to boycott rollcalls in what was essentially "an open declaration of war", after which, having realised the prisoners' determination, the SS only risked entering the camp during the night if they were heavily armed.⁸³ Both in Falkensee and Buchenwald the SS showed that they were demoralised and, essentially, disinterested in forcing the traditional guard-prisoner relationship to restabilise. Accepting that the prisoners were defiant, the SS, in both instances, behaved as if they were at a disadvantage despite being militarily trained, well-armed quasi soldiers contending with starving, debilitated, and overwhelmingly civilian prisoners. It is unclear whether the prisoners at Falkensee had stockpiled arms, but at Buchenwald the underground had put together a large supply of munitions, yet the SS should still have been the superior force by quite some distance. The October Revolt in Birkenau showed that prisoners could cause chaos and kill SS guards when they caught them by surprise, but equally it evidenced that the SS could swiftly crush resistance efforts. It is probable that, as the Falkensee and Buchenwald situations occurred in April 1945, the SS' capacity to dominate groups of potentially armed prisoners had disintegrated over this critical six-month period as their morale faded and potential for reinforcements had gone. Nonetheless, these scenarios evidence that the SS' relationship with prisoners could change significantly in this period; the power balance had been upset and it was the SS who found themselves feeling powerless. In choosing to reject the chance to punish those who defied them, through favouring self-preservation,

⁸¹ Testimony of Kitty Hart-Moxon in Smith, *Forgotten Voices*, 256-257.

⁸² WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account by Peter Fahron, Düsseldorf, of his arrest in 1934, Sachsenhausen and Falkensee concentration camps, 4.

⁸³ E. Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 276-277.

these SS guards inadvertently showed that their confidence was shot and that they could no longer dominate their victims effectively.

The numerous themes discussed here show the vast differences between how the members of the Camp SS reacted to pressure at the end of the war. There were indeed instances where SS attitudes softened leading to positive behavioural adjustments which improved their prisoners' prospects of survival. The change in environment from the camps to the road appears to have allowed guards, who were so inclined, to find privacy and circumnavigate the peer pressure to abuse prisoners. Some guards were completely overwhelmed by the KL's collapse and sought to escape the repercussions of their actions. Some simply escaped, forgoing their duty to Himmler, endeavouring to erase their SS involvement overnight. Others who were overwhelmed refused the temptation to flee and continued to devalue the lives of prisoners to guarantee their own survival which remained their chief priority. The most pervasive impact of the pressure of defeat on the Camp SS was the waning self-assurance that was brought by uncertainty for the future. SS guards showed that they struggled to cope in situations where their prisoners inherited the confidence that they had lost. Because the reaction of the guards to the KL's collapse was so varied, it is difficult to apply conclusions to the entire organisation. What can be stated with certainty is that the guards coped poorly during the evacuation period which again evidenced their propensity to fail in their duty.

SS Massacres at the End of the War

Chapters Four and Five showed the increasing savagery of the SS within the KL as the war progressed and this was further evidenced by massacres in the late war period. Mass murders during the evacuations are particularly important to consider since, earlier in time, the SS leadership had introduced *Zyklon B* gas to the camps to minimise the emotional impact of exterminations upon the guards. The SS' willingness to slaughter prisoners with conventional weaponry so near to the end of their service thus warrants some examination. Unfortunately, because these largescale killings were often thorough, there are relatively few survivor testimonies available to consult, somewhat limiting the scope of conclusions that can be drawn from the bloodshed. Nonetheless, they were a key element of the evacuations which must be considered. Before moving on, it is necessary to clarify the term used here; a mass murder can be defined here as any situation where any number of SS guards killed 10 or more victims in one outburst of violence. Wachsmann has considered mass murders carried out during the evacuations to be the exception rather than the norm.⁸⁴ As the extreme variety in SS response to the KL's collapse showed, the 'norm' was difficult to define during the evacuations. Mass murders were more infrequent than the relentless occurrences of individual

⁸⁴ Wachsmann, *KL*, 589.

murder, but instances of large groups being killed were common enough to consider them a significant aspect of the death marches. The following analysis of several examples of mass murder committed by the Camp SS during the evacuation phase help to better understand the motivations of their perpetrators.

In January 1945, in the face of the Soviet advance, the SS decided to evacuate prisoners from Stutthof's most easterly subcamps, which were in East Prussia, past Königsberg (Kaliningrad today). The eventual destination was the coastal settlement of Palmnicken (Yantarny today), 25 miles from Königsbergs. The exact number of prisoners involved is disputed but Rudolf Folger, a witness to the SS' arrival and ensuing discussion with local authorities, testified that an *SS-Obersturmführer* Fritz Weber claimed he had been ordered to transport 5,000 Jews.⁸⁵ The death march was escorted by at least 20 SS guards and around 120 foreign auxiliaries.⁸⁶ Thus, within the ranks of the perpetrators the SS comprised a minority, albeit a minority which dictated events. About 3,000 prisoners survived the journey and arrived on the coast on 27 January. Along the road, between 1,500 and 2,000 prisoners lost their lives in what appeared to be a typically destructive eastern death march. Survivor Dora Hauptman claimed that the prisoners were forbidden from walking and had to run, with guards shooting victims regularly.⁸⁷ A combination of Palmnicken witness statements and Soviet reports reveal more about the treatment of prisoners on the road. One civilian, Franz Fogel, informed Soviets that "the road [to town] was littered not only with bodies, but also covered with pools of blood and skull fragments". This was corroborated by another civilian, Bruno Kreck, who also claimed the road was "covered with pools of blood".⁸⁸ A Soviet military report commented on the condition of 86 KL prisoners' bodies found near Palmnicken, including 80 women between 20 and 40 years of age. The report stated that "the cranium of each body exhibited marks of bullet wounds, with extensive areas of the skull splintered. The bodies exhibited numerous injuries in the extremities and the chest, which indicates their having been shot point-blank with automatic

⁸⁵ Testimony of Rudolf Folger from *Zentralarchiv*, Ludwigsberg in M. Bergau, *Todesmarsch zur Bernsteinküste: Das Massaker an Juden im ostpreußischen Palmnicken im Januar 1945* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), 30. Note that Bergau does not give precise archival details. The figure of 5,000 is supported in Blatman, *Death Marches*, 118. Note that in A. Kossert, "'Endlösung on the 'Amber Shore'": The Massacre in January 1945 on the Baltic Seashore – A Repressed Chapter of East Prussian History', *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 49:1 (2004) 3-21, 4 the number given is 7,000 and the memorial organisation 'Liberation Route' gives the far higher figure of 13,000. *Liberation Route Europe*, "The Massacre of Palmnicken", [The massacre of Palmnicken \(liberationroute.com\)](http://liberationroute.com) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

⁸⁶ Bergau, *Todesmarsch*, 21.

⁸⁷ Testimony of Dora Hauptman from *Central Archive of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation* (CAMDRF), Collection 303, Records Section 4021, File 199 and *Yad Vashem Archives*, M-40/MAP/86, in S. Krakowski, 'Massacre of Jewish Prisoners on the Samland Peninsula – Documents', *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. XXIV, 349-387, 365.

⁸⁸ Testimonies of Franz Fogel and Bruno Kreck from CAMDRF, Collection of the Rifle Division of the Guards No. 32, Records Section 1, File 24, 46 in *ibid.*, 377-379.

weapons”.⁸⁹ These documents show that guards on this march committed especially bloody executions, utilising assault rifles or submachine guns to shoot young women at very close range. Soviet Major General Vasilii Danilov wrote a report on the condition of 263 corpses found in another grave near Palmnicken. The report repeated findings relating to point blank shootings with automatic weaponry, but it added details which implied many women had been sexually assaulted. Danilov wrote that “the undergarments of some of the young women’s bodies were torn up and pulled down to their thighs, whereas some bodies of the women were found in the posture of cynical abuse, their legs pulled behind their heads, without any undergarments”.⁹⁰ Clearly, the march from the Stutthof subcamps was itself conducted in terrible conditions with the guards brutally executing prisoners and humiliating women gruesomely.

Upon reaching Palmnicken, the SS wished to quickly remobilise the prisoners to leave, without regard for their condition. Palmnicken’s mayor, Kurt Friedrichs, supported the SS in their endeavour as he did not want KL prisoners in the town. Friedrichs subsequently mustered between 50 and 100 HJ teenagers to help in managing the thousands of KL undesirables in the area. The complicity of these youths in the massacre that occurred in Palmnicken was discussed in Chapter One. The local *Volkssturm* leader, Hans Feyerabend, endeavoured to protect the prisoners from the SS which temporarily derailed the SS’ murderous plans. It is interesting that the SS did not choose to overpower the *Volkssturm*, as Palmnicken HJ and *Volkssturm* member Martin Bergau described the latter as “so poorly trained they wouldn’t have been able to put up any resistance whatsoever if they’d encountered an active enemy unit”.⁹¹ These SS may have stopped short of attacking fellow Germans but with Friedrichs’ support for their plans it is unclear why they did not try to disarm and dismiss the reportedly disorganised *Volkssturm*. The SS were again showing that, akin to the Falkensee and Buchenwald examples above, when met with a measure of firm resistance, their determination to act could be suppressed. On 30 January, Feyerabend died, reportedly through suicide, which broke the spine of the *Volkssturm*’s passive resistance to the SS efforts to abuse prisoners in the town. Whilst in town the SS made use of an abandoned mine nearby and shot prisoners two at time, utilising the HJ as helpers in this gradual annihilation of the evacuees.

On the night of 31 January, the SS led the remaining 3,000 prisoners out of town to the beach where they executed the entire convoy with automatic weaponry. The haste with which the SS conducted this extermination led to many prisoners only being wounded and left to freeze on the sand and in

⁸⁹ Soviet Commission Report from CAMDRF, Collection 32, Records Section 11302, File 284 in *ibid.*, 370.

⁹⁰ Report from Major General Danilov entitled “On the Atrocities of the Germans Against Soviet Citizens in the Township of Kraxteppelin” from CAMDRF, Collection 32, Records Section 11302, File 284, in *ibid.*, 371-372.

⁹¹ Testimony of Martin Bergau from *Yad Vashem Archives*, doc. 033/3563, in *ibid.*, 352.

the sea.⁹² Dora Hauptman was one of the few who fell into the sea and survived, having been shot through the hand.⁹³ There is no apparent explanation for why the guards chose to eliminate the prisoners at Palmnicken. Had the SS doubted the prisoners' capacity to march further at speed, they could have abandoned them in the area. The decision to carry out a massacre, on top of the other merciless crimes committed on the way to Palmnicken, suggests that these SS guards were not fatigued by constant murdering in the KL, but, rather, relished it. The prisoners in Palmnicken were overwhelmingly comprised of Jewish women which was undoubtedly a contributing factor to the SS' handling of the situation. Bearing in mind that there were many Eastern Europeans amongst the SS auxiliaries, whose antisemitism often rivalled and sometimes surpassed the Nazis, and a significant presence of HJ who were taught to be vehemently intolerant of Jews, there were clearly few in uniform who recognised Jewish life as valuable. The raping of many of the women whose bodies were found in mass graves gives further credence to themes discussed previously in this thesis; the SS were hypocritical and often displayed behaviours which their organisation officially proscribed. Though Hauptman's testimony does not clarify whether the SS or the foreign men were the more vicious killers or more prolific sexual attackers, on other marches survivors have observed that the foreign assistants were extremely violent. For instance, Saul Raimi referred to Ukrainian SS auxiliaries during the evacuations as "the most vicious beasts... they were out to kill every Jew they could get".⁹⁴ However, the German SS were the senior party involved at Palmnicken and should have been able to quell the most explicit abuses if they were not the main perpetrators themselves. The numerous Soviet post-mortem reports suggest, however, that no efforts were made to curtail the vicious attacks on the march. Moreover, it seems likely that the SS' inferior numbers, compared to the auxiliaries, was in fact a benefit for them. The SS were granted the ability to hide in plain sight and could conveniently blend in with the mass of foreign perpetrators during the thousands of murders that they carried out.

Geographically, Palmnicken offered very dim prospects for withdrawal to the SS due to its location on the Samland Peninsula, northeast of Königsberg; the SS were undeniably in an extremely precarious position. Surely aware of the Soviet handling of Majdanek's liberation in July 1944, and of their brutal treatment of SS captives, the guards at Palmnicken would have feared capture if they doubled back. Yet this massacre predated Himmler's 15 April order forbidding prisoners to fall into enemy hands, so, whilst still a heavily discouraged course of action, the prisoners could have been left for the USSR as the guards made their escape. In fact, 15 April was the date that the Soviets

⁹² Kossert, *Endösung*, 15-16.

⁹³ Testimony of Dora Hauptman in Krakowski, 'Massacre of Jewish Prisoners', 365.

⁹⁴ USC, Shoah Foundation, VHA, Testimony of Saul Raimi, segment 96-97, [Saul Raimi - Testimony | VHA \(usc.edu\)](#) [Accessed 5 April 2023]

eventually captured Palmnicken, meaning that the SS had plenty of time to plan their getaway. Whether the SS knew that they had time to spare is unclear. If they were unsure, it would have still served their escape well to leave thousands of living prisoners alive as they would have slowed the Soviet vanguard. If the Soviets proved to be weeks behind them, hundreds or thousands of the starving prisoners would have died of hunger and sickness anyway, neglected by the HJ and the mayor; if the Red Army was close then the triage required would have bought the SS time to reach safety. It seems that the only perceivable benefit, to the guards at least, in shooting the prisoners was a final victory in the SS uniform, a chance to categorically ensure that there would be 3,000 fewer Jews in the world.

There were other SS mass murders in the evacuation which ought to be considered here. On 13 April 1945, on the outskirts of Gardelegen, in Saxony, 1,016 prisoners were burnt alive and shot in a barn by the SS, with HJ and *Volkssturm* support, as they slept during a march from Mittelbau-Dora. Aimé Bonifas' fellow evacuation convoy escapee, named Amaro, was caught by the SS and sent to Gardelegen where he survived the massacre. Amaro later told Bonifas that the SS had trained machine guns on the exits to the barn, ushered out German and Polish prisoners, leaving many French and other foreign nationals inside to be killed. The SS then reportedly used incendiary grenades to ignite the barn and did not shoot unless prisoners pushed for the exits. Amaro survived by being smothered by bodies, protecting him from the flames; he claimed that only 10 inmates came out alive.⁹⁵ Amaro's claim that the SS showed preferential treatment to Polish prisoners over the French is unusual, based on their ethnic prejudice. Presuming Amaro's observation was correct, the Gardelegen murderers' choice to protect Slavs again illustrates the muddling of SS ideology at the end.

There are some similarities and differences to the Palmnicken example which warrant consideration. Firstly, at Gardelegen there was a non-SS decision maker influencing events; local *Kreisleiter* (district leader) Gerhard Thiele whipped up public furore by exploiting rumours that escaped prisoners had looted and raped in the countryside.⁹⁶ Thiele thus played a similar role to Friedrichs in facilitating the murders that were to occur. Also, like at Palmnicken, the SS were a minority within the perpetrators, but, as the party responsible for the prisoners' wellbeing, they were able to prevent the massacre if they so wished. The HJ played an active role in orchestrating the deaths of these prisoners, their participation was discussed in Chapter One, highlighting that even young men were willing to put themselves at risk by murdering so near to the war's end. Conversely, unlike at Palmnicken, the local

⁹⁵ A. Bonifas, *Prisoner 20-801* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 130-131.

⁹⁶ I. Kershaw, *The End: Germany 1944-1945* (London: Penguin, 2011), 333.

Volkssturm aligned themselves with the SS and participated in the murdering. A critically important difference to note between these massacres was that the Gardelegen march was not overwhelmingly comprised of Jews like at Palmnicken. Whilst 711 victims were never identified, a small number of Jewish prisoners were found amongst the identifiable corpses and buried under a Star of David.⁹⁷ Goldhagen emphasises that at places like Gardelegen, the SS acted against their own interests by bloodying their hands so near to Germany's capitulation.⁹⁸ This is an especially relevant point at Gardelegen wherein the SS left behind a significant number of civilian co-conspirators who, after calming from their murderous frenzy, could pose a threat to the SS by shifting the blame entirely to them. Considering the above, there is obviously significant overlap between how the Palmnicken and Gardelegen massacres came about. However, what seemed to be the main catalyst for Palmnicken, the prisoners' Jewish identity, was significantly less important to the Gardelegen massacre. It is logical to suppose that the SS thus conducted massacres for numerous reasons at the end of the war and were more wont to do so when they had external support and the ability to blend into a wider body of perpetrators.

This chapter will briefly consider two more massacres, both lesser known than the Palmnicken and Gardelegen examples. The first was discovered by evacuee Arthur Lehmann and other prisoners whilst being transported from Auschwitz subcamp Laurahütte to Mauthausen in late January 1945. Along the route, Lehmann's train stopped due to a blockage on the tracks which prompted the SS to take several prisoners to fetch food from nearby farmsteads whilst the track was cleared. Nearby, however, the SS and the prisoners discovered a deserted goods train on an adjacent track and called Lehmann and the other prisoners over. Lehmann described the scene they came across: "Strewn all around it were all kinds of remains – ragged prisoners' clothes, some items of uniform, steel SS helmets and caps – and everything was stained with blood. There were also broken rifles... all kinds of camp books, some new, some used, from which some sections had apparently been torn out".⁹⁹ Lehmann explained that the SS leader of his convoy ascertained that their discovery was an evacuation transport which had been attacked by partisans. The presence of SS helmets and weaponry amongst the debris would seemingly support this conclusion. However, prisoners from Lehmann's convoy found two sick Jews in one of the abandoned carriages who died shortly after being found. According to Lehmann, the two survivors claimed that:

⁹⁷ Blatman, *Death Marches*, 347.

⁹⁸ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 369.

⁹⁹ WL, Testimonies, Eyewitness account by Arthur Lehmann of transports from Laurahütte to Mauthausen concentration camp and labour camps in Gusen and Hanover, 1.

Their transport of some 1,000 Jews had been killed by the accompanying SS. Some were killed in the carriages, and the rest, who had to drag the dead into the woods and make the scene appear as if they had been attacked, exactly as we had come across it, were then slaughtered in the woods. The SS then moved out after this had been done.¹⁰⁰

The two Jewish witnesses dispelled the idea that partisans were involved in the massacre whatsoever. Rather, the SS had manipulated the scene of their crime and left SS equipment amongst the bodies to portray themselves as victims in a bloodbath that they had in fact orchestrated. It is impossible to know the motivation for this massacre, chiefly because Lehmann's testimony does not give us more detail and the two survivors died shortly after, but the SS had made extensive efforts to try to cover their tracks.

The second lesser-known massacre occurred at Ohrdruf, a Buchenwald subcamp, prior to the U.S. 3rd Army's arrival on 4 April 1945. The camp populace was not entirely exterminated; estimates suggest that around 3,000 prisoners were murdered or died from exhaustion in the first months of 1945. Approximately 13,000 others were sent on a death march to Buchenwald, during which around 1,000 were killed by a familiar triumvirate of perpetrators; the SS; local *Volkssturm* men; HJ members.¹⁰¹ Those who were killed before even leaving the camp – exact figures are difficult to find but survivors claimed “thousands” – were mostly Jewish.¹⁰² William DeHuszar, a Hungarian attached to the U.S. Army, wrote about the scenes at Ohrdruf when the Allies arrived after the SS massacre. He recalled seeing “some 20 men machine-gunned and still laying [sic] in their blood. The Germans herded them into a pile just before we came. Gruesome and terrible sight”.¹⁰³ The massacre, it seems, was carried out in a rush and, from DeHuszar's account, it appears that the SS were in the process of trying to destroy the evidence in a burning pyre. This viewpoint was supported by General George Patton who was amongst the first Americans to see Ohrdruf. In his diary he said:

The Germans thought it expedient to remove the evidence of their crime. Therefore, they had some of the slaves exhume the bodies and place them on a mammoth griddle composed of 60-centimeter railway tracks laid on brick foundations... They were not very successful in their operations because

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰¹ *Gedenkstätte Buchenwald*, “Aussenlager Ohrdruf”, [Ohrdruf als Zeuge nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen. - Gedenkstätte Buchenwald](#) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

¹⁰² Bauer, ‘The Death-Marches, January-May, 1945’, 14.

¹⁰³ M. DeHuszar Allen, ‘The WWII Diary of a Former Hungarian Refugee in US Army Military Intelligence: A Study in Intransigence’, *Law & Literature*, 29:1 (2017), 99-107, 102.

there was a pile of human bones, skulls, charred torsos on or under the griddle which must have accounted for many hundreds.¹⁰⁴

Both the extermination discovered between Laurahütte and Mauthausen and the Ohrdruf massacre show that the SS opted to slaughter prisoners in situations wherein it was easier for them to abandon them alive. Their efforts to cover their tracks, absent from the Palmnicken and Gardelegen examples, reveal that they were completely aware, and in fear, of the potential repercussions of their actions. This anxiety about their exterminations being discovered did not supersede their determination to murder hundreds of victims. Equally, the SS may have calculated that eliminating their prisoners was the safest way to protect their own futures. Removing all witnesses promised anonymity and goes some way to explaining why these two massacres and their events are less well-known.

This section has shown that mass murders during the evacuations had different motivations and were handled by the perpetrators differently. At first glance hatred for prisoners was critical in incentivising the SS to prevent their victims surviving the KL; antisemitism was an immensely powerful catalyst for outbursts of SS violence. Yet, as Gardelegen showed, the SS were susceptible to massacring prisoners who, ideologically speaking, inspired less hatred than the Jew. The SS were emboldened when they were supported by other perpetrators or by civilians who shared their outlook. This theme has been seen before in this chapter; if the SS received a negative reception or faced resistance, their behaviour tended to be more reserved. They were also essentially opportunistic and committed mass murder when the risks to themselves were minimal. When the guards were not hidden amongst a broader body of perpetrators, they showed more anxiety about being connected to their crimes. Entirely aware of the illegality of their actions, the SS hoped that in removing all witnesses and evidence they could protect themselves. Furthermore, most SS guards evacuating prisoners were keen to be free of their burden and in each of the examples above, exterminating the prisoners could free the SS from a race against the Allies, from KL service, and from possible retribution from witnesses to their crimes. Ultimately, the factors discussed played varying roles in the massacres of the evacuation period, but the opportunism of the SS was the most pervasive. At the very last, when their SS careers were drawing to a close, the guards exploited the chaos of the marches to kill thousands of people who were so near to freedom.

Conclusion

¹⁰⁴ *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Website*, "Ohrdruf", [Ohrdruf | Holocaust Encyclopedia \(ushmm.org\)](https://www.ushmm.org) [Accessed 2 June 2023]

The SS' management of the evacuation period was extremely negligent and showed failures in both preparation and execution. The SS leadership, chiefly the WVHA, deserve a significant share of the blame for the disastrous outcomes of many evacuations, particularly the especially deadly eastern death marches. However, the traditionally recalcitrant commandants, and their guards, would have abused and killed even if the WVHA had not tried to shift accountability for the evacuations onto the HSSPFs. On the marches, the SS guards innovated and implemented localised rules which showed that the guards sought the purpose that enforcing the KL guidelines had given them and that they sought pretexts to kill and abuse on the road. The similarity between the rules that the SS enforced on the marches showed that the guards proved themselves to be more than competent at improvising when it came to protecting the original punitive function of the camps. That the rules of the road were so alike between different marches suggests either that unknown orders existed which the numerous SS marches adhered to in relation to discipline, or, more likely, that SS guards were able to innovate remarkably similarly when working. The guards were too temperamental to follow guidelines that were not enforceable from above but after years of service in the KL, it is believable that, from experience, the shrewd guards were smart enough to evolve their abuse to suit the road.

This chapter has shown that the KL's collapse prompted different responses from SS men across the KL with vastly different emotions influencing their handling of the evacuations. The examination in this chapter is not exhaustive; human reactions to immense pressure are too diverse to analyse completely. What can be seen from the examination above is that the SS guards were unreliable throughout the final year of the war. This should not come as a shock when one considers that this study has shown that the SS guards were not elite men who could realistically be expected to endure fears of attack or capture whilst operating professionally. Nor were the SS guards immune to vices like self-interest and sadism. The mass murders during the evacuations evidenced the SS' ability to succumb to their lust for violence and to act both predatorily and opportunistically. It appears illogical that the SS would push aside their interest in reaching the end of the war without dirtying their hands further and choose to commit mass murder, but this underlines the extent of their hatred and enjoyment of suffering. At times these murders were followed by desperate efforts to hide the evidence, showing the SS were fearful of repercussions, but this fear could not protect the KL inmates from guards who wished to support the mission of the SS, or simply sate their own urges, through to the end. In summary, the evacuation phase was the final deadly chapter in the development of the behaviour of the KL guards. Poorly led, highly independent, and demoralised men marched thousands of innocent people across the Third Reich, showing their victims that, until the very last, tolerance still meant weakness.

Conclusion

Over the six preceding chapters, this thesis has made an important scholarly contribution to understanding the lifespan of the KL from the perspective of the Camp SS who developed along with the system they served. In the process, four main conclusions have been reached. It is useful to briefly identify them prior to exploring them in more depth below. Firstly, the thesis has consistently shown that the men in the concentration camps were independent thinkers who pushed against restrictions placed upon their conduct and whose mastery of their craft made them difficult to manage for their superiors. However, Theodor Eicke appeared to understand how to endear himself to the camp guards in a manner which secured their loyalty and somewhat improved their obedience. The cruciality of Eicke's role in developing the Camp SS and the KL thus forms this study's second main conclusion. The third key inference from the preceding discussions is that other KL leaders were unable to control the camp guards effectively, undermined in their efforts by continual missteps in administering the system. Lastly, and more surprisingly, this thesis has shown that the response of the Camp SS to the hallowed *Führerprinzip* was very complex, seeing a great many of the KL guards, and their officers, choosing to apply it selectively.

More specifically, though acknowledging that they were not independently responsible for the creation of the Camp SS perpetrators, Chapter One presented several background themes which could influence German men who found themselves in the KL. The education systems of the early twentieth century were underpinned by the enshrining of military values and nationalistic thinking which regularly escalated into xenophobia and, eventually, outright racism under the Nazis. Once the HJ grew in significance within the youth group scene, young German males were under immense pressure to accept the Nazi *Weltanschauung* and to view serving Adolf Hitler in his quest to eradicate undesirable elements within society as a noble cause that one should aspire to contribute to. It is also clear that the Weimar Republic years represented a potentially radicalising influence upon male youths and adults. Economic pressure and the social upheaval caused by the era of politicking through street violence were just some of the negative experiences that could encourage men to turn to the National Socialists. After 1933, the Nazi media reinforced the ideas that young Germans had been taught in schools and in the HJ which made it very difficult to avoid and ignore the messages being disseminated. Many were able to recognise the immorality of Nazi ideology – not all Germans grew up to be tools of the National Socialist regime – but children should be seen as Hitler's victims, even those who were corrupted and became convinced believers. There should be no doubt that background factors including experience of education and the chaotic 1920s,

supported by Nazi propaganda, set young men on a trajectory toward militarism and intolerance of the maligned Other in Germany which ultimately left them susceptible to joining particularly vitriolic organisations like the SS.

The second chapter of the study considered at length the true nature of the SS which, because of Heinrich Himmler's bravado and the insidious propaganda machine, was viewed as sitting at the apex of the German military formations and of German society itself. There is no doubt that the 'SS elite' was an illusion and that the Camp SS was an especially poor-quality unit within the wider organisation. Whenever it was feasible, the KL guards exploited their position and engaged in vices and excesses of behaviour. Many of these, such as alcoholism, served to enhance the suffering of their victims whilst others, like their penchant for corruption, hurt their own establishment and undermined its integrity. The inference from this chapter's conclusions should be that the SS leadership could rarely claim to have had their men under control which is especially important to bear in mind when contemplating the KL's operation across its existence. Historians may identify the flaws in the Camp SS' conduct, but this had hitherto not been adequately framed as a key aspect of the failure of the KL management to control day-to-day life in the camps.

Though there was little success from the leadership overall, Chapter Three showed that Eicke was indispensable to the camp system. He fostered warm relations with his men which created a bond between superior and subordinate that was sorely lacking after his departure from the KL. The respect his men showed him, whilst not sufficient to prevent the emergence of the vices considered in the second chapter, allowed for him to centralise the camps without resistance from below. 'Papa Eicke' was trusted, and, because of this, he had, in Himmler's perception, a highly productive period at Dachau and in the IKL. The men bought into his 'tolerance means weakness' mantra and his guidelines gave structure to the previously unrestrained abuses that they inflicted upon their prisoners. Evidently, his popularity made the pseudo-apprenticeship in the 'Dachau School' considerably more attractive to prospective camp abusers. Though the early KL was not subjected to problems caused by the war, like uncontrolled population booms, which admittedly made his successors' job harder, the first IKL chief built solid foundations for Himmler's system. Undoubtedly, the first six years of the KL were crucial in both centralising a system which might have faltered under a less driven leader and in training Camp SS perpetrators, some of whom held senior positions in the KL during the war.

Despite the KL entering the war years operating in an effective manner, Richard Glücks could not build upon the work of his predecessor. Chapter Four ultimately showed that the early war years represented a backwards step for the IKL which faltered and oversaw chaos in the camps. The

inevitable population growth caused by an influx of foreign citizens was mismanaged terribly with overcrowding causing hunger and disease. Capital punishment was introduced to the camps which added to the increasing mortality rate. Himmler's creation of SS courts, independent of the German legal system, demonstrated that the KL was now, in essence, free from the shackles of the law. Death thus became ubiquitous, and the guards adjusted to this, opting to push boundaries to see how much slack they could get from the SS leadership. Essentially, in freeing the KL by detaching it from the outside world, Himmler inadvertently loosened his grip on the Camp SS. Murderers emerged around the KL with cliques like the Sachsenhausen 'Death Squad' killing arbitrarily. Weak leadership from Glücks allowed undisciplined commandants like Karl Koch to behave as they pleased, which tended to include them passing the same freedom down to their guards. In short, the early years of the war saw the KL descend into turmoil, the IKL's control declined, and the guards metamorphosed from cautious abusers into empowered killers.

The calamity of Glücks' administration, which saw the KL death toll rise rapidly, became intolerable as the war caused the German economy to falter. Chapter Five discussed Oswald Pohl's incorporation of the IKL into the WVHA and the ramifications of this upon the camps and their guards. Pohl's plan to shift the system from its destructive function to prioritise productivity failed. Though Pohl was more capable than Glücks, the latter had overseen the growing impotency of the IKL from 1939 to 1942 which could not be reversed. By the time Pohl took over, the commandants had developed a comfortable level of autonomy which equated to the undoing of Eicke's centralising of a uniformed system before the war. As these mid-level leaders were left to their own devices by Glücks, the guards had no connection to the IKL chief as they had done in Eicke's years. Consequently, when Pohl endeavoured to fix the situation, the guards obstinately clung to their familiar methods rather than softening their behaviour. In effect, the Camp SS were still adhering to the Eicke concept of necessary intolerance which, in conjunction with their education and Nazi propaganda, dissuaded a rethinking of how to behave when dealing with Nazi enemies. The logical conclusion from this is that the rank-and-file had more influence over KL policy than its leaders did. Their defiant nature, underlined in Chapter Two, showed that it was very difficult to dominate the guards' will and, as a result, they ensured the continuation of the KL's punitive purpose.

Finally, Chapter Six completed the timeline of the guards' development by assessing their handling of the evacuation period at the end of the war. Once more, the leadership showed their inability to manage KL matters effectively and overlooked the determination of the guards to act independently. Curiously, many guards showed a knack for helping the KL to evolve into a mobile institution which reinforces the idea that they were able to operate autonomously and frequently showed intelligence when it came to abusing prisoners. Nonetheless, in keeping with the

inconsistent nature of the Camp SS, the evacuation guards responded differently to the pressure of Germany's imminent capitulation. Some committed heinous crimes in final outbursts of violence, some fled to hide from retribution and others attempted to embark upon radical character reversals, hoping to convince their victims they were not bad people. Though this phase of the KL's existence requires greater attention in the future, the extant evidence suffices to show that, unsurprisingly, the Camp SS were immensely unreliable until the very end.

Most importantly, throughout, this thesis has shown that the KL guards certainly had more power over the KL's operation than has been acknowledged previously. This owed much to some of the other findings from the study which will be considered momentarily. Generally, the guards were experts in their craft who manipulated the KL guidelines and subverted their own codes of conducts to behave as they pleased. This was central in facilitating the crimes they committed; Karl Röder accurately remarked of the Camp SS that "their behaviour towards us was not regulated by any regulation, if one does not regard absolute arbitrariness as such".¹ Eugen Kogon's assertion that the guards were unintelligent does not account for the vocational smarts that they consistently showed. Through their years of service, the Camp SS were aware of how to abuse prisoners in keeping with the rules. If, however, they acted outside of the remit of their regulations, the guards knew how to protect themselves. The extensive reliance upon the excuse that murdered prisoners were escaping was just one of the tricks they employed to cover their tracks. Though many were ideologically committed to the SS, it did not prevent guards from engaging in black market deals with their victims and pocketing riches. Himmler hated the clandestine theft of Reich property. This loathing contributed to Georg Konrad Morgen's successful prosecution of Koch, but he was never able to suppress the problem because the guards were astute. Their criminal cleverness, which adapted as their environment and rules changed, allowed the SS guards to outmanoeuvre anyone, like Pohl, who sought to reform their behaviour. Moreover, supporting Hans Buchheim's concept of negative camaraderie, the guards influenced and enabled one another's illicit activities. This has been seen regularly in this thesis and should be considered to have been a central element of their socialisation. If an SS man sought to belong to the masculine collective, he would have to indulge in behaviours which harmed prisoners or their own organisation.

Another crucial conclusion reached here is that Eicke was the most indispensable figure in the KL's development. Perhaps driven by the failures in his life before reaching the Camp SS, Eicke was unwaveringly dedicated to Dachau and later to the entire camp system. Johannes Hasebroek, who claimed true friendship existed between Eicke and his men, stated of his old mentor that "we felt a

¹ K. Röder, *Nachtwache: 10 Jahre KZ Dachau und Flossenbürg* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1985), 252.

very personal closeness to him. Each of us needed Eicke, and there was something in his appearance, his behaviour, in the way he worded his orders, that told us that he also needed us. It was a very deep and complex relationship".² Hassebroek's words again indicate that whilst unusual in the KL, Eicke and his subordinates demonstrated the vertical comradeship which Thomas Kühne identified as being common in the *Wehrmacht*. Generally, as has been shown, Camp SS socialisation was better defined by facilitatory camaraderie which was mostly horizontal rather than vertical in nature. Thus, Eicke's efforts were particularly unusual in the KL and were an important part of his unique nature as a binding force in the early camps. The statement from Hassebroek, taken in conjunction with comments from other SS men, as well as Eicke's dominant position in the camp hierarchy, show that the first IKL leader had immense influence over his subordinates. Without him, the KL would certainly have existed, and, surely, it would have seen enemies of Nazism perish by the thousands. However, Eicke's popularity and deep understanding of how to foster a paternal relationship with his young zealots ensured that until he left the camps, they developed according to his own script. The Eicke camps, like their staff, were hard and unforgiving, in these sites the will of the SS was put into action by men who believed in their leader. These men then left the early camps, in particularly high numbers from the sites that were replaced, such as Lichtenburg, and transferred across the system bringing Eicke's methods to places like Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. This put the KL in a strong position going into the war years and, had he been replaced by a competent administrator, his effective management might have been built upon. Despite the SS' failure to adequately protect Eicke's legacy, much of it endured until 1945. His guidelines and his 'tolerance means weakness' ethos gave direction to the guards until the war's end which warrants the assertion that even in his absence he ruled the SS camp system.

By contrast, other senior figures within the KL were unable, or unwilling, to contribute to the system's development. At the top, Glücks preferred to be left to his own devices which ultimately led to the guards being left to theirs. He chose to be what Eicke had determinedly avoided becoming, a 'pencil-pusher'. Pohl was committed to reforming the camps and, despite lacking the charisma of Eicke, sincerely tried to make an economic success of the KL. However, the slack leadership of Glücks had infected commandants and made Pohl's mission extremely difficult. Even the most fervid camp leaders, like Rudolf Höss, were prone to allowing their guards to behave arbitrarily without doing much to keep them under control. Others like Koch, once a trusted lieutenant to Eicke who later embraced corruption and the application of random terror, actively enjoyed the barbarous behaviour of their subordinates, and joined them in their abuses. As a

² Johannes Hassebroek interview in T. Segev, *Soldiers of Evil: The Commandants of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 117.

vacuum of effective leadership opened in the war years, guards were able to exploit the growing slack they were given to act however they pleased. This was a key contributor to the murderous deeds perpetrated by the Camp SS; their background experiences, including education, gave them reason to hate, their service in the SS put them in the position to abuse, and the failing leadership granted them freedom to kill without fear of consequences. Logic dictates that had Glücks' leadership of the IKL not been so inactive, or had Eicke retained the role of camp inspector, the commandants who behaved the worst would have been monitored better which, in turn, should have tempered their guards' erraticism.

The main unexpected revelation from this study, which ties somewhat to the above discussion, is the discovery that the *Führerprinzip* was a more peculiar concept than appeared to be the case. In theory, the leadership principle was straightforward; Germans were taught to obey their superiors and accept orders given to them without querying their purpose or meaning. The SS, along with other military outfits, treated the *Führerprinzip* with an especially high degree of reverence. This principle was to be the fundamental glue between the ranks which ensured efficiency and discipline. Within the KL this was particularly useful; seemingly difficult and mentally damaging tasks would be made easier by the subordinate's trusting of his superior's judgement, helping the camp system to operate correctly. In practice, in the KL at least, the *Führerprinzip* was unable to keep the rank-and-file under control. The guards were willing to adhere to it when the orders they were given were not overly problematic for them. They would kill men, women, and children in the name of the leadership principle because, for many guards, these actions were not too troublesome. However, the guards were willing to avoid respecting the concept of blind obedience when they felt an alternative suited them better. For instance, in the evacuation period, guards chose to abandon their duty to save themselves after being ordered to escort prisoners to a destination. In other situations, like the evacuation from Ellrich-Juliushütte described by Charles Holzer in the previous chapter, the SS would undermine the *Führerprinzip* if they felt the order given was wrong. After being told to let their prisoners leave, and the order giver killing himself, the SS deduced that the order was flawed and murdered their victims. This prompts questions about the principle's nature. Perhaps if one felt that their superior was wrong, they were entitled to essentially replace him or, alternatively, true reverence and obedience was reserved solely for the Führer himself and other leaders could be defied in certain situations. What appears certain, however, was that easily enforceable orders, or 'direct' orders, were generally executed but more general orders, or 'indirect' orders, relating to conduct were dodged by the cunning SS guards. The avoidance of indirect orders formed the basis of a great deal of the terrible abuses in the camps and ultimately showed that, through selective application of the leadership principle, the Camp SS were disobedient and manipulated orders they

were given. It is handy to return to Alf Lüdtke's discussion of *Eigen-Sinn*; there are clear indications that the Camp SS' reception of the *Führerprinzip* demonstrated a potent self-will which enabled them to selectively ignore pressure from above to alter their work environment if they did not agree with it. Furthermore, the *Führerprinzip*, especially in relation to its effectiveness in day-to-day KL life, requires a more in-depth study in future to fully grasp its influence over events.

Overall, this study has shown that the organisational development of the Camp SS and the behavioural evolution of the men serving in the KL were inordinately complex issues. It would be irresponsible to identify one central reason for the camp killers' motivation for abusing the KL's victims. Nonetheless, although many of the guards came into SS service with the potential to kill people who they had been taught to resent as they grew up, there was one particularly important factor which saw them succeed in reaching their murderous potential. The guards were generally clever perpetrators; they exploited opportunities that they found, and their leaders became increasingly impotent when it came to harnessing the guards' potential in line with the KL's codes of conduct. The guards did as they pleased, which often honoured Eicke's vision, but almost always prioritised self-gratification over anything else. In the future, it would be beneficial to conduct a symmetrical study of female perpetrators, akin to the work of Elissa Mailänder, with particular focus upon this thesis' themes. For example, examinations of how the education of girls differed to that of boys in the early twentieth century, how females were targeted by Nazi propaganda, and how key figures in the concentration camps influenced the conduct of female SS helpers would shine light on female perpetrator development, further contextualising the findings of this study. There is also potential to build upon some of the analyses of this research. It has been shown that medical treatment in the camps was inconsistent, often deadly, and arbitrarily handled; there should be an undertaking, building upon Philipp Kiosze and Florian Stieger's focused assessment of tuberculosis treatment at Mittelbau-Dora and this study's broader examination, which considers the SS' management of prisoner health. Equally, it would be beneficial to flesh out the analysis of the SS' heavily flawed claim to its supposed elite status since, on top of the potential to explore more deeply the themes of Chapter Two, there are more criteria by which to measure this which could not be considered here. Evaluating SS training and military capability, especially when measured against that of the *Wehrmacht* and foreign elite forces, would aid in making conclusions about the SS' effectiveness more applicable to the *Waffen-SS* in the field.

In summary, the findings of this thesis have shone light upon some key aspects of the character of Camp SS perpetrators that had hitherto been absent in the historiography of the topic. Naturally this is of great importance for it is only through truly understanding the creation of these SS killers that societies can work to avoid the repetition of such atrocities. Moreover, the evidencing of the Camp

SS' rebellious nature illustrates why the KL was so chaotic and why abuses and vices were so pervasive and difficult to tame. Dismissing the façade of the 'elite' organisation, this research has shown that the mediocre Camp SS excelled in two areas, murdering, and operating independently of the restraints of subservience. Essentially, the camp killers were the product of a behemoth camp system without brakes and they grew into the freedom they were granted. Although the leadership sought the destruction of European Jewry and other ethnic enemies, which the Camp SS ensured, it is crucial that historians do not misdiagnose this as a display of utter obedience. The guards were not controlled, especially after 1939, and despite reaching the same goal in the end, the leadership and the rank-and-file were not unified. Rather, the latter dominated the system which they were meant to serve.

Ranks of the SS with German Army Equivalents (1934-1945)

SS Rank	Army Rank
<i>Reichsführer-SS</i>	<i>Generalfeldmarschall</i> (field marshal general)
<i>SS-Oberstgruppenführer</i>	<i>Generaloberst</i> (colonel general)
<i>SS-Obergruppenführer</i>	<i>General</i>
<i>SS-Gruppenführer</i>	<i>Generalleutnant</i> (lieutenant general)
<i>SS-Brigadeführer</i>	<i>Generalmajor</i> (major general)
<i>SS-Oberführer</i>	No direct army equivalent but roughly equal to brigadier general
<i>SS-Standartenführer</i>	<i>Oberst</i> (colonel)
<i>SS-Obersturmbannführer</i>	<i>Oberstleutnant</i> (lieutenant colonel)
<i>SS-Sturmbannführer</i>	<i>Major</i>
<i>SS-Hauptsturmführer</i>	<i>Hauptmann</i> (captain)
<i>SS-Obersturmführer</i>	<i>Oberleutnant</i> (lieutenant)
<i>SS-Untersturmführer</i>	<i>Leutnant</i> (second lieutenant)
<i>SS-Hauptscharführer</i>	<i>Oberfeldwebel</i> (sergeant major)
<i>SS-Oberscharführer</i>	<i>Feldwebel</i> (staff sergeant)
<i>SS-Scharführer</i>	<i>Unterfeldwebel</i> (sergeant)
<i>SS-Unterscharführer</i>	<i>Unteroffizier</i> (corporal)
<i>SS-Rottenführer</i>	<i>Gefreiter</i> (lance corporal)
<i>SS-Sturmmann</i>	<i>Obersoldat</i> (senior private)
<i>SS-Mann</i>	<i>Soldat</i> (private)

Source: C. Zentner & F. Bedürftig (eds.), trans. A. Hackett, *The Encyclopedia of the Third Reich, Volume 2* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 753.

Note that Chris McNab offers information on SS ranks from 1930-1932, 1932-1934 and 1934-1945. As the ranks from 1932-1934 had extensive overlap with the later ranking system, they have not been included here. C. McNab, *The SS, 1923-1945: The Essential Facts and Figures for Himmler's Stormtroopers* (London: Amber Books, 2009), 29-30.

Glossary

Einsatzgruppen – Deployment Groups, extermination units of the *Waffen-SS*

Führerprinzip – ‘Leadership Principle’

Funktionshäftling, Kapo – ‘Prisoner Functionary’, appointed by the SS to serve as overseer

Geheime Staatspolizei, Gestapo – Secret State Police

Hitlerjugend, HJ – Hitler Youth

Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer, HSSPF – Higher SS and Police Leader

Inspektion der Konzentrationslager, IKL – Concentration Camp Inspectorate

Inspektor der Konzentrationslager – Inspector of Concentration Camps.

Kaiserreich – The Second Reich, the German Empire between 1871 and 1918

Konzentrationslager, KL – Concentration Camp/Concentration Camp System

Kriegsmarine – ‘War Navy’, German navy from 1935-1945

Männerstaat – ‘Masculine State’

Muselmänner – ‘Muslims’, exhausted and emaciated prisoners

Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS, RuSHA – SS Race and Settlement Main Office

Schutzstaffel, SS – Protection Squadron

Sicherheitsdienst, SD – Security Service

Sicherheitspolizei, SiPo – Security Police

Sonderkommando – Special Unit, prisoners working in the KL’s killing facilities

SS-Helferin – SS Female Helpers

SS-Totenkopfverbände, SS-TV – SS Death’s Head Units, the organisation which many of the Camp SS officially belonged to

SS-Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt, SS-WVHA – SS Main Economic and Administrative Office

Sturmabteilung, SA – Stormtroopers

Völkisch – ‘Folkish’, derived from the *Völkisch* movement which valued organic development and agrarianism

Volksdeutsche – Ethnic Germans

Volksgemeinschaft – National Community

Volkssturm – ‘People’s Storm’, German militia from 1944 to 1945

Waffen-SS – Armed SS

Wehrmacht – ‘Defence Force’, German armed forces from 1935-1945

Weltanschauung – Worldview

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