

**The SS Cavalry Brigade and its operations in the Soviet Union, 1941-1942**

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## Abstract

This dissertation analyses a unit of the *Waffen-SS* during a period that was crucial to the Second World War and the destruction of the European Jews. The SS Cavalry Brigade differed from other German military formations as it fulfilled a special function. Although its origins lay in sportsmanship, this unit was quickly formed into an auxiliary police formation in Poland during the first two years of the war and developed a 'dual role' after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. This role arose from the fact that the SS cavalymen both helped to initiate the Holocaust in newly occupied territories and experienced combat at the front. Acting on direct orders from Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, the soldiers – for the most part – were quickly radicalised: in the Pripet Marshes, they not only killed Jews and communists but were the first to destroy entire Jewish communities. By the end of 1941, they enforced a brutal occupation policy in Belorussia and Russia, which aimed at eliminating all possible racial, political and military enemies of the German forces. This brutal war of annihilation also included the combat against real or suspected partisans. Between December, 1941 and June, 1942, the SS Cavalry Brigade fought against the Red Army and suffered high losses, which necessitated replenishment after its withdrawal from the front. From late 1942 onwards, the unit lost its 'dual role' as it was involved in more conventional warfare, and the story of its development from this point is beyond the scope of this dissertation which concentrates on the years of 1941 – 1942. A special focus lies on the role and behaviour of the personnel of the brigade and places it in perpetrator history.

**For my parents**

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## Introduction

Whilst many different German military and paramilitary units involved in the Holocaust have been studied by researchers, not much has been written on the SS Cavalry Brigade due to a lack of access to files in eastern European archives. This unit belonged to the *Waffen-SS* and played a special role both in the German war against the Soviet Union and the destruction of the European Jews.

The brigade was deployed at an important point in history: in the summer of 1941, as the transition from individual acts of violence and massacres of Jews to the ‘Final Solution of the Jewish Question’ occurred. Whereas different ideas for deporting the European Jewry to faraway places such as Siberia still seemed feasible at the beginning of the year, plans changed dramatically after the beginning of the German attack on the Soviet Union. From the beginning of this campaign, Jews were killed by German military and paramilitary units, and this was the first step to the attempted complete annihilation of Jewish communities in eastern Europe and to the industrial slaughter of the concentration camps.

The special significance of the SS Cavalry Brigade lies in its ‘dual role’: the unit had an ideological as well as a military function. On the one hand it can be compared to the *Einsatzgruppen* and battalions of the order police as its members also killed thousands of Jews. It differs from these formations on the other hand as it was a genuine military unit and took part in combat against the Red Army. Soldiers of the SS Cavalry Brigade saw themselves as elite, very similar to the members of other *Waffen-SS* units. Like them, they were ‘political soldiers’, as Bernd Wegner has put it.<sup>1</sup>

But unlike other formations of the *Waffen-SS* or divisions of the *Wehrmacht*, this

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<sup>1</sup> Bernd Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten: Die Waffen-SS 1939 – 1945* (Paderborn, 1988).

brigade was not just a product of the German rearmament in the 1930s. It was a construct that originated from the sporting interests of the German aristocracy and the personal initiative of a high-ranking Nazi from Munich. Thus, its development set it apart from the machinery of war at first, but the SS Cavalry Brigade later found its own way into the German war of annihilation.

This work aims at writing a full history of the brigade for the first time, beginning with the formation of mounted SS units in Germany in 1931. The main focus, however, is on the period between the summer of 1941 and the spring of 1942, when the two SS cavalry regiments were reorganised as a brigade and took part in the campaign against the Soviet Union and the Holocaust. The analysis of the SS Cavalry Brigade is based on three aspects. First, the emphasis on the period during which the unit existed as a brigade is central to the way it became involved in the ‘first wave’ of German troops committing massacres of Jews in the Soviet Union and what happened during that time. Second, the ideological and military role of the unit present a unique combination as no other German military or paramilitary formation during the Second World War had to fulfil a ‘dual role’ to the same degree as the SS Cavalry Brigade. Third, the lives and careers of the men who served in the brigade need to be studied. The findings provide a better insight, particularly into the field of perpetrator history. As a result, a ‘modern history of violence’ of this unit will be produced from the available information.

It is essential to understand the unit’s role in the SS and the conditioning of its members in the Nazi system. The prehistory of the SS Cavalry Brigade begins with Hermann Fegelein, a riding school owner’s son from Bavaria, who had sympathies for the National-Socialist movement and a strong enthusiasm for equitation. His excellent connections to Heinrich Himmler secured him the leadership of a special riding school for the SS, which was established at Munich in 1937; two years later,

this school and the equestrians who trained there became part of the German war effort.

From late 1939 until the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, a cavalry component of the *Waffen-SS* was built up in Poland under Fegelein's leadership. With the former riding school trainees and instructors as a nucleus, two SS cavalry regiments were formed and used as auxiliary police units by the German occupation administration. They soon became involved in crimes against the Polish population, such as acts of ethnic cleansing, the internment of Jews in ghettos, and massacres of Jews and people who were considered belonging to the Polish elites. At the same time the SS cavalymen were also trained for military tasks.

Immediately before the beginning of operation *Barbarossa* on 22 June, 1941 the two regiments were assigned to the forces of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS*. This was a special body of SS troops under Himmler's direct command, to which the SS cavalry remained subordinate until the summer of 1942, the point in time when the units were withdrawn from the front to be reorganised as a cavalry division. Like the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Infantry Brigades, the two other formations which belonged to it, the SS cavalry units were only deployed in the eastern European theatre of war during the years of 1941 – 1942. Unlike other SS formations or divisions of the *Wehrmacht*, they played a significant role in implementing the Nazi policy of extermination without being garrisoned in a western European country. Outside Poland and the Soviet Union, the civilian population was not treated in such a brutal way and measures against Jews were carried out less openly.

For the SS cavalry, the initial phase of the war was now over and the men awaited new tasks. Two days after the invasion of the Soviet Union, the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment was ordered to take part in a combat mission near Bialystok. Soon after this operation, both SS cavalry regiments relocated from their garrisons in East

Prussia to the Pripet Marshes in Belorussia.<sup>2</sup> This territory had been skirted by the advancing German troops for the most part because, in addition to the river Pripet itself, its large swamps, dense forests, and absence of roads formed several obstacles to the armoured forces and supply columns. Therefore troops not employed in combat were needed to police the marshes, to break any resistance in the region and to set up a military administration.

After their arrival in the operational area in late July, 1941, the forces of the SS cavalry were split up into fast moving subunits, some of which were attached to an infantry division of the *Wehrmacht* in order to fight against units of the Red Army which had broken through the German lines. The remaining squadrons were deployed according to the task of crossing and searching the western Pripet Marshes.<sup>3</sup> More precise and brutal orders were issued now: the cavalymen were ordered to ‘finally pacify’ the area, which meant that they were to fight against partisans and to capture stragglers of the Red Army. The instructions included killing enemy soldiers in civilian clothing, armed civilians, and ‘looters’. In this context, ‘looters’ did not mean criminals but was the term used for Jews; they were to be executed, except for some required specialists such as craftsmen and doctors.<sup>4</sup> The instructions remained rather vague at the beginning as to the fate of Jewish women and children. Whereas they were to be driven into the swamps at first<sup>5</sup>, tactics were soon changed to killing all Jews regardless of gender or age.<sup>6</sup> This approach, which was followed during two missions in the Pripet Marshes, resulted in the killing of

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<sup>2</sup> When referring to the Soviet Socialist Republic, I will use the term ‘Belorussia’ as this was the name of the state in the period under observation. In connection with the contemporary country, I will refer to it as ‘Belarus’.

<sup>3</sup> Kommandobefehl Nr. 19, 19 July, 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 3.

<sup>4</sup> Regimentsbefehl Nr. 42 für den Einsatz Pripec-Sümpfe, 27 July, 1941, in BArchL, Dokumenten-Sammlung, Ordner Verschiedenes 291-17, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Transcript of a radio message from the regimental staff to the cavalry detachment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, 1 August, 1941, in BArchF, RS 3-8/36.

<sup>6</sup> Report from the commander of the cavalry detachment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, 12 August 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

more than 15,000 Jews, partisans, and soldiers of the Red Army until mid-September, 1941. The exact number of victims is unknown; it can be assumed that even more people were murdered, as the cavalrymen operated in a vast area and not all killings were reported.<sup>7</sup>

From September onwards, the brigade followed the advance of the German army. The cavalry units were transported to Toropets in the northern sector of Army Group Centre, some 380 kilometres west of Moscow. They were given orders to guard the railway line from Velikiye Luki to Rzhev, an important east-west mainline, to conduct reconnaissance missions and to fight against partisans in this region. Soon, further killings were perpetrated: a number of suspected partisans were shot, most of them merely civilians without identification papers. As documentation becomes scarcer for the second half of 1941, it is yet unclear how many people were killed during that time. Between Toropets and Rzhev, the brigade was engaged in heavy fighting against the Red Army. After the German offensive on the Soviet capital had bogged down in early December, the cavalry units were forced into the defence. As no reserves were available, the brigade was needed to defend an important sector of the front at the intersection of Army Group Centre and Army Group North. Despite heavy losses, setbacks and local retreats, it remained at the front and fought against superior Soviet forces.

When spring came, only half of its former 4,000 soldiers were still combat-ready; more than 2,000 had been killed, wounded, declared missing in action or sick. The cavalry brigade was particularly weakened by a high death toll amongst the officers and non-commissioned officers.<sup>8</sup> In May, the unit was relieved from the front and

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<sup>7</sup> The two regiments reported 13,788 Jews as executed until 11 August; see report of the SS Cavalry Brigade, 13 August, 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3. In a report from 18 September, 1941, 14,178 Jews, 1001 partisans and 699 soldiers of the Red Army were reported to have been shot since the end of July; see final report about the "pacification of the Pripet Marshes", September 18, 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

<sup>8</sup> Stärke und Verluste der SS-Divisionen vom 24.3. 1942, in BArchB, Persönlicher Stab Reichsführer-SS, NS 19/1520, frame 45-47.

withdrawn to Debica in south eastern Poland, where the SS had established a military training area. During the summer of 1942, a new SS cavalry division was formed out of the surviving brigade members and new recruits. The unit was sent to the eastern front, suffered heavy casualties in the winter of 1942 – 1943 and was replenished again after that. Until the end of the war, the division was employed in combat until it was finally annihilated at Budapest in February, 1945.

Research on the SS Cavalry Brigade has to take into account a variety of sources, mostly original documents kept in archives across Europe. These files have to be analysed with great care as they originate from different countries, authorities, and periods. In order to establish the historical context, it is necessary to approach the SS as an institution within the National Socialist state. The background to this form of government was a power structure centred on Adolf Hitler as the supreme leader. As Germany turned into a dictatorship when Hitler consolidated his power during the 1930s, former political ideas were replaced with Nazi ideology, institutions of the democratic state became meaningless, and a process of radicalisation began which aimed at restoring the country's role and destroying its enemies. This development, which ultimately led to the Second World War and the Holocaust, has been analysed very accurately by Ian Kershaw in his two-volumed biography of Adolf Hitler, a standard work for a historian researching Nazi Germany.<sup>9</sup>

While the German government and its agencies were synchronised, other institutions of the state such as the police were nazified and arms of the Nazi party became executive organs. Within this system, Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS and chief of the German police, was the second man after the *Führer*. He became responsible for all matters of security and oppression of political enemies. Under his leadership, the SS grew from a small group of Nazi party bodyguards into a massive

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<sup>9</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889 – 1936* (Stuttgart, 1998); Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936 – 1945* (Stuttgart, 2000).

institution that was essentially a state within the state. At the end of the 1930s, it encompassed the German police and secret police, the concentration camps, an army of its own, and an economic empire. After the beginning of the Second World War, the *Waffen-SS* took part in the fighting whereas Himmler's technocrats planned the Holocaust and paramilitary SS formations executed their orders. Himmler's life and the role of the SS in the Third Reich are outlined very competently in the biography by Peter Longerich, a work that represents the current state of research on the *Reichsführer-SS*.<sup>10</sup>

The SS had its own principles and code of honour. Himmler saw his organisation as 'the black order', an elite force protecting the state. Candidates were selected very carefully and became subject to strict discipline once they had been accepted. One of the first works to describe the structure and aims of the SS was written by Heinz Höhne in the 1960s. He noticed that the elitist nature of the organisation attracted a special type: highly educated intellectuals, many of whom held a law degree.<sup>11</sup> These men later played an important role in the Holocaust, both as commanders of killing squads and as so-called 'desk murderers'. This group, which can be considered an elite within the elite, has been analysed in great detail by Michael Wildt in his study of the officer corps of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich security main office), the central SS authority for the coordination of police and secret service.<sup>12</sup> As opposed to the well-researched 'desk murderers', the officers of the SS Cavalry Brigade became 'political soldiers' in a different way. They had different backgrounds and joined the SS for other reasons: horse-riding, not higher education

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler. Biographie*. (Munich 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head: the Story of Hitler's SS* (London, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führerkorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg, 2003). A prominent example of the intellectuals in the SS was Werner Best, who helped to build up the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD), the secret service of the Nazi party. He also was involved in the foundation of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* and organised killing squads that were deployed in Poland. See Ulrich Herbert, *Best: biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903 – 1989* (Bonn, 1996).

was their common feature. They intended to pursue a career in sports or as professional soldiers and did not strive for administrative positions in the SS.

Despite the fact that a vast amount of original sources has survived, the SS Cavalry Brigade has hardly been examined in academic literature as only a few authors have focussed on this particular unit until now. To a certain extent, this has to do with the fact that many of the sources which are available today were completely inaccessible until 1989. In order to present the historiography on the SS Cavalry Brigade, I will introduce the most important works which integrate it into the context of Holocaust research, the field which also forms the 'general background' to my project.

The first accounts of the unit and its crimes were published in the 1980s and early 1990s by Yehoshua Büchler, Karla Müller-Tupath, and Ruth Bettina Birn.<sup>13</sup> Although Büchler's essay contains a few errors, it is a good introduction to the topic. It contains information on the units of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS*, a body of troops that was of special importance as it served as Heinrich Himmler's 'private army' within the SS. With regard to the destruction of the Soviet Jews, Büchler stated that mass executions committed by these units 'were no less significant in quantity or brutality than those by the *Einsatzgruppen*'.<sup>14</sup> This comparison is particularly remarkable as there was hardly any specific literature available on these formations in 1986. But despite the fact that it is very well written, the essay is too short to give a very detailed analysis as the focus is not on the SS cavalry alone. Müller-Tupath's work deals with the biography of Kurt Becher, an SS cavalry officer and close aide of Hermann Fegelein. It also provides the historical background by extensively quoting West German court files from the trials against officers of the

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<sup>13</sup> Yehoshua Büchler, 'Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS: Himmler's Personal Murder Brigades in 1941', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 1 (1986), pp. 11-25; Karla Müller-Tupath, *Reichsführers gehorsamster Becher: Eine deutsche Karriere* (Hamburg 1982); Ruth Bettina Birn, 'Zweierlei Wirklichkeit? Fallbeispiele zur Partisanenbekämpfung im Osten', in B. Wegner (ed.), *Zwei Wege nach Moskau. Vom Hitler – Stalin-Pakt bis zum 'Unternehmen Barbarossa'* (Munich, 1991), pp. 275-290.

<sup>14</sup> Büchler, 'Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS', p. 14.

brigade, but as it is based on the life of one particular person its scope is also not broad enough.<sup>15</sup> In her article on partisan warfare, Ruth Bettina Birn clearly proves that the missions of the SS Cavalry Brigade were not primarily part of the anti-Partisan campaign, as was often stated in German literature after the Second World War. Instead, Birn incorporates its actions within the context of the Holocaust and the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union.

So far, the brigade has been analysed in detailed monographs only by two historians: Paul J. Wilson and Martin Cüppers.<sup>16</sup> Wilson's study concentrates on the prewar Equestrian SS within the Nazi state and analyses the role of this organisation as part of the *Allgemeine SS*. Despite of its importance in presenting the prehistory of the SS Cavalry Brigade, this work does not provide enough information on the unit's deployment in the Soviet Union or on how Fegelein's men helped to initiate a new phase of the Holocaust.

Cüppers, on the other hand, demonstrates the organisation and operations of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS* and its subunits in a very detailed and capable way. In general, his work focuses on the *Kommandostab* and could have provided more information on the SS Cavalry Brigade, especially on the formation of the unit and its combat missions.<sup>17</sup> However, Cüppers also presents a very important

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<sup>15</sup> For this dissertation, I have used the second edition of the work, which was published in Berlin in 1999. It consists of a revised version of the original and contains significantly more information, especially on Becher's life after 1945 and judicial proceedings against him.

<sup>16</sup> Paul J. Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry: The Equestrian SS, 1930-1945* (Atglen, PA, 2000); Martin Cüppers, *Wegbereiter der Shoah: die Waffen-SS, der Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS und die Judenvernichtung 1939 – 1945* (Darmstadt, 2005). A comparison and short summary of the missions of the brigade's two cavalry regiments in the summer of 1941 is given in another essay by Cüppers, 'Vorreiter der Shoah. Ein Vergleich der Einsätze beider SS-Kavallerieregimenter im August 1941', in T. C. Richter (ed.), *Krieg und Verbrechen. Situation und Intention: Fallbeispiele* (Munich, 2006), pp. 87-99.

<sup>17</sup> In a contribution to a work by Christopher Browning, Jürgen Matthäus warned of overestimating the role of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS*, two years before the book by Cüppers was even published. The article by Matthäus also outlines the beginning of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union very competently and can be used to gain an overview on the subject; see Christopher R. Browning, *Die Entfesselung der 'Endlösung'. Nationalsozialistische Judenpolitik 1939 – 1942. Mit einem Beitrag von Jürgen Matthäus* (Munich, 2003), pp. 405-420. A critical assessment of Cüppers's work can also be found in a review by Raul Hilberg, 'The Kommandostab Revisited', *Yad Vashem Studies* 34 (2006), pp. 355-367.

consideration, namely that the brigade escalated the practice of executions soon after the beginning of operation 'Barbarossa' and therefore has an exceptional position within the context of German mobile killing squads. Battalions of the order police, for example, committed massacres with thousands of victims at Bialystok and Brest-Litovsk in late June and early July, 1941.<sup>18</sup> But as opposed to police units and *Einsatzgruppen* which targeted Jewish males, the SS Cavalry Brigade was the first formation to destroy entire Jewish communities, including women and children.

My project follows a different approach than the research of Wilson and Cüppers as it aims at reconstructing and analysing the history of the SS Cavalry Brigade in 1941 – 1942 outside the primary context of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS*. Instead, the focus is on the combined ideological and military role of the unit and the question of how it worked as an institution in an environment of mass violence. Based on the delineation of its deployment, my work will also explore the combat value of the brigade at the front in more detail.

In the field of perpetrator history, the two best-known and perhaps most significant works have been written by Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen. Both authors focussed on a police formation, the Reserve Police Battalion 101.<sup>19</sup> They included a history of the battalion and examine the role of its men in the Holocaust. The two authors arrived at different conclusions in the question of how the policemen became perpetrators and also used their main source, questionings from postwar trials, in a different way.

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<sup>18</sup> Edward B. Westermann, *Hitler's Police Battalions: Enforcing Racial War in the East* (Lawrence, KS 2005), pp. 174-177; Wolfgang Curilla, *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei und der Holocaust im Baltikum und in Weißrußland 1941 – 1944* (Paderborn, 2006), pp. 511-518 and pp. 570-574. The massacre at Bialystok, which was committed by Police Battalion 309 on 27 June, 1941, claimed the lives of about 2,000 victims. Two weeks later, about 4,000 Jews and 400 non-Jewish Soviet citizens were murdered by Police Battalion 307 at Brest-Litovsk (the exact date could not be ascertained by historical research). For the executions at Bialystok and Brest-Litovsk, see also below, p. 85.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Browning, *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland* (Harmondsworth, 2001); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's willing executioners: ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London, 1996).

Goldhagen blamed a specific, 'eliminationist' form of anti-Semitism. According to his study, this attitude was typical of all Germans and motivated them to kill the Jews. This monocausal approach has been widely dismissed by historians as it does not take into account other ideological and situational aspects, such as anti-Bolshevism or the 'war of annihilation' waged by the Germans in eastern Europe, where virtually everybody could be perceived as an enemy. In contrast, Browning offers a more productive multicausal explanation and shows in detail how the policemen behaved when they were ordered to kill, as well as referring to psychological experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo. These have proven that almost everybody is able to inflict violence on others. Browning relates their results to the German policemen and states that although most of the members of the battalion took part in committing crimes of a genocidal nature, the circumstances of each of these crimes have to be analysed separately and thoroughly in order to find out more about why they happened. He arrives at the conclusion that the circumstances of war and racism, two factors which had mutually intensifying effects, as well as peer pressure and careerism, were combined and turned the policemen into killers.

Browning's approach also differs in his use of testimony from the trial of former members of the police battalion. As opposed to Goldhagen, who left out statements which disproved his overall argument (namely that all policemen agreed with what they had to do), Browning explains a variety of different attitudes and fears contained in the court files and thus presents a view which is based on a broader range of sources. Leaning towards Browning, I will use a multi-layered evaluation of sources, which is very important as court files form a major component of the primary sources I am using, and avoid the monocausal approach taken by Goldhagen. This method of collecting, interpreting and cross-checking of sources is

also described by Devin Pendas in his article on testimony; Pendas referred to the controversy between Browning and Goldhagen about the use of testimony and also to the use of other sources from court proceedings against Nazi perpetrators.<sup>20</sup>

A similar approach has also been taken by Harald Welzer: based on a general overview of the state of research in perpetrator history, he delineates the process of becoming a killer in a very detailed way, starting with the anti-Semitic campaigns launched by the Nazis from 1933, continuing with the dehumanisation of the Jews and finally their mass annihilation at the hands of killing squads in eastern Europe. According to his approach, humans are capable of viewing 'their actions as something independent of their own person' when they can integrate them into a special 'frame of reference' such as war.<sup>21</sup> He particularly stresses the importance of the social framework and individual situations in which the perpetrators found themselves when ordered to kill, and the social affiliation of their victims, which was first eroded by dehumanisation and finally erased by execution. This method of analysis was also used in another work by Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, which centres on wiretaps of German prisoners of war. It contains information on soldiers of the *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen-SS* and thus helps to compare the motivation of men belonging to these organisations.<sup>22</sup> In my work, I will use this approach in order to examine how and why the SS cavalymen came to fulfil their particular role in the Holocaust.

An examination of the SS Cavalry Brigade and its 'dual role' also has to analyse the military performance of the unit and to integrate the results into the operational history of the *Waffen-SS*. This overarching context to the research topic is still a

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<sup>20</sup> Devin Pendas, 'Testimony', in M. Dobson and B. Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of texts from nineteenth- and twentieth-century history* (London, New York 2009), pp. 226-242.

<sup>21</sup> Harald Welzer, *Täter: wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt 2005), p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten. Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben* (Frankfurt, 2011).

*desideratum* of research as there is hardly any scholarly literature available. In order to gain an overview of this field, rather dated standard works have to be used, most of which describe the SS and the *Waffen-SS* in general without reference to the brigade or only mention it briefly.<sup>23</sup> There is also a huge array of non-scholarly works which could be summarised as belonging to the genre of 'militaria literature'. These books focus on military missions of the *Waffen-SS* in general and tend to neglect the aspect of ideology, which is why they are hardly of any use for this dissertation.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the brigade's deployment at the front has to be delineated largely on the basis of primary sources.

For the interpretation of the behaviour of SS soldiers in a battle situation, however, three recent publications can be used. The book by Jean-Luc Leleu, despite the fact that it focuses on SS divisions in the Western European theatre of war and hardly mentions the SS Cavalry Brigade, constitutes a new standard work on the expansion, structure, ideology, and combat performance of the *Waffen-SS*.<sup>25</sup> As opposed to this approach, the work by Neitzel and Welzer contains information on soldiers of the *Wehrmacht* as well as of the *Waffen-SS* and thus provides an opportunity to compare their military competence and ideological motivation. René Rohrkamp's work on the social profile of the *Waffen-SS* supports the theory of a further radicalisation of SS units during the Second World War.<sup>26</sup> As far as the influence of combat situations and the characteristics of fighting against the Red Army are concerned, I will show how

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<sup>23</sup> Kurt-Gerhard Klietmann, *Die Waffen-SS. Eine Dokumentation* (Osnabrück, 1965), George H. Stein, *The Waffen SS: Hitler's Elite Guard at War, 1939 – 1945* (Ithaca, N.Y., London, 1966), and Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*. See also the following compilation: Georg Tessin, *Verbände und Truppen der deutschen Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS im Zweiten Weltkrieg 1939-1945. 20 Bände* (Osnabrück, 1967). Whereas Klietmann at least provides a brief summary of the military operations of the SS Cavalry Brigade, Stein and Höhne hardly mention it at all. Tessin only presents the structure of the unit.

<sup>24</sup> See for example Herbert Walther, *Die Waffen-SS. Eine Bilddokumentation* (Wölfersheim-Berstadt, 1994); Christopher Ailsby, *Waffen SS: The Illustrated History, 1923-1945* (Minneapolis, MN 1998); Tim Ripley, *The Waffen-SS At War: Hitler's Praetorians 1925-1945* (Minneapolis, MN 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Luc Leleu, *La Waffen-SS. Soldats politiques en guerre* (Paris, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> René Rohrkamp, *'Weltanschaulich gefestigte Kämpfer': Die Soldaten der Waffen-SS 1933 – 1945. Organisation – Personal – Sozialstrukturen* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, Zurich, 2010).

soldiers of the SS Cavalry Brigade went beyond carrying out orders and how their behaviour was shaped by the criminal intentions of their superiors. This can be achieved by contrasting findings from primary sources and the above mentioned secondary literature with the argumentation of Omer Bartov.<sup>27</sup>

After 1945, some veterans of the SS cavalry presented their view in the form of *Kameradenliteratur* (comrade literature).<sup>28</sup> These works do not describe events very accurately but aim at commemorating wartime experience. They rather glorify the virtues of the German soldier in general and depict everyday life in the mounted units as well as combat operations. The most important publication in this context was written by a former non-commissioned officer who served in the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment during the mission in the Pripet Marshes.<sup>29</sup> These books help to explain the mentality of the men of the SS Cavalry Brigade: between them, a strong bond existed, based on horse-riding and the development of the later cavalry role.

In order to transcend the current state of research, many different primary sources have to be analysed. The general state of source material is very good as information of various kinds can be found, such as German SS and military documentation. For original documents on the deployment and intentions of the SS Cavalry Brigade, two national record offices are of great importance. The Central Military Archive of the Czech Republic at Prague has extensive German holdings, which were captured by

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<sup>27</sup> Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941 – 1945, German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (Basingstoke, 1985). To understand the specific atmosphere of *Waffen-SS* units, especially their power of endurance even in critical situations, the work by Jean-Luc Leleu again is of great importance (see above).

<sup>28</sup> See for example the self-published works by a former member of the 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division Florian Geyer: Hans-Otto Wachter, *Wir funkten. Geschichte der Funkkompanie Nachrichtenabteilung 8 "Florian Geyer"* (Kassel, 1979); Hans-Otto Wachter, *...und nur dafür! Erinnerungen und Gedanken ehemaliger Soldaten, die auszogen, um ihr Vaterland zu verteidigen* (Kassel, 1984); Hans-Otto Wachter, *Als die Feuer brannten... Erinnerungen und Gedanken ehemaliger Soldaten, die auszogen, um ihr Vaterland zu verteidigen* (Kassel, 1984); Hans-Otto Wachter, *Unsere Kavallerie-Division in der Dokumentation des II. Weltkrieges: Soldaten der "Florian Geyer" fotografierten* (Kassel, 1984). These works constitute collages of first-hand accounts, photographs, and other documents rather than actual books. Despite the fact that Wachter himself only joined the 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division in 1943, they also contain many items and anecdotes from 1941 – 1942, which the author received from other veterans of the SS cavalry units.

<sup>29</sup> Hanns Bayer, *Die Kavallerie der Waffen-SS* (Heidelberg 1980).

the Czechs after the end of the war. These files comprise documents from *Waffen-SS* divisions and other SS agencies, the *Wehrmacht*, and the Nazi party.<sup>30</sup> The most significant source complex in this context is that of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS*, in which orders, daily reports (mostly in the form of radio message transcripts) and special mission reports of the SS Cavalry Brigade from the period under observation can be found. They provide key information on the advance into Belorussia, killings committed by the brigade and police units, combat operations against the Red Army during the advance on Moscow, and the heavy losses of the SS cavalry after the collapse of the German offensive in the winter of 1941 – 1942. The documentation of the *Kommandostab* files also shows different levels of the chain of command: reports were issued by the brigade staff as well as the next higher SS authority, the *Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer 'Mitte'* (Higher SS and Police Leader 'Centre'), *SS-Gruppenführer* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, who was in charge of all SS and police units not employed in combat in the central sector of the German eastern front. Therefore, each hierarchy level gives a different picture of the general situation.

The Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv at Freiburg is the second institution which preserves sources on the SS Cavalry Brigade.<sup>31</sup> As opposed to the above-mentioned cohesive body of SS material available in Prague, the documentation at Freiburg

<sup>30</sup> This archive is subordinate to the Czech Ministry of Defence and holds the records of the Czech and Czechoslovakian armed forces from the time of the Austro-Hungarian empire until 1975. The content and state of indexing of the German holdings are described in a short article: Zuzana Pivcová, 'Das Militärhistorische Archiv in Prag und seine deutschen Bestände', in: *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen* 52 (1993), pp. 429-435. Some of the documents of the SS Cavalry Brigade, together with the war diary of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS* and material on other units subordinate to this institution (such as the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Infantry Brigade), were published in 1965; see *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue. Kriegstagebuch des Kommandostabes Reichsführer-SS, Tätigkeitsberichte der 1. und 2. SS-Inf.-Brigade, der 1. SS-Kav.-Brigade und von Sonderkommandos der SS*, ed. F. Baade and others (Vienna, Frankfurt, Zurich, 1965). Further information on the brigade can also be found in the documentation of its successor, the 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, which is kept at Prague as well.

<sup>31</sup> This is part of the German Federal Archive and responsible for preserving the documentation of the German armed forces from 1864 until the present day. For the holdings and role of this archive, see Andreas Kunz, 'Das Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv in Freiburg i.Br. Quell(en) deutscher Militärgeschichte von 1864 bis heute', *Militärgeschichte. Zeitschrift für historische Bildung* 4 (2008), pp. 14-17.

consists of different types of files. Amongst them are many documents relating to the establishment and deployment of the two regiments in Poland, which illustrate the organisational matters the two regiments had to face between 1939 and 1941. They also give information on various other aspects, such as the involvement of the SS cavalry in crimes against the Polish population, especially the Jews. By using these documents, it is possible to describe a continuity of development: the various reports and orders prove the formation of mounted SS units which from a very early stage served ideological as well as military purposes. The archival holdings also contain evidence for crimes such as direct orders for murder issued by Himmler and radio message transcripts which gave daily updates on the progress of executions in the east.

As the SS Cavalry Brigade closely cooperated with units of the *Wehrmacht* in the first phase of the campaign against the Soviet Union, it is also possible to prove the military and ideological character of the unit by means of analysing army sources, which are also accessible at Freiburg. Thus, it can be examined how the SS cavalrymen adapted to different situations, such as the fight against Red Army stragglers and partisans as well as at the front, and how this was viewed by the leadership of the army units they were subordinated to. This study also goes beyond the analysis of individual divisions or army corps and includes the institution of the *Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte* (supreme commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre), general Max von Schenckendorff, who closely cooperated with the *Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer 'Mitte'* and the SS Cavalry Brigade.<sup>32</sup>

The branch of the German Bundesarchiv at Lichterfelde, Berlin, also holds a large

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<sup>32</sup> The institution of the supreme commanders of the army rear areas has also been outlined very competently in a recent source: Jörn Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik in der Sowjetunion: die Befehlshaber der rückwärtigen Heeresgebiete 1941 – 1943* (Paderborn, 2010).

amount of material on the SS which particularly helps to delineate the early phase of the SS cavalry, especially the close connection between Himmler and Fegelein that helped to create a military unit from the Fegelein riding school at Munich. The records of the former Berlin Document Center, an Allied organisation which was founded to support the 'denazification' of Germany in the late 1940s, comprise several databases with files on hundreds of thousands former SS officers, non-commissioned officers and men, such as the SSO (SS organisations) database which holds information on life data, military careers, awards of medals and decorations, and Nazi party membership. Files from the SSO database can be used for outlining biographies of members of the brigade.

Court files form the second large source complex which has to be taken into account. In the 1960s, two trials against former officers of the two regiments that made up the cavalry brigade were held in West Germany. In the trial against Gustav Lombard and other officers of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, no verdict was returned. In the other trial against Franz Magill and other officers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, four defendants were sentenced to prison sentences of four and five years and one was acquitted. The records of these legal proceedings are kept at the Ludwigsburg branch of the German Bundesarchiv and the Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv - Staatsarchiv at Wolfenbüttel. They contain questionings of hundreds of some 400 former SS cavalrymen as well as the indictments and conclusions of the two cases and also other documents such as testimonies of survivors.<sup>33</sup> The result of the Magill trial was also published in an academic series in 1979.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> In the trial against Gustav Lombard and others, more than 230 witnesses were questioned; see Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 324. Not all of them, however, had served with the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment or the bicycle reconnaissance battalion during the missions in the Pripet Marshes; some of the witnesses were questioned because they had served under Fegelein at another point in time, such as Egon Birkigt (see chapter 1). For the proceedings against Franz Magill and others, about 170 former SS cavalrymen were interrogated; see Zwischenbericht der Sonderkommission Z [zum Stand der Ermittlungen mit umfangreichen Adressenlisten] vom 12.11. 1962, in StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Nr. 1268, pp. 43-98.

<sup>34</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungs-*

Apart from using primary and secondary sources, I also conducted interviews with two investigators who worked on the Magill case: a former police inspector and a retired regional prosecutor.<sup>35</sup> These talks not only provided information on the involvement of the SS Cavalry Brigade in the Holocaust, but also provided valuable reflections on the mindsets of the officers as well as the ordinary soldiers. This perspective helped me to view aspects of perpetrator history not only in the abstract, academic sense but also to understand them as part of real life as well as judicial proceedings: why did a man commit a crime and how could he be brought to justice for it? Moreover, both interview partners elaborated on the situation in postwar West Germany, where the prosecution of Nazi crimes was not a priority of legal authorities and investigations against such perpetrators were often impeded by the circumstances. In addition to illustrating investigation methods and giving of evidence, the two interviews also facilitate working with testimony as they can help to identify and interpret different narratives and layers of information in the interrogation transcripts.

The three most important explanations offered by former SS cavalrymen for their behaviour, which will be addressed in the appropriate chapters of the thesis, were designed to conceal the actual contribution or role of individuals in the crimes. Many veterans described an atmosphere of harshness and sometimes excessive punishment in their units as a reason for not refusing orders to kill Jews. In order to negate or extenuate their own involvement in executions, they said that they had perceived this as ‘putative duress’.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, some of the questioned justified killings as military

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*verbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20: Die vom 12.04.1964 bis zum 03.04.1965 ergangenen Strafurteile. Lfd. Nr. 569-590*, ed. I. Sagel-Grande and others (Amsterdam, 1979), pp. 24-105. This series incorporates conclusions of all Nazi trials conducted in Germany, including those held in East Germany until 1989. As these works only comprise cases which ended with a sentence or an acquittal, the Lombard trial is not included in the series.

<sup>35</sup> These interviews were carried out on 26 January and 3 August, 2011 respectively. Based on information from court files, I have also attempted to find former SS cavalrymen in order to interview them; unfortunately, this was in vain as most of them have passed away already.

<sup>36</sup> Auszüge aus Vernehmungsprotokollen von Schwadronsangehörigen, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp.

necessity by claiming that they had been part of the brigade's deployment in partisan warfare. Finally, when confronted with solid evidence former soldiers made exculpatory statements, for example by stating that they only played an auxiliary role in an execution.<sup>37</sup>

In order to interpret the validity of testimony, investigation methods and weaknesses of the judicial system have to be taken into account as well. First, a contrast between the rank groups amongst the SS veterans becomes evident, which results from the focus of the questionings.<sup>38</sup> Former officers showed a pattern of testimony which differed from that of the ranks as they denied their participation in the killings, especially their personal responsibility. Their former subordinates, on the other hand, sometimes took to answering questions evasively or making exculpatory statements but were not generally in denial. When questioned, most of them did not even make use of their right to remain silent. Some appeared to be glad to relieve their consciences and described the events in graphic detail. Both kinds of behaviour during the hearings were classified as normal by judicial authorities.<sup>39</sup> The veterans were not specifically questioned about their attitude towards Jews. Despite the fact that some of the men had shared anti-Semitic prejudice common in German society, the investigators assumed that a general hatred for Jews had not been the case. When asked for their personal impression of the former SS

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1629-1653; interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Bernhard D., retired chief inspector of the Landeskriminalamt Niedersachsen, 26 January, 2011; interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> During the questionings before the Magill trial, two distinctions were made: between witnesses and defendants as well as between officers and men. Former officers from the rank of *SS-Untersturmführer* and above were questioned as defendants (because investigators assumed that as superiors these men had been able to know right from wrong), whereas all other veterans were heard as witnesses, apart from perpetrators of excesses. See interview with Bernhard D., retired chief inspector of the Landeskriminalamt Niedersachsen, 26 January, 2011; interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Bernhard D., retired chief inspector of the Landeskriminalamt Niedersachsen, 26 January, 2011; interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011.

cavalrymen, the investigators supported the image of non-ideological perpetrators who had killed under orders. From their experience in the Magill trial, they concluded that this had happened due to the special circumstances the soldiers had found themselves in, not because of their strong support for National Socialism or personal anti-Semitism.<sup>40</sup>

Interrogation protocols also reflect a characteristic of the West German penal code: as laws regarding the punishment of genocide, crimes against humanity, or participation in the Holocaust did not exist or were not applicable, perpetrators had to be charged with murder or accessory to murder instead.<sup>41</sup> In order to fulfil the elements of murder, reasons such as lust to kill, greed, satisfaction of sexual instinct, or other ‘base motives’ such as racial hatred had to be proven.<sup>42</sup> Witnesses and defendants very carefully tried to avoid the impression of having killed out of ‘base motives’, which might be another reason for the absence of ideology from the questionings.<sup>43</sup> The work of the investigators was also impaired by another factor. Exposing lies and, ultimately, establishing the individual role of witnesses and the guilt of defendants required expert knowledge of Nazi Germany and the SS Cavalry

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Bernhard D., retired chief inspector of the Landeskriminalamt Niedersachsen, 26 January, 2011; interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011.

<sup>41</sup> After the end of the Second World War, a completely new justice system had to be built up in both parts of Germany. This process was impeded by many factors, such as the allied supremacy over German courts between 1945 and 1949. As this dissertation refers to court proceedings in West Germany, the development in the German Democratic Republic will not be examined in this context. On the prosecution of Nazi crimes in West Germany during the 1960s, see Michael Greve, *Der justitielle und rechtspolitische Umgang mit den NS-Gewaltverbrechen in den sechziger Jahren* (Frankfurt, 2001). For problems resulting from the allied legislature and an insufficient penal code, see *ibid.*, pp. 17-18. See also Edith Raim, *Der Wiederaufbau der Justiz in Westdeutschland und die Ahndung von NS-Verbrechen in der Besatzungszeit 1945 – 1949*, in Jürgen Finger and others (eds.), *Vom Recht zur Geschichte: Akten aus NS-Prozessen als Quellen der Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen, 2009), pp. 57-58. The punishment of genocide was only introduced into the West German penal code in 1954. As laws cannot be applied with retrospective effect in Germany, this law was of no use during the court proceedings against former members of the SS Cavalry Brigade. See Kerstin Freudiger, *Die juristische Aufarbeitung von NS-Verbrechen* (Tübingen, 2002), pp. 31-32.

<sup>42</sup> Freudiger, *Die juristische Aufarbeitung von NS-Verbrechen*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>43</sup> Konrad Kwiet, ‘Von Tätern zu Befehlsempfängern. Legendenbildung und Strafverfolgung nach 1945’, in J. Matthäus (ed.), *Ausbildungsziel Judenmord? ‘Weltanschauliche Erziehung’ von SS, Polizei und Waffen-SS im Rahmen der Endlösung* (Frankfurt, 2003), pp. 122-125 and pp. 128-129. Kwiet refers to questionings of former members of the SS Cavalry Brigade including Franz Magill. He also quotes from documents regarding proceedings against former policemen and members of the security police and the security service.

Brigade. This prerequisite could not always be fulfilled by policemen who were assigned to the proceedings as hardly any specific literature on the Holocaust was available in the early 1960s. In order to ensure a thorough preparation of the trials, investigators had to resort to archival research to gain the necessary background knowledge.<sup>44</sup>

The structure of my work is based on chronological order. Each chapter follows the ‘frame of reference’ model according to the method developed by Harald Welzer in order to establish the background and development of the SS cavalry with a special focus on perpetrator history.

The first section outlines the formation of mounted SS units and their incorporation into Nazi concepts of ideology and the creation of a police state from the early 1930s until the beginning of the Second World War. This also involves the role of sports, particularly horse-riding, and the build-up of armed formations within the SS.

The second part of the work surveys the growth of the SS cavalry regiments in Poland and their function as occupation units between late 1939 and early 1941. It shows how sportsmen and farmers were turned into soldiers and took part in acts of mass violence such as the destruction of the Polish elites and Jews. Two years after the beginning of the war, the SS cavalrymen were embedded into a new command structure and had begun their training for deployment in combat.

A subsequent chapter examines the role of the two SS Cavalry Regiments in the opening phase of operation *Barbarossa*, the German attack on the Soviet Union. Now part of the forces of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS*, Himmler’s ‘private army’, Fegelein’s men took part in a short combat mission. Against the background of the nascent Holocaust, the cavalry units began to develop their ‘dual role’ and

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011; interview with Bernhard D., retired chief inspector of the Landeskriminalamt Niedersachsen, 26 January, 2011.

were soon included in the German occupation plans. This chapter also includes an excursus on the officer corps of the SS cavalry, which points out how Nazi ideology shaped the lives of its leadership and which effect the special function of the unit had on individuals, and another section on minor combat missions in Belorussia.

The fourth chapter analyses the deployment of the brigade in Belorussia between July and September, 1941, and the crimes the unit committed in this area. The aim of this section is not only to follow the general route of the SS cavalry through the Pripet Marshes in a documentary approach but to explain the importance of the unit in the inception of the next phase of the Holocaust, the annihilation of entire Jewish communities. For this period, the aspect of perpetrator history is of special importance: whereas no documents on the process of SS cavalrymen becoming killers in Poland exist, this can be demonstrated in a detailed way for their mission in Belorussia. The amalgamation of the regiments to a brigade fell into this time as well, as did the first real combat operation of the unit.

Despite the fact that partisan warfare was an actual task only for a comparatively short time, it was of great importance for the SS cavalry: even when Fegelein's men did not have to face a threat from guerrillas in Poland and Belorussia, the fight against insurgents served as a welcome reason for concealing the real mission objective, namely mass killings. The development of this justification and real partisan warfare of the unit in Russia will be outlined in the fifth chapter.

The sixth section analyses military operations of the SS Cavalry Brigade from late 1941 until early 1942. These include the participation of the unit in the German advance on Moscow, the ensuing fighting near Rzhev, and the defence of this sector until the spring of 1942. The SS cavalrymen were now no longer involved in large-scale massacres, but their conduct will be examined regarding individual cases of atrocities as well. As their frame of reference during this period of time was

determined by combat, the performance of the soldiers forms an essential part of this chapter. By means of an excursus, this aspect will be integrated into the context of the operational history of the *Waffen-SS*.

The interpretation of events such as military actions and massacres, together with an evaluation of biographies and the application of the most important models and theories in perpetrator history can help to answer the central research question of the work: What factors shaped the institutional-level conduct of the SS Cavalry Brigade as an instrument of ideological terror, and as a combat force? In the analysis of these two capacities, the main focus is on the role of the brigade as a mobile killing squad. This emphasis is based on the unit's particular importance in the development of the Final Solution. The ideological aspect, however, is closely related to the military part of the brigade's deployment in the Soviet Union: despite the fact that the SS cavalrymen were the first to initiate the indiscriminate killing of all Jews, the key to understanding their special situation lies in the combination of both factors.

The history of the unit and the biographies of SS cavalrymen will be integrated into the historical context and into the field of Holocaust research. By incorporating English primary and secondary sources into the research and by translating German terms within the text I am hoping to transcend the German context and to conduct a study that contains material and findings which have not been analysed until now.

1) Elite sportsmen in the SS: the pre-war *Reiterstandarten* in the Nazi state

The forming of the units that later made up the SS Cavalry Brigade was a gradual process which began before the outbreak of the Second World War. It was intrinsically tied to the lives of several SS officers, most notably Hermann Fegelein, and also to the development of mounted paramilitary formations in Germany.

In the early 1930s the two most important Nazi paramilitary organisations, the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) and the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) grew rapidly; they were joined primarily by war veterans and people who had been members of other rightwing organisations before. Their leaders, Ernst Röhm and Heinrich Himmler, established a strict hierarchy in their respective institutions, both of which were based on military principles and closely resembled one another in structure and terminology. In other respects, mainly regarding their tasks, they were very different: the SA were the ‘boots on the ground’ for the fight against political enemies whereas the SS was an elite force which served as a bodyguard for Hitler and the party leadership; it was also designated to discipline the SA in the case of revolt.<sup>45</sup> In the years before Hitler came to power and in the early days of the Nazi regime, the administration of the SS was subject to many changes. From late 1934 onwards, it became more effectively structured and took on the basic organisational form it was to keep until its end in 1945. The institution, which was also known under the generic term of *Allgemeine SS*, consisted of several main administrative offices or *Hauptämter*. Nationwide, the SS was divided into main sections, the so-called *Oberabschnitte*, which corresponded with the military districts. Below them came the *Abschnitte*, or districts, of which there were about three in each *Oberabschnitt*.<sup>46</sup> On this regional

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<sup>45</sup> Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, pp. 56-59.

<sup>46</sup> Lumsden, R., *Himmler's Black Order. A History of the SS, 1923 – 1945* (Stroud, 1997), pp. 22-34.

level, the SS built up its manpower in regimental units, the so-called *Standarten*, a scheme that paralleled the organisation of the SA. There were *Fußstandarten* and *Reiterstandarten*, which were the equivalent of infantry or cavalry regiments respectively. The mounted component was summarised as *Reiter-SA* and *Reiter-SS*.<sup>47</sup>

Many of the new paramilitary detachments were understrength in the years preceding the Nazi takeover. Whereas the *Standarte* as the standard SS unit had been established by 1930, individual units often only grew big enough to constitute a full *Standarte* from 1933 onwards. Often, an individual *Sturm* (company or squadron) or *Reitersturm* (mounted company or squadron) was founded first.<sup>48</sup> As far as new mounted units were concerned, this process was inconsistent throughout the country as there were some regional differences. As the SA had begun to establish mounted units in 1930, the *Reiter-SA* was already dominant in some parts of the country before the *Reiter-SS* started to follow suit a year later. Until 1933, civilian riding clubs of all kinds continued to exist parallel to the *Reiterstandarten* that had been founded so far. After Adolf Hitler had come to power, two different developments influenced the expansion of mounted paramilitary units. Firstly, a decree issued by the Ministry of the Interior required that all rural riding associations in Germany had to become part of the SA or the SS, a measure which served the purpose of *Gleichschaltung* and militarisation of the German society under the Nazis. As a result, both organisations soon were caught up in a competition for recruitment of experienced horsemen and influence over certain interest groups, which lasted several years.<sup>49</sup> Due to their different strength and social composition, there was a

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<sup>47</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 39; Lumsden, *Himmler's Black Order*, p. 37.

<sup>48</sup> Lumsden, *Himmler's Black Order*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>49</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 39; Michael H. Kater, 'Zum gegenseitigen Verständnis von SA und SS in der Sozialgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus von 1925 bis 1939', in *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 62 (1975), p. 360; Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry*, p. 17 and pp. 71-76.

significant difference in the intention, role, and appearance of mounted formations between the SA and SS. Röhm's organisation intended to broaden its selection of leisure time facilities in order to appeal to people from a wider range of social backgrounds.<sup>50</sup> Most of its members, however, were farmers. From 1933, the requirement of owning a horse was abolished and the strength of the horse units increased rapidly: whereas in 1935 88,000 men were members of the *Reiter-SA*, their number rose to 200,000 in 1939. The *Reiter-SS*, on the other hand, never had more than about 12,000 members throughout the 1930s.<sup>51</sup>

Heinrich Himmler, the leader of the SS, intended to integrate the rural elites, including many members of the German nobility, into his organisation. For this purpose, he solicited the more exclusive rural equestrian associations and incorporated several horse-breeding farms into the structure of the *Reiter-SS* as well. Although the SA had followed this approach already and taken over a majority of the riding clubs and associations in Germany, the SS was more successful in the main horse breeding areas such as East Prussia, Holstein, Oldenburg, Hanover and Westphalia. Despite the fact that it exerted a growing influence over all aspects of horse riding and breeding in Germany, the SS had to make concessions to influential noblemen. In order to win them over, Himmler accepted members of the equestrian associations into the SS regardless of their political views, a step which sparked protest from the 'old fighters' within the organisation.<sup>52</sup> For new candidates of the *Reiterstürme*, he also suspended the freeze on entry into the Nazi party, which had been introduced in May, 1933.<sup>53</sup> As a result, the horsemen within the SS were elite

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<sup>50</sup> Peter Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone: Geschichte der SA* (München, 1989), p. 93.

<sup>51</sup> Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry*, pp. 72-73. The author assumes that during the 1930s about 20,000 men passed through the ranks of the *Reiter-SS*; see *ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>52</sup> Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, pp. 137-138; Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry*, p. 10; Berno Bahro, 'Der Sport und seine Rolle in der nationalsozialistischen Elitetruppe SS', *Historical Social Research* 32 (2007), p. 87.

<sup>53</sup> Kater, 'Zum gegenseitigen Verständnis von SA und SS', p. 360.

from the beginning; the formations had a largely ceremonial and representative character, committed to the advancement of equestrianism. Unlike other paramilitary arms of the Nazi party, the *Reiterstandarten* did not display radicalism and brutality in public as they did not have to guard Nazi politicians or concentration camps and were not used for street fighting or intimidation of Jews. Although there is some evidence which indicates a preparation for paramilitary duties as well as military service, the focus on sports and the representative character was dominant.<sup>54</sup> Later successes in national and international equestrian competitions showed that Himmler's elite policy was paying off throughout the 1930s, as opposed to the mass inclusion of new members into mounted units of the SA: the most talented horsemen could be found in the *Reiter-SS*.<sup>55</sup>

In some cases the roots of a local *Reitersturm* can be traced back to rightwing extremist organisations that were active long before the Nazi takeover. Munich, the city which was later referred to as *Hauptstadt der Bewegung*, is most important in this context: the SS *Reitersturm* there was created in February, 1931.<sup>56</sup> Its founders were 25 former members of the *Bund Oberland*, the successor of the paramilitary *Freikorps Oberland*.<sup>57</sup> After the *Reitersturm* had been set up, a cooperation with a

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<sup>54</sup> SS equestrians were also trained as a mounted police force, for example in manning roadblocks and barricades, and sometimes carried out security duty at events of the Nazi party; see Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry*, pp. 24-25. Due to the small size of the organisation (especially when compared to the SA), it can be assumed that they were not employed in this role very often. See also Lumsden, *Himmler's Black Order*, p. 37.

<sup>55</sup> Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry*, p. 76.

<sup>56</sup> Mathias Rösch, *Die Münchner NSDAP 1925 – 1933: eine Untersuchung zur inneren Struktur der NSDAP in der Weimarer Republik* (München, 2002), p. 260. According to the first document signed by Fegelein which refers to the two SS cavalry regiments as a brigade and can therefore be viewed as the 'founding document' of the unit, the beginning of the *Reitersturm* at Munich even dated back to 1929; see Schreiben an die Kommandeure und Chefs der SS-Kav.Brigitade, 1 August, 1941, in BArchF, RS 3-8/20. It is likely, though, that Fegelein gave a wrong date here in order to make the unit look more like an 'old guard' that had existed even before the Nazi party started to win millions of votes in 1930. The unit name and abbreviation he gave in the document from 1941, '1. Reitersturm 3/1/1 der allgemeinen SS', stood for the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Reitersturm* of the 1<sup>st</sup> *Sturmbann* (battalion) of the 1<sup>st</sup> *Standarte*. The SS *Reitersturm* at Munich only existed under this name and in this subdivision from February, 1931 onwards; see again Rösch, *Die Münchner NSDAP 1925 – 1933*, p. 260-261.

<sup>57</sup> *Freikorps Oberland* had been one of the best-known and most radical *Freikorps* units. Its men were involved in many of the politically motivated conflicts of the immediate postwar period, such as the fight for the Annaberg in Upper Silesia in 1921. The *Freikorps* was dissolved in the same year but

local riding school owned by a man named Johann Fegelein facilitated its training: he lent horses to them and provided regular riding instructions for its members, which he also did for members of the SA at that time.<sup>58</sup> Fegelein was a former cavalry lieutenant of the German imperial army and veteran of the First World War. He had rented a riding hall on the premises of an army barracks where he gave lessons himself; these were very popular, especially with university students.<sup>59</sup> Both Fegelein and his young customers shared the political views of the Nazis before 1933: university students at Munich became more and more radical at this time and Fegelein also provided a venue for gatherings of the NSDAP at the horse breeding farm he owned on the outskirts of town.<sup>60</sup> Egon Birkigt, who led the equestrian section of the university sports programme at Munich, stated after 1945 that he had joined the *SS-Reitersturm* with all his companions in 1933 after becoming acquainted with Hermann Fegelein, Johann's son.<sup>61</sup>

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reformed under its new name *Bund Oberland* soon afterwards. It then participated in the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923; see Hans Fenske, *Konservativismus und Rechtsradikalismus in Bayern nach 1918* (Bad Homburg, 1969), p. 53 and p. 159. Amongst its members was Josef "Sepp" Dietrich, who later founded the *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* and became one of the highest-ranking and most decorated soldiers of the *Waffen-SS*. For Dietrich, see Christopher Clark, 'Josef "Sepp" Dietrich. Landsknecht im Dienste Hitlers', in R. Smelser and E. Syring (eds.), *Die SS – Elite unter dem Totenkopf. 30 Lebensläufe* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, Zurich 2000), pp. 119-133; his membership of *Freikorps* and *Bund Oberland* is described on p. 120. See also James J. Weingartner, 'Sepp Dietrich, Heinrich Himmler, and the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, 1933 – 1938', *Central European History* 1 (1968), p. 265.

<sup>58</sup> Volker Riess, 'Hermann Fegelein. Parvenü ohne Skrupel', in Smelser and Syring, *Die SS – Elite unter dem Totenkopf*, p. 161; Rösch, M., *Die Münchner NSDAP 1925 – 1933*, p. 260; Indra Schöller, 'Die Universitätsreitschule München von ihrer Gründung im Jahre 1927 bis zur Schenkung an die Universität München', in E. Kraus (ed.), *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Band 1 – Die Universität München im Dritten Reich, Aufsätze Teil I* (Munich, 2006), p. 106.

<sup>59</sup> Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 160; Schöller, 'Die Universitätsreitschule München', p. 106. According to Schöller, the popularity of Fegelein's courses with students could already be observed in 1928, when a university professor listed the major riding schools in Munich and compared their prices and popularity with those of the university riding school. See Schreiben Moser an Rektorat vom 10.11. 1928, in University Archive Munich, Sen 725, quoted *ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106. For the use of Fegelein's farm as a venue, see Eichenlaubträger SS-Oberführer Fegelein, *Völkischer Beobachter*, 24 December, 1942, in BArchB, SSO Hermann Fegelein. See also Bahro, 'Der Sport und seine Rolle in der nationalsozialistischen Elitetruppe SS', p. 88.

<sup>61</sup> Vernehmung Egon Birkigt vom 22.3. 1960, in BArchL, B 162/5544, p. n40. Birkigt later became a *Hauptsturmführer* in the *Waffen-SS* and served in the *SS* cavalry in various functions until the end of the war. His assignments included service as squadron commander in the 1<sup>st</sup> *SS* Cavalry Regiment in Warsaw, the organisation of horse races at the main riding school in Munich and front-line duty in the Ukraine in 1944.

Another mounted SS formation of particular importance was the *1<sup>st</sup> SS-Reitersturm* at Berlin, which stands out because at least three men who later played important roles in the SS belonged to it in the early years of the Nazi regime. In addition, it fulfilled a ceremonial duty: upon request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its riders served high-ranking state guests as escorts and interpreters, or formed a guard of honour during visits of foreign politicians and diplomats.<sup>62</sup> For these purposes, knowledge of foreign languages and etiquette were essential, requirements which were easily met by the members of the unit which, like the rest of *Reiterstandarte 7*, consisted of ‘diplomats and attachés from the Ministry of Intelligence and the Justice Department with numerous students, high-level civil servants, and members of Berlin’s leading social circles (nobles and the financial elite)’.<sup>63</sup> Two particularly prominent equestrians in this *Reiterstandarte* were Gustav Adolph von Halem, deputy Chief of Protocol in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Prince Bernhard zur Lippe-Biesterfeld, the Dutch prince consort.<sup>64</sup> Events attended by the *1<sup>st</sup> SS-Reitersturm* included the annual *Reichsparteitag* at Nuremberg, the 1936 Olympics at Berlin, and state visits of Benito Mussolini and Miklós Horthy. The visit of the Duce, which lasted several days, was accompanied by the SS men from the beginning to the end. In his memoirs, Gustav Lombard also mentions an incognito visit of Edward Duke of Windsor at Hermann Göring’s residence in Brandenburg, where an SS equestrian officer from Berlin served as an escort to the guest. According to Lombard, the Duke of Windsor conferred with Hitler and warned him of Winston Churchill.<sup>65</sup> After the war, the special support role of the *1<sup>st</sup> SS-Reitersturm*, the eloquent behaviour of its men, the valuable connections they made

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<sup>62</sup> Lebenserinnerungen des Generalmajors der Waffen-SS und SS-Brigadeführers Gustav Lombard, in: BArchF, MSg 2/13509, p. 17. This source will from now on be abbreviated as ‘Lebenserinnerungen Gustav Lombard’. See also Jens Westemeier, *Joachim Peiper (1915-1976): Zwischen Totenkopf und Ritterkreuz. Lebensweg eines SS-Führers* (Bissendorf, 2006), p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> Wilson, *Himmler’s Cavalry*, p. 26.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>65</sup> Lebenserinnerungen Gustav Lombard, pp. 17-23.

with foreign diplomats, and perhaps also the membership of famous sportsmen and the Dutch prince consort influenced the assessment of the mounted SS at the Nuremberg Trials: unaware of the later crimes of the SS cavalry, the Allied tribunal excluded this part of the SS from being declared a criminal organisation.<sup>66</sup>

But the *1<sup>st</sup> SS-Reitersturm* was not only a spare-time activity for diplomats – it was also the starting point for several men with very different political ambitions. The roster of 1933 – 1934 almost reads like a ‘who’s who’ of the later SS leadership. Gustav Lombard, for example, first commanded one of the platoons, later the entire *Sturm*. During the war, he led the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment in 1941 and later rose to the rank of *Brigadeführer* in the *Waffen-SS*.<sup>67</sup> Under him, a young man began his SS career in this company: Joachim Peiper, who later served as Himmler's adjutant and became a highly decorated officer in the *Waffen-SS*.<sup>68</sup> In the time he could spare from his administrative duties in Berlin, Hans Kammler practiced his favourite sport in the *Reitersturm*, where he had the rank of *Unterscharführer*. Some years later, he was in an executive position in the SS main office for economic administration and responsible for all construction work in concentration camps, which also included gas chambers and underground factories of the German arms industry.<sup>69</sup>

These two *Reiterstürme* are the two most prominent examples for the growth of small mounted units into larger ones. When membership increased throughout the 1930s, the early *Reiterstürme* were embedded in *Reiterstandarten*: the unit at

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<sup>66</sup> Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry*, pp. 172-173.

<sup>67</sup> Dienstlaufbahn Gustav Lombard, in: BArchB, SSO Gustav Lombard; Vernehmung Gustav Lombard vom 10.3. 1964, in: BArchL, B 162/5540, p. e67 f., quoted in Martin Cüppers, ‘Gustav Lombard – ein engagierter Judenmörder aus der Waffen-SS’, in K. M. Mallmann and G. Paul (eds.), *Karrieren der Gewalt: Nationalsozialistische Täterbiographien* (Darmstadt, 2004), p. 151, footnote 43.

<sup>68</sup> Westemeier, *Peiper*, pp. 1-2, pp. 7-13, and pp. 25-57.

<sup>69</sup> Rainer Fröbe, ‘Hans Kammler. Technokrat der Vernichtung’, in Smelser and Syring, *Die SS – Elite unter dem Totenkopf*, pp. 305-319. For Kammler's career in the SS and his involvement in the concentration camp system, see pp. 307-317. See also the following source: [http://www.gtj.de/archiv/indexa.html?kammler\\_leb39.html](http://www.gtj.de/archiv/indexa.html?kammler_leb39.html) (accessed on 8 January, 2011).

Munich, for example, became part of *Reiterstandarte 15*. By 1939, 21 *Reiterstandarten* of the *Allgemeine SS* were formed all over Germany, some of which were based at places where garrisons of army cavalry with excellent riding facilities existed, such as Insterburg in East Prussia.<sup>70</sup> From 1933 onwards, equestrians could only practise competitive sports in Germany as members of the SA and SS *Reiterstürme*. In order to take part in tournaments, championships or even the Olympics, they had to join these formations unless they were not cavalymen in the regular *Reichswehr* anyway. Thus, being a member of the mounted SS did not necessarily mean being a fanatical National socialist in the first years of the Third Reich. Many future members of the SS Cavalry Brigade, among them not only officers but also non-commissioned officers and men, had found their way into its ranks through their sport, not their political attitude.<sup>71</sup>

During the first six years of the Third Reich, a passion for equitation was the only feature common to members of the *Reiterstandarten*; otherwise, a strong heterogeneity could be observed: from former *Freikorps* fighters to noblemen and from skilled professionals to peasants, many different types were represented. As a result of Himmler's easing of the conditions for admission in order to attract members of the German upper classes, many men who had retained their conservative and nationalist viewpoint entered the *Reiterstandarten*.<sup>72</sup> Open

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<sup>70</sup> Inspekteur der Reiterei, 15 February, 1939, in BArchB, NS 31/346, quoted in Bahro, 'Der Sport und seine Rolle in der nationalsozialistischen Elitetruppe SS', p. 87; Lumsden, *Himmler's Black Order*, p. 38; see also Friedrich, Stahl, (ed.), *Heereseinteilung 1939: Gliederung, Standorte und Kommandeure sämtlicher Einheiten und Dienststellen des Friedensheeres am 3.1. 1939 und die Kriegsgliederung vom 1.9. 1939* (Friedberg, 1980), p. 24.

<sup>71</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 39; Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry*, p. 17.

<sup>72</sup> As the political background of new members was often not checked thoroughly, other 'men with unwanted political tendencies' joined the mounted SS as well, in one case even a communist; see Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry*, p. 17. Also, the *Reiter-SS* became more selective from about 1935 onwards as Himmler wanted to 'recruit only horse owners or their sons', whereas previously poor farmers who did not own a horse had been accepted as well; see *ibid.*, p. 21. This change was brought about by the intention to 'expel opportunists and the unskilled'; see *ibid.*, p. 20. It also coincides with the beginning of national and international sporting success of the mounted units.

opposition, however, was not tolerated: in 1933, eleven equestrians who refused to take the SS oath were interned in concentration camps. A year later, the *Reiter-SS* leader of East Prussia, Anton Freiherr von Hohberg und Buchwald, became one of the victims of the Night of the Long Knives: as a former member of the *Stahlhelm*, he had passed on internal matters of the SS to the *Reichswehr* just before the disempowerment of the SA.<sup>73</sup> Although most of the SS horsemen were loyal to the *Reichsführer*, the *Reiter-SS* cannot easily be compared to other branches of the SS or the SA.

Several factors seem to suggest if not the character of non-Nazi units then at least two other possible interpretations: the frame of reference for the pre-war mounted SS was dominated by elite sport rather than politics, with some SS horsemen even showing deviant behaviour and views different from National Socialism. Many men became part of this organisation by chance as they had belonged to equestrian associations and intended to carry on practising their sport, which was only possible in the mounted SS or its SA counterpart. Interrogators after the war concluded from this that a large number of the veterans had originally joined the mounted SS as a result of their passion, not because of its political position.<sup>74</sup> Others, especially from the rural elites, joined the *Reiterstandarten* out of opportunism after Hitler had come to power. They wanted to position themselves in the new system, for which the SS and its even more elitist mounted section were much better suited than the rather proletarian SA. As the case of von Hohberg und Buchwald and the protest of the ‘old fighters’ against the acceptance of ‘reactionaries’ show, the mounted SS was by no means a uniform stronghold of the new regime. It did, however, contain a broad spectrum of right-wing political opinions from the more moderate conservatism of

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<sup>73</sup> Kater, ‘Zum gegenseitigen Verständnis von SA und SS’, pp. 359-360; Höhne, *The Order of the Death’s Head*, p.121 and p. 138.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011.

the Prussian nobility to the radicalism of the Nazis.

It must not, however, be forgotten that all members of these units, whatever their personal background, political opinion, or social standing was, lived in the society of a dictatorship. Thus, they were exposed to, aware of and sometimes actively engaged in the policies and measures of the Nazi regime. The mounted SS as a whole did not become an instrument of anti-Jewish policy before 1939, despite the fact that it was part of one of the paramilitary formations of the *NSDAP*. There were, however, intersections between organised equestrianism in the SS and the repressive system of the Nazi state even at this stage. As far as the officers are concerned, a high level of acceptance of these methods, if not an involvement in their implementation is suggested by multiple examples. Several men who later became officers in the SS cavalry served in a concentration camp guard unit at some point of their career, for example Heimo Hierthes, a regimental commander, and squadron leaders Siegfried Kotthaus, Kurt Wegener, and Ulrich Goertz.<sup>75</sup> There is no evidence, however, to suggest the deployment of a *Reiterstandarte* or one of its subunits for guard duty in one of the camps.<sup>76</sup> Involvement into the crimes of the Nazi regime did occur but only at an individual, not a group level; Kotthaus for instance was involved in the riots during the *Reichspogromnacht* and personally set fire to the synagogue at Wuppertal.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Hierthes served in the *Totenkopfsturmbann 'Brandenburg'* (the guard unit of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp) and later at Buchenwald before the outbreak of the war; see BAChB, SSO Heimo Hierthes. Kotthaus was a guard at Esterwegen concentration camp before he joined the SS cavalry in Poland; see curriculum vitae of Siegfried Kotthaus (1940), in: BAChB, SSO Siegfried Kotthaus. Wegener served in the *Totenkopfsturmbann 'Brandenburg'* as well; see curriculum vitae of Kurt Wegener, 8 March, 1938, in: BAChB, SSO Kurt Wegener. Goertz received training as a platoon leader at Dachau and later commanded a company of the *Totenkopfstandarte* at Oranienburg (the successor of the *Totenkopfsturmbann 'Brandenburg'*); see Dienstlaufbahn des Goertz, Ulrich (undated), in: BAChB, SSO Ulrich Goertz.

<sup>76</sup> According to the homepage of the Federal Archive, *Reiterstandarte 15* from Munich was involved in guarding the Dachau concentration camp: see the sources on 'Pferde im Einsatz bei Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS', [http://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder\\_dokumente/00943/index-11.html.de](http://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder_dokumente/00943/index-11.html.de) (accessed on 7 January, 2011). But according to the Dachau memorial, SS horsemen or other mounted forces never belonged to the guard troops there; it is possible though that members of *Reiterstandarte 15* received training at the SS recruit depot at Dachau. This information was obtained through an email from Dirk Riedel from the Dachau memorial on 15 April, 2010.

<sup>77</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 117.

These men were the very opposite of men like Anton Freiherr von Hohberg und Buchwald: as part of the new elite, they spearheaded radical measures rather than just being bystanders. Moreover, men who later rose to prominent positions in the SS had already been members of the pre-war *Reiterstandarten*, such as Joachim Peiper or Hans Kammler. Thus, it can be assumed that those who held higher ranks in the pre-war mounted SS and their comrades who rose through the ranks at the same time predominantly, but not exclusively, supported Hitler's aims and Himmler's methods. Regarding the ordinary members, post-war investigators noticed anti-Semitic undertones in some of their statements. Presumably, these views had already predated the Nazi takeover; from 1933, they correlated with the general policy of the regime which skilfully exploited them. Although a majority of the veterans had a distinct rural background, which often ruled out strong personal contacts with Jews in their native regions, some of the men felt a kind of 'social envy' as Jews were perceived as being more educated and belonging to the upper class. They disliked them as they disliked anybody who stood above the 'ordinary workers' in the German social system, but they had not entered the SS to kill Jews.<sup>78</sup>

The establishment owned by Johann Fegelein is the best-known example of the transformation of a local riding school into an SS training centre for equestrians. The most important personality to emerge from there was his son Hermann, who had been a passionate equestrian since his childhood and was also one of Germany's top show jumpers. He worked as a riding instructor and soon took over the *SS-Reitersturm*, which had become based at the school.<sup>79</sup> In the mid-1930s, he also assumed control over the school itself, which overlapped with the growing importance of the institute and the plans of turning it into the main riding school for

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Bernhard D., retired chief inspector of the Landeskriminalamt Niedersachsen, 26 January, 2011; interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011.

<sup>79</sup> Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 161; Bahro, 'Der Sport und seine Rolle in der nationalsozialistischen Elitetruppe SS', p. 88.

the SS.<sup>80</sup> By this time, the old location at a barracks in the borough of Neuhausen no longer suited Himmler's ambitious goals: in late 1936, he gave the order to build a new facility which was to become a 'riding academy' that provided a selection of equestrians and horses. Designed as a school for members of the SS and police, it was predominantly an institution that was to assure that the SS was being successfully represented at international tournaments. This project was energetically and generously promoted by Christian Weber, the chairman of the local Nazi party, who took a great interest in equitation. He provided some of his own land holdings and used his personal connections to raise funds of 500,000 reichsmarks from the state of Bavaria and the city and district of Munich. Thus, a state-of-the-art institute was built on the site of the Fegelein horse-breeding farm in the suburb of Riem and the new *SS-Hauptreitschule* was handed over to Heinrich Himmler ceremoniously on 25 July, 1937.<sup>81</sup>

Fegelein and Weber greatly benefitted from this situation: the former remained in charge of the institution in its new form, an appointment which greatly boosted his own career, whereas the latter now also became his direct superior as Himmler made him inspector of the SS riding schools in 1937.<sup>82</sup> The riding school and the

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<sup>80</sup> It is not known when exactly Fegelein took over his father's riding school. Riess assumes that this happened in June, 1936 whereas Fegelein's SS file states 1 October, 1936 as a date. See Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 162, and Dienstlaufbahn des Fegelein, Hermann Otto (undated), BAArchB, SSO Hermann Fegelein.

<sup>81</sup> Christian Weber was an infamously corrupt Nazi party bigwig and close friend of Hitler's since the *Kampfzeit*; like Heinrich Himmler and Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich, he was an 'old fighter' and a veteran of the Beer Hall Putsch with a *Freikorps* background. He held various functions in the Nazi party until the end of the war; just after the German surrender in 1945, he died in a car accident on his way to an Allied interrogation camp. For a detailed account of his life, see Thomas Martin, 'Aspekte der politischen Biographie eines lokalen NS-Funktionärs. Der Fall Christian Weber', *Zeitschrift für Bayerische Landesgeschichte* 57 (1994), pp. 435-484. For Weber's role in supporting the SS riding school, see *ibid.*, pp. 472-473. Another work describes Weber's life in a non-scholarly, satirical way but also uses archival material; see Herbert Rosendorfer, *Die Nacht der Amazonen: Roman* (Munich, 1992). For the transformation of the horse-breeding farm into the main riding school see also Bahro, 'Der Sport und seine Rolle in der nationalsozialistischen Elitetruppe SS', p. 88. This article also mentions the fact that apart from the main riding school at Munich, there also was a smaller school at Forst (in the Lausitz area in eastern Germany); see *ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>82</sup> Their new positions as commander and inspector earned Fegelein and Weber the ranks of *Standartenführer* and *Brigadeführer* in the SS respectively; see Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 162, and Martin, 'Der Fall Christian Weber', p. 456.

advancement of equestrianism within the SS, however, were not the only matters in which these two men teamed up. By supporting a brutal act of *Arisierung* in 1938, Fegelein also showed that he shared the criminal energy and corruption for which Weber was notorious even amongst the functionaries of the Munich NSDAP. This incident occurred on the night of 8 November, 1938, a day before the so-called *Reichspogromnacht*, during which the radical basis of the Nazi party incited anti-Jewish riots throughout the entire country. Under the command of Christian Weber, Hermann Fegelein and a number of other SS men in plain clothes raided the house of Baron Rudolf Hirsch, a wealthy Jewish nobleman. They set fire to the building, kept fire fighters and police from interfering, and beat up Hirsch's brother. They pushed Hirsch around, trying to intimidate him into selling his villa to Weber at a low price. A day later, Hirsch was arrested and sent to the concentration camp at Dachau, 'where he was badly abused, and from which he was eventually released only after promising to sell his property immediately'.<sup>83</sup>

From the beginning, the *SS-Hauptreitschule* had a special status within the SS as it was highly privileged: it received the same status as an *Abschnitt* and became directly subordinate to the SS main office in Berlin.<sup>84</sup> It was designed as a counterpart of the army cavalry school at Hanover, the only other institution to train high-class equestrians in Germany. A continuous rivalry between the sportsmen of the two schools ensued as the SS tried to put an end to the domination the *Wehrmacht* had enjoyed for many years. The necessary means for this attempt were available to them: in terms of personal, material, and horses the equipment was at the highest level. In 1938, Adolf Hitler himself made a donation of 10,000 reichsmarks to the *SS-Hauptreitschule*. As a result of these efforts and the talent of its students, it

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<sup>83</sup> Alan E. Steinweis, *Kristallnacht 1938* (Harvard, 2009), pp. 79-80; Martin, 'Der Fall Christian Weber', pp. 470-471.

<sup>84</sup> Martin, 'Der Fall Christian Weber', p. 472.

soon evolved as a training ground for elite equestrians in Germany.<sup>85</sup>

For Heinrich Himmler, sport in general was highly important: in his opinion, SS men were not only to keep in shape but to be in constant readiness to combat, which they had already seen during the political unrest of the *Kampfzeit* before 1933. Urging the members of his organisation to do sports served as a means of discipline and enabled Himmler to conduct a selection of the best for the elite force of the Nazi party. Intense competition, both within the SS and on a national level, was promoted and numerous different sports, for example athletics, swimming, fencing or equitation, were strongly advanced. Himmler always demanded top performance from his men in order to improve the standing of his organisation through sporting success, especially compared with the *Wehrmacht*. He also introduced a unified sports system with various events throughout the year. To establish performance records, he ordered all SS men to gain the sports badge of the SA and ideally the Reich sports badge; members of riding formations were also urged to gain the riding sports badge.<sup>86</sup>

Equitation played a special role in the world of German sport as it was highly esteemed. In return for the generous advancement of this particular sport, the SS leadership expected the equestrians of the *SS-Hauptreitschule* to take part in all available horse riding tournaments. The high expectations were met by numerous victories: in 1935 Günter Temme, a non-commissioned officer in the *Reiter-SS*, won the German show-jumping derby at Hamburg. In 1935, 1936 and 1937, SS riders won all three equestrian championships in Germany. In no other field of sport did the SS become so successful: this record was unmatched even by their bitter rivals of the *Wehrmacht* and helped the organisation to gain further prestige.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 162; Bahro, 'Der Sport und seine Rolle in der nationalsozialistischen Elitetruppe SS', p. 88; Martin, 'Der Fall Christian Weber', p. 472.

<sup>86</sup> Bahro, 'Der Sport und seine Rolle in der nationalsozialistischen Elitetruppe SS', p. 78 and p. 81-82.

<sup>87</sup> Bahro, 'Der Sport und seine Rolle in der nationalsozialistischen Elitetruppe SS', p. 88; Höhne, *The*

In other disciplines, SS athletes were often less triumphant. At the *NS-Kampfspiele*, a national competition with tournaments in athletics, swimming, boxing, weightlifting, fencing, and other sports, sportsmen of the *Wehrmacht* proved to be far more successful. As only equitation (and fencing to some extent) could be dominated by the SS, Himmler's attempt to create an elite and to emancipate the SS from its secondary role behind the *Wehrmacht* was thwarted.<sup>88</sup>

As the SS equestrians continued to beat their competitors on a national level, Hermann Fegelein set himself a new target: participation in the 1940 Olympic Games. But the preparation was already overshadowed by the danger of a new war in Europe. When troops were mobilised for the annexation of Austria in March, 1938, Fegelein appealed to Heinrich Himmler and asked for the integration of his sportsmen and horses into Himmler's personal staff to protect them from being drafted, which was denied.<sup>89</sup> During the Sudeten crisis, a mobilisation plan which included the SS riding school in the army cavalry was introduced. In a letter to Himmler, Fegelein expressed his fears of losing his Olympic candidates to the army cavalry school at Hanover and asked for them to remain in the SS.<sup>90</sup> But this attempt, too, failed as Himmler only intended to save the horses but would not spare the men.<sup>91</sup> The guarantee given by the *Reichsführer* was then realised by another personal connection: Fegelein's friend Karl von Eberstein, head of the Munich police, incorporated the horses into the police stock and thus took them out of reach of the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>92</sup>

As far as the possible call-up of the equestrians was concerned, the state of

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*Order of the Death's Head*, p. 137.

<sup>88</sup> Bahro, 'Der Sport und seine Rolle in der nationalsozialistischen Elitetruppe SS', p. 90.

<sup>89</sup> Schreiben des Stabsführers des persönlichen Stabes RFSS an SS-Standartenführer Fegelein vom 7.4. 1938, in: BArchB, NS 19/1167, fol. 12.

<sup>90</sup> Schreiben Fegeleins an Himmler vom 6.9. 1938, in: BArchB, NS 19/1167, fols. 32-35, quoted in Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 162.

<sup>91</sup> Schreiben des Persönlichen Stabes RFSS an Fegelein vom 15.9.1938, in: BArchB, NS 19/1167, fol. 42, quoted in Bahro, 'Der Sport und seine Rolle in der nationalsozialistischen Elitetruppe SS', p. 89.

<sup>92</sup> Riess, 'Fegelein', pp. 162-163.

uncertainty continued throughout the year 1939 and became even more pressing with the deterioration in German – Polish relations. Finally, Himmler gave his consent to their integration into the armed formations of the SS, which was implemented on September 14, 1939.<sup>93</sup> A combination of three different factors had decided this question and thus become the base of the SS cavalry: Fegelein's personal ambitions, his connections to Heinrich Himmler, and the rivalry between *Wehrmacht* and SS.

According to the memoirs of Gustav Lombard, who later became commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, cooperation between the regular armed forces and the SS proved to be less problematic in another field: after consultations with army officials, Lombard was able to set up a special officer candidate platoon within the *1<sup>st</sup> SS-Reitersturm* in Berlin, which he commanded. As early as 1933, young SS equestrians who wanted to become officers in the army cavalry or artillery after finishing secondary school received their basic riding instruction here. From February 1 to mid-March, 1934, Lombard and 31 other SS horsemen took a training course to become platoon leaders in a cavalry squadron at Perleberg, a subunit of *Reiter-Regiment 4* from Potsdam.<sup>94</sup> This army regiment had been involved in border skirmishes in Upper Silesia in 1919 and 1920; also, it had seen action against rioters in Brandenburg a few months later. Throughout the Weimar Republic, extra recruits were trained illegally in this unit: the so-called *Zeitfreiwillige* (short-service volunteers) enlisted for nine months only and formed a 'silent reserve' afterwards, a clear breach of the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>95</sup> Thus, it was presumably no coincidence

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<sup>93</sup> Schreiben des Generalinspektors der verstärkten SS-Totenkopfstandarten an die Inspektion der SS-Reiterei vom 14.9. 1939 über die sofortige Unterstellung der Reitschule unter die verstärkten SS-Totenkopfstandarten, in: BArchB, NS 19/1167, fol. 98.

<sup>94</sup> Lebenserinnerungen Gustav Lombard, p. 16. In his memoirs, Lombard stated that he had also approached an artillery regiment in Potsdam and other cavalry units at Rathenow and Stendal; the document does not provide information on similar training courses for SS men at these garrisons.

<sup>95</sup> 'Die Geschichte des ehemaligen 4. (Preuß.) Reiterregiments zu Potsdam', vorgetragen am 27. Juni 1974 vor dem Offizierskorps des Panzer-Bataillons 24 in Braunschweig von dem ehemaligen Angehörigen der 1. Eskadron Fritz Wiechmann, quoted in 'Der Meldereiter' Nr. 2/1975, in: BArchF, MSg 3/4046, p. 1 and p. 7.

that the SS men were trained by this particular regiment.

Until the Blood Purge of 30 June – 2 July, 1934, which saw the disempowerment of the SA and the murder of its leader, Ernst Röhm, courses like this one for members of the SS were an exception. In the early days of the Nazi regime, the army preferred to cooperate with the SA: the party force, which already had formed border guard units before 1933, provided a much needed reserve for the *Reichswehr*. The military instructions received by a small number of SS men, including the Staff Guard of the Reich Chancellory under the command of Sepp Dietrich (the predecessor of the *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*), did not compare to the officer training of 13,000 SA leaders and the agreement between the army and the SA of July, 1933, to prepare 250,000 men from the ranks of the SA for the case of defence.<sup>96</sup> Activities such as the course initiated by Lombard, although they prove military training of SS members at a very early stage, only marked an intermediate step. Even after the summer of 1934, when the SS had won the power struggle within the Nazi party and the SA was no longer a part of strategic planning, it was units of the *Allgemeine SS* which did the preliminary work for the regular armed forces, despite their paramilitary character. The role of the *Reiterstandarten* serves as a perfect example for this development: in late 1936, the mounted SS formations were ordered by the SS main office to intensify the recruitment of young men with a rural background and the riding and driving training of their members. After positive feedback from the army on former SS horsemen, this measure was to ensure that the *SS-Reiter* would later make well qualified soldiers in mounted and horse-drawn units of the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Robert John O'Neill, *The German Army and The Nazi Party, 1933 – 1939* (London, 1966), pp. 32-34; Weingartner, 'Sepp Dietrich, Heinrich Himmler, and the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler', pp. 267-268.

<sup>97</sup> Schreiben des Chefs des SS-Hauptamtes, SS-Gruppenführer Heißmeyer, vom 22.11. 1936 betr. Vormilitärische[r] Reit- und Fahrausbildung bei den SS-Reitereinheiten, in: BArchB, NS 31/346, fol. 6. According to Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry*, p. 21, most former SS equestrians who were called up for service in the *Wehrmacht* after the reintroduction of the draft in 1935 requested to serve in a cavalry

At the same time, the process of creating substantial armed forces under the command of the SS was already under way: as part of Heinrich Himmler's intention to strengthen his organisation within the Nazi state, two formations in particular were strongly expanded. The *Verfügungstruppe* (VT) was a military force. It consisted mainly of infantry regiments, four of which were formed between 1933 and 1939; they were to form the core of a future SS army. The first of these units was Hitler's personal bodyguard, the *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*. This unit and the other regiments built up later were exclusively at Hitler's disposal. For that reason, they were referred to as *Verfügungstruppe*.<sup>98</sup> During the German invasion of Poland, the regiments were attached to army groups of the regular *Wehrmacht* and took part in the fighting.<sup>99</sup> The *Totenkopfverbände* (TV) were paramilitary units which ran and guarded the concentration camps. By 1939, four Death's Head regiments had been established: three in Germany and one in Austria.<sup>100</sup>

As divisions of the Nazi party, the VT and the TV were subordinate only to Hitler and constituted a purely national-socialist counterweight to the regular army and police. Despite strong resistance from the old elites, especially those in the military, Himmler prevailed: his initiative to establish these units as armed formations and to emphasise their role as executive organs of the state was backed by the *Führer* with the decree of 17 August, 1938. This act guaranteed the independence of the SS from the *Wehrmacht* and explained the duties of the different armed SS divisions. The VT was to be employed alongside units of the regular army in wartime or to be used domestically, if necessary. The TV were to fulfil 'special police tasks'. Service in the

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regiment. For that purpose, they could also acquire a special certificate, the so-called *Reiterschein*, which would allow them to be placed in such a unit rather than in a different branch of the army; see *ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>98</sup> See Hans Buchheim and others, *Anatomie des SS-Staates Band 1: Die SS – das Herrschaftsinstrument. Befehl und Gehorsam*. (Olten 1967), pp. 161-164; Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, p. 103 and p. 120.

<sup>99</sup> Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, pp. 124-128.

<sup>100</sup> *Totenkopfverbände* translates as Death's Head units. See Buchheim, *Anatomie des SS-Staates*, p. 162 and p. 164.

VT was to count as regular military service whereas service in the TV was not.<sup>101</sup> In the case of mobilization for war or in times of political unrest, the Death's Head units were to form a so-called *Polizeiverstärkung* (police strengthening). New police forces, made up of SS reservists aged 25-35, were to be armed and trained in recruit depots of the TV. While the TV units were either deployed for 'special police tasks' or training reinforcements, the concentration camps were to be guarded by SS reservists aged 45 or older.<sup>102</sup>

Another act that emphasized the military character of the VT was passed on 18 May, 1939. In this decree, the VT was granted artillery and other support regiments. Moreover, the maximum number of troops the SS was allowed to recruit and arm was given: the VT should not exceed the strength of 20,000 men, the TV 14,000 and the *Polizeiverstärkung* 25,000.<sup>103</sup> The TV, apart from their duty to train reserve forces, were also to drill replacements for the VT in wartime, which meant that they were now also given military tasks.<sup>104</sup> The necessary manpower for the *Polizeiverstärkung* was called up by means of the *Notdienstverordnung* (emergency order) of 15 October, 1938. According to this decree, draftees could be trained for military service in a very short time.<sup>105</sup> Training started in peacetime already: from mid-January 1939, reservists of the SS received their draft calls.<sup>106</sup> Immediately before the outbreak of war in 1939, the VT numbered around 18,000 men and the strength of the TV had risen to more than 8,000.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Buchheim, *Anatomie des SS-Staates*, pp. 168-170; Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>102</sup> Buchheim, *Anatomie des SS-Staates*, pp. 175-176; Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, pp. 114-115 and p. 123.

<sup>103</sup> Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>105</sup> Buchheim, *Anatomie des SS-Staates*, p. 176; for the three decrees of 1938 and 1939 see also Charles W. Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction. The SS Death's Head Division, 1933 – 1945*. (Princeton 1977), pp. 32-35.

<sup>106</sup> Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, p. 122 and pp. 124-125.

<sup>107</sup> Testimony of R. Brill at the International Military Tribunal (IMT) at Nuremberg, 5 August, 1946, in: IMT vol. XX, p. 372, quoted in Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, p. 125. See also Rede des Reichsführers-SS bei der SS-Gruppenführertagung in Posen am 4. Oktober 1943, Nuremberg Document 1919-PS, quoted in Stein, *The Waffen SS*, p. 27.

The fate of the SS equestrians now became closely linked to the armed forces of the SS as well. As they had not yet undergone military training they were included in the set-up of new guard forces which would soon be needed for the occupation of Poland. Thus, a place within the framework of SS infantry, SS guard units and administrative planning had been found for Fegelein and his men; ideally, it did not involve frontline duty. At the same time, many others were in a similar position: after 1 September, full use of the *Notdienstverordnung* was made as tens of thousands of SS reservists were called up again for active service in the *Polizeiverstärkung*. The reservists were used to form so-called *verstärkte Totenkopfstandarten* (reinforced Death's Head regiments).<sup>108</sup>

New methods were also introduced to support the growth of the armed SS. Until the beginning of the war, the SS had not been allowed to advertise as the *Wehrmacht* did not want to lose potential conscripts. These regulations were now eased.<sup>109</sup> On 19 September, 1939 a recruitment campaign for the SS was mounted in the German press. It called for volunteers born in 1921 and 1922 who had not been drafted by the army yet. If qualified, they were offered a career as an officer during their service and a takeover into police or public service after finishing their time in the armed forces.<sup>110</sup> As a result of lowering the age limit and offering job opportunities, high numbers of volunteers could be enlisted.<sup>111</sup> By the end of the year, the strength of the armed SS formations had risen to 56,000. This number only refers to the combined strength of the *Verfügungstruppe* and units of the *Polizeiverstärkung*, and excludes the regular Death's Head units.<sup>112</sup> For the newly formed police strengthening force an

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<sup>108</sup> Rolf Michaelis, *Die Waffen-SS. Dokumentation über die personelle Zusammensetzung und den Einsatz der Waffen-SS*. (Berlin 2006), p. 312; for an example of an SS draft call for the *Polizeiverstärkung* from late 1939 see *ibid.*, p. 313; see also Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>109</sup> Buchheim, *Anatomie des SS-Staates*, pp. 165-166.

<sup>110</sup> Michaelis, *Dokumentation*, p. 312.

<sup>111</sup> Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>112</sup> Schreiben des Insp. für Statistik an den RF-SS vom 1.3. 1943, BArchK, Slg. Schum. / 436, quoted in: Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, p. 126.

actual strength of around 36,000 men can be assumed at the end of 1939.<sup>113</sup> In November, the VT and the TV were also given a new name: *Waffen-SS* (armed SS). Within one year, this new name had fully replaced the terms *Verfügungstruppe* and *Totenkopfverbände*.<sup>114</sup>

At the beginning of the Second World War, the Equestrian SS did not have a military component yet. The development of the *Waffen-SS*, too, was still at an early stage. Two of the most important factors which later influenced the conduct of the SS Cavalry Brigade, however, had already been fulfilled. First, the close relationship between Heinrich Himmler and Hermann Fegelein proved to be resilient and productive: the *Reichsführer* could employ his horsemen for representation and gained more support from the German upper class whereas Fegelein enjoyed unprecedented freedom and showed great skill in building up a highly talented cadre of sportsmen. He was also able to use his rapport with Himmler to keep his privileges when war broke out: despite the fact that they had no combat value, the equestrians from Munich were incorporated into the mobilisation scheme of the SS and police rather than being drafted into the *Wehrmacht*. Second, subalterns from the *Reiterstandarten* such as Gustav Lombard soon made up the officer corps of the SS cavalry regiments in Poland. They were dedicated National socialists who stood behind their commander and executed his aims with great initiative. Thus, the prerequisites for the foundation of a new mounted unit in the SS had been met; they were soon to be put to the test on an institutional level.

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<sup>113</sup> Testimony of R. Brill at the IMT, quoted in Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*; see footnote 63.

<sup>114</sup> Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, pp. 127-128.

## 2) Brutal occupation: the cultural formation of the SS cavalry in Poland

From late 1939 until mid-1941, the SS cavalry units underwent the most drastic change since their formation. Not only did a comparatively small group of men separate from the *Reiterstandarten* in Germany to build up a new unit; they also became members of an executive organ of German occupation in Poland. Their frame of reference changed from peace to war which meant that the men not only shared radical views which formed the background to discrimination and exclusion of certain groups of people, but openly committed acts of violence against various sections of the Polish population. The two years in the General Government can be divided into three phases: the initial stage from September, 1939 until the summer of 1940, during which new recruits were integrated and trained continuously; a transitional period from mid-1940 until spring, 1941, which saw a massive turnover of personnel; and the final phase from February until June, 1941, when the two regiments assumed a structure similar to that of their *Wehrmacht* equivalents. Fully working military units and comradesly bonds amongst the men could only be formed in the last months before their departure into the Soviet Union.<sup>115</sup>

Although the SS cavalry did not have to face a military threat and was involved in anti-partisan operations only on a few occasions whilst based in Poland, the men were to be trained, hardened, and readied for future combat missions. This task put the regiments under pressure, especially after half the personnel had to be replaced in 1940. What would have been a standard procedure in an established military unit was perverted by the criminal ambitions of the officers and some of the men; it was

<sup>115</sup> When he left the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment in early September, 1941, *Standartenführer* Hierthes stated in his final address to the unit that it only had been assembled and trained in its current form since the month of April of that year. Due to fulfilling all of its tasks, however, it was now to be viewed as a fully-fledged military unit; see Regimentsbefehl Nr. 28/41, 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, 2 September, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/986, p. 41.

also obstructed by the participation in the first phase of a war of annihilation. The effect of war in shaping the minds of men and ultimately resulting in crimes against humanity has also been observed with other SS units and was described by Harald Welzer and Sönke Neitzel in a study of tapping protocols of German prisoners of war. They found that a special set of conditions was created during wartime which made soldiers do things they would not have normally done. This set, which made up the war frame of reference, consisted of a strict military framework and hierarchy and the incorporation of men into a system of formal obligations and time-specific as well as group-specific perceptions of their environment, which made them kill Jews or fanatically defend their country even when they were not convinced of National Socialist ideology.<sup>116</sup> Regarding the SS cavalry, it can be assumed that the changed frame of reference, together with a different composition of the units and a habituation to violence served as a preparation of what was to come from mid-1941 onwards. Three factors determined the process which turned members of mounted SS units into cavalry soldiers of the *Waffen-SS*: military drill, indoctrination, and participation in anti-Jewish and anti-Polish measures. In order to assess the personal and ideological motivation of the soldiers, it is necessary to analyse and balance the three above mentioned elements in the context of the SS cavalry's deployment in Poland from 1939 – 1941.

From the outset, the war against Poland was fought not only for military, but also for ideological aims. Adolf Hitler had ordered the SS to eliminate the ruling classes of the country. For this mission, which received the code name 'Tannenberg', six killing squads, the so-called *Einsatzgruppen*, were assembled from various branches of the police and SS during the summer of 1939.<sup>117</sup> Responsible for this was SS-

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<sup>116</sup> Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten. Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben* (Frankfurt, 2011), pp. 390-394.

<sup>117</sup> Alexander B. Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland. Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity* (Lawrence, KS 2003), p. 29.

*Gruppenführer* Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the SS security police and security service. But this was not an operation of the SS alone: Heydrich also consulted with the quartermaster-general of the *Wehrmacht*, general Eduard Wagner, 'to construct a system of mutual assistance and support in matters of security behind German lines'.<sup>118</sup> From the crossing of the Polish border, this cooperation resulted in mass murder: units of the SS and police, the army, and other formations not only executed people who were considered to be part of the Polish elites, but also suspected insurgents (often innocents who were mistaken for partisans by inexperienced German soldiers), prisoners of war, and Jews.<sup>119</sup> Until the end of the year, about 50,000 Poles fell victim to the Germans; at least 7,000 of them were Jews.<sup>120</sup>

Historical researchers long held the view that the *Wehrmacht* had been 'tragically entangled' in the killing of civilians in Poland: whereas the soldiers fought bravely and honourably, the SS committed atrocities.<sup>121</sup> More recent works, however, have shed new light on the role of the German armed forces during and after this campaign. Numerous acts of violence have been documented and it can be assumed that 16,000 Poles were killed by members of *Wehrmacht* units until the end of October, 1939.<sup>122</sup> This did not only happen during combat operations or missions against insurgents. Ideological measures were often carried out by army and SS concertedly because both agencies pursued the same aim: the destruction of certain ethnic, religious and other groups within the Polish society. Although the brutality of the German policy sparked protest from some members of the leadership of the

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30.

<sup>119</sup> Jochen Böhler, 'Tragische Verstrickung' oder Auftakt zum Vernichtungskrieg? Die Wehrmacht in Polen 1939', in K. M. Mallmann and B. Musial (eds.), *Genesis des Genozids. Polen 1939 – 1941* (Darmstadt, 2004), pp. 40-50. As examples for the cooperation of *Wehrmacht* and SS, Rossino has described the cases of the German advance into the Polish Corridor and East Upper Silesia, both of which claimed many victims among the civilian population. See Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, pp. 59-74 and pp. 74-85.

<sup>120</sup> Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, p. 234.

<sup>121</sup> The view of the 'entanglement' of the *Wehrmacht* was first formulated by Martin Broszat in his work *Nationalsozialistische Polenpolitik 1939 – 1945* (Stuttgart, 1961), p. 28; see Böhler, 'Tragische Verstrickung', p. 36.

<sup>122</sup> Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, pp. 86-87.

German army in Poland and some killings were prevented by the intervention of local military commanders, *Wehrmacht* and SS worked hand in hand in what was to become the beginning of a war of annihilation.<sup>123</sup> The agreements and cooperation between the two institutions significantly paralleled what happened before the attack on the USSR two years later.

The quick victory also enabled the Germans to implement plans for radically transforming Poland. Several new territories were annexed to Germany, these being West Prussia, the Warthegau, and East Upper Silesia. The eastern half of the country, which was referred to as *Generalgouvernement* (General Government), remained occupied and a German administration was established.<sup>124</sup> The newly annexed territories were to be cleared of all Jews and Gypsies. The Jews were then to be driven eastward, either into the Lublin region of the General Government (where a '*Judenreservat*', a reservation for Jews, was planned) or even across the new border into the Soviet occupied part of Poland. Jews who were already living in the General Government were deprived of all their rights, interned in ghettos and many of them were taken to Germany for forced labour. Apart from them, many Poles, too, were to be deported from the western part of the country. Instead of these groups, ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe were to be resettled.<sup>125</sup> In the following years the course of the German occupation became even more radical. Forced labour was introduced for all Jews in the General Government. They were assigned to newly-

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<sup>123</sup> Jochen Böhrer, *Auftakt zum Vernichtungskrieg: Die Wehrmacht in Polen 1939* (Frankfurt 2006), pp. 219-220 and pp. 246-247. For the prevention of killings and the protest of *Wehrmacht* commanders, see also Böhrer, 'Tragische Verstrickung', pp. 36-37. Opposition from the *Wehrmacht*, however, was of no avail: on 4 October, 1939, Adolf Hitler sanctioned the killings by decreeing an amnesty for all crimes which had been committed in the newly occupied territories since the beginning of the war. Three weeks later, the military administration of Poland ended. See Dorothee Weitbrecht, 'Ermächtigung zur Vernichtung. Die Einsatzgruppen in Polen im Herbst 1939', in K. M. Mallmann and B. Musial (eds.), *Genesis des Genozids. Polen 1939 – 1941* (Darmstadt, 2004), pp. 65-66.

<sup>124</sup> Horst Rohde, 'Hitlers erster 'Blitzkrieg' und seine Auswirkungen auf Nordosteuropa', in K. A. Maier (ed.), *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, Bd. 2: Die Errichtung der Hegemonie auf dem europäischen Kontinent* (Stuttgart, 1979), pp. 111-126, pp. 126-131, and p. 138.

<sup>125</sup> Christopher R. Browning, 'Nazi Resettlement Policy and the Search for a Solution to the Jewish Question, 1939-1941', *German Studies Review* 9 (1986), pp. 501-503.

built labour camps, construction work for SS units and other tasks.<sup>126</sup>

The beginning of the war and the enlargement and deployment of armed SS units led to a significant reduction of the *Allgemeine SS*: of its 250,000 men, about 175,000 were drafted into the *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen-SS*, with the majority of them joining the army. Most of the regular activities had to be reduced due to a lack of manpower, or changed to help the war effort: the *Standarten* were confined to a support role and provided guard units and welfare functions for members who had been drafted and their families. The prewar structure of infantry and equestrian units of the paramilitary SS continued to exist, but predominantly on paper.<sup>127</sup> An example for this was *Reiterstandarte 20* from Tilsit in East Prussia, the staff of which only consisted of a sick *SS-Oberscharführer* and a female secretary after the outbreak of war.<sup>128</sup> This development concerned almost all of the 11,161 men of the peacetime mounted formations in Germany, with the exception of the SS riders from Munich.<sup>129</sup> In September 1939, they were put under the control of the *verstärkte Totenkopfstandarten* and the riding school was turned into a depot for training new recruits. About 250 volunteers and as many horses were assembled in Berlin by the end of the month and sent to Poland. Like other such formations, it was to reinforce German police units and thus to execute the orders of the occupation administration. Hermann Fegelein, by that time a *Standartenführer* (colonel) in the SS, was now employed in the armed SS as *Obersturmbannführer* (lieutenant colonel) and appointed commander of the unit.<sup>130</sup>

<sup>126</sup> Martin Cüppers, ‘... auf eine so saubere und SS-mäßige Art’. Die Waffen-SS in Polen 1939 – 1941’, in K. M. Mallmann and B. Musial (eds.), *Genesis des Genozids. Polen 1939 – 1941* (Darmstadt, 2004), p. 97.

<sup>127</sup> Lumsden, *Himmler's Black Order*, pp. 47-47 and p. 50.

<sup>128</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 17: Die vom 04.11.1960 bis zum 21.11.1961 ergangenen Strafurteile. Lfd. Nr. 500-523*, ed. I. Sagel-Grande and others (Amsterdam, 1977), p. 432.

<sup>129</sup> For the pre-war strength of the Equestrian SS, see Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry*, p. 13.

<sup>130</sup> For the buildup from the beginning of the war, see Riess, ‘Fegelein’, p. 163. In Cüppers, ‘SS-mäßige Art’, pp. 92-93 it is stated that the first detail of the SS cavalry units numbered 451 men altogether whereas Riess assumed a strength of 250 men. This number is also given in Rolf Michaelis, *Die Kavallerie-Divisionen der Waffen-SS*. (Erlangen 1993), p. 7 and Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*,

The unit arrived in Poland shortly after the end of hostilities. It consisted of two detachments with two mounted squadrons each. The first detachment with the squadrons 1 and 4 was deployed in and around Lodz, the second detachment with the squadrons 2 and 3 was based in the region of Poznan.<sup>131</sup> The cavalry unit as a whole was referred to as *Berittene Abteilung der verstärkten Totenkopfstandarten (Polizeiverstärkung)* (mounted detachment of the reinforced Death's Head regiments / police strengthening).<sup>132</sup> After their arrival in the operational area, the SS riders came under the command of the *Ordnungspolizei*.<sup>133</sup> Small groups of three or four men under the command of a non-commissioned officer were allocated to local police posts. The second squadron alone was spread out in 19 such small units across the entire Poznan district.<sup>134</sup> In addition to being scattered over a large area, the different squadrons were also far from their full strength. At first, most of them did not number more than 40-50 men.<sup>135</sup>

Two months after their arrival in Poland the cavalry squadrons underwent substantial changes in structure and deployment. On 15 November, 1939, Himmler ordered the formation to be renamed as *1. SS-Totenkopf-Reiterstandarte* (1<sup>st</sup> SS Death's Head Cavalry Regiment).<sup>136</sup> Its structure was now expanded from the original four to thirteen squadrons, including two artillery batteries equipped with

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p. 5. The difference between the two figures probably is based on the inclusion of police volunteers by Cüppers; for this aspect see Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry*, p. 146.

<sup>131</sup> Cüppers, 'SS-mäßige Art', pp. 92-93.

<sup>132</sup> Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 163; see also Zwischenbericht der Sonderkommission Z, p. 573, according to which the unit also operated under the name *Polizeiverstärkung Ost*.

<sup>133</sup> The *Ordnungspolizei* (order police) was the German uniformed police, as opposed to the *Sicherheitspolizei* (security police), the political branch of the German police which since 1936 combined the *Kriminalpolizei* (criminal investigation department) and the *Geheime Staatspolizei* or *Gestapo*, the secret police. In 1939, the order police had a strength of 131,000 men. In preparation for war, mobile units with a strength of about 500 men, the so-called police battalions, were deployed. In Poland, 21 such battalions supported the occupation regime as guard units and killing squads. See Curilla, *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei und der Holocaust im Baltikum und in Weißrußland 1941 – 1944*, pp. 53-57; see also Deutsche Hochschule der Polizei and others (eds.): *Ordnung und Vernichtung – Die Polizei im NS-Staat* (Münster, 2011), pp. 34-41.

<sup>134</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 29.

<sup>135</sup> Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen*, p. 8.

<sup>136</sup> Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 163.

horse-drawn guns. By mid-December, 1939, the existing and newly formed subunits of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Death's Head Cavalry Regiment were garrisoned at Warsaw, Garwolin, Seroczyn, Zamosc, Cholm, Tarnow, Krakow, Kielce, Lodz, Radom and Lublin. At Lucmierz near Lodz a recruit training squadron and a training facility for non-commissioned officers were founded. Thus, the entire General Government had become an operational area for the SS cavalry.<sup>137</sup> Recruitment was extended: ethnic Germans from the General Government and other eastern European countries began to join the units.<sup>138</sup> Further transfers of SS volunteers from Germany increased the number of SS cavalymen to 587 by the end of the year: 46 officers, 91 non-commissioned officers and 450 men with 455 horses altogether.<sup>139</sup>

The mounted SS units were now supposed to assume a different character: after the withdrawal of the small details from the police posts they were to be reorganised as cavalry squadrons, a process that was impeded by many problems. Accommodation for soldiers and horses had to be found or built from scratch; in many cases, the men had to improvise.<sup>140</sup> Their riding and military training, which had been neglected so far, was intensified and the SS riders were now finally turned into cavalry soldiers.<sup>141</sup> But despite the fact that the pre-war *Reiterstandarten* had been paramilitary formations already they could not be converted into military units easily. Often, the

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<sup>137</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 29; Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 9.

<sup>138</sup> From late October 1939, the SS cavalry started recruitment drives in districts of Lodz where many Germans lived and amongst former Polish soldiers in prisoner-of-war camps. Also, they integrated members of former German militias, the so-called *Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz*, which had formed immediately after the German invasion; see Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 87. Other ethnic German recruits joined the German military in Poland and were then transferred to the mounted SS units; see Vernehmung von Ferdinand Henschke vom 5.12. 1962, in: StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Zwischenbericht zum Stand der Ermittlungen 1962, Nr. 1013, p. 175. Recruits from other countries entered the SS cavalry in late 1939 as well, for example from Slovakia. A former cavalryman stated that he served in an SS cavalry squadron together with six comrades from his Slovakian hometown; see Vernehmung von Adolf Michalik vom 11.12. 1962, in: StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Zwischenbericht zum Stand der Ermittlungen 1962, Nr. 1013, pp. 241-243.

<sup>139</sup> Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 5; this number represents the strength of the unit as of 15 December, 1939.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>141</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 39.

squadron commanders and junior ranks were not qualified enough: most of them had never completed officer training as they had only served in the paramilitary SS until 1939 or had never risen above non-commissioned officer rank in the army.<sup>142</sup> They tried to compensate for this weakness with extreme rigour and put recruits through tough exercises, a procedure a former cavalryman later referred to as ‘persecution of the Christians’. He stated that the military drill he and his comrades received in their squadron at Krakow aimed at completely breaking their personality and that it even caused older reservists of the *Wehrmacht*, who were based in the same barracks, to protest repeatedly.<sup>143</sup>

Although the veteran only voiced this opinion after the war, some of the criticism he mentioned must have reached Hermann Fegelein during the formative period of the regiments. In a situation report he compiled in August, 1940, after many of the initial volunteers and recruits had left the SS cavalry again, he confirmed this (and, indirectly, also the aim of breaking individuals):

If one [man] or the other is unhappy with the work in his squadron nowadays or subsequently mutinies about it, then it is because of his own flawed character. [...] These cowards who now bitch about their superiors somewhere at home or because they have been asked to do so by some agency are being called cowards because they did not have the courage as soldiers to follow the complaints procedure [and] stand freely and openly before their superiors. The General Government has formed officer and man

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<sup>142</sup> Only Heimo Hierthes had been a reserve officer in the German army; see Stammrollenauszug von Heimo Hierthes, in: BArchB, SSO Heimo Hierthes. Stefan Charwat had served as a captain in the Rumanian cavalry, whereas Franz Magill and Kurt Wegener had been non-commissioned officers in the *Reichswehr* and the *Wehrmacht* air force respectively. For Charwat, see StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Personalunterlagen (Kopien), Nr. 1060, p. 36. For Magill, see Dienstlaufbahn des Magill, Franz, in BArchB, SSO Franz Magill. For Wegener, see Lebenslauf von Kurt Wegener vom 8.3. 1938, in: BArchB, SSO Kurt Wegener. None of the others, including Hermann Fegelein, ever received full officer training. For Fegelein, see Riess, ‘Fegelein’, pp. 160-161.

<sup>143</sup> Testimony of Bernd Wenzel, in: BArchL, trial against Magill and others, B 162/2329, p. 1644.

into different men to some extent [...] Those who were weak were broken.<sup>144</sup>

Superiors also resorted to severe punishment even for minimal breaches of duty: a former soldier said that his platoon leader had him imprisoned for three days for answering back to him on a trivial matter.<sup>145</sup> One soldier was sentenced to a year's imprisonment and exclusion from the SS for stealing money from a comrade; another man received nine months' imprisonment for drink-driving and illegal use of an SS vehicle.<sup>146</sup> There is evidence for mistreatment as well: a charge against an SS-*Obersturmführer* from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, who allegedly had beaten a soldier with a riding crop, was dismissed as there had been no witnesses. The reason for dismissing the case was given as follows:

Thus, there is only the testimony of the person pressing charges against the defendant, whereupon it cannot be assumed that an SS officer would deny a crime once committed by him for fear of punishment and that he would not stand by his deed.<sup>147</sup>

This ruling in favour of the defendant shows the strong sense of honour within the officer corps of the SS cavalry, which apparently was worth more than the word of an ordinary man. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the rank and file often did not dare to 'follow the complaints procedure and stand freely and openly

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<sup>144</sup> Stimmungsbericht des 1. SS-Totenkopf-Reiterregiments, 13 August 1940, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 7.

<sup>145</sup> Vernehmung von Helmut Fenslaf, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp. 1647-1648.

<sup>146</sup> Tagesbefehl Nr. 15 des Kommandostabes Reichsführer-SS vom 5.8. 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/1003, pp. 21-22. The verdicts against the two soldiers were passed on 19 and 24 July, 1941; the first case referred to an incident from April, 1941, whereas the second incident had happened during the training period in East Prussia in July, 1941.

<sup>147</sup> Verfügung vom 30.10. 1940, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, in: BArchF, RS 4/906, p. 9.

before their superiors', as Fegelein had remarked two months earlier.

In late 1939, the incorporation of the regiment into the structure of the German occupation forces changed as well. With effect from 15 December, its command was transferred from the regular police to the *Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer 'Ost'* (HSSPF 'Ost', Higher SS and Police Leader 'East') who coordinated all police and SS forces in the General Government.<sup>148</sup> In November, 1939, this function was fulfilled by *SS-Obergruppenführer* Friedrich Wilhelm Krüger.<sup>149</sup> The SS cavalry regiment was embedded in an effective chain of command. Orders and instructions came either from the SS headquarters in Berlin or from SS and police agencies in Warsaw. Although the *Kommandeur der Sicherheitspolizei* (KdS, head of security police) was also authorized to issue orders the central authority coordinating operations was always the HSSPF 'Ost'.<sup>150</sup>

The cavalry regiment continued to be confronted with organisational problems. Whereas the initial lack of manpower could slowly be overcome by recruitment of ethnic Germans in Poland and allocations of reservists and volunteers from Germany, the units remained poorly equipped. The most important good of a cavalry unit, its horses, had to be commandeered from all over Germany and even also in Poland.<sup>151</sup> Even months after its deployment, one of the batteries did not have a single piece of artillery but was only equipped with rifles and two machine guns.<sup>152</sup> At least some of the cavalry squadrons were likewise inadequately armed: the men carried sub-machine guns, officers had their own pistols and other weapons were not available.<sup>153</sup> The regiment turned to the *Wehrmacht* for help and negotiated with the

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<sup>148</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 29 and Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 163. Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 5 and Michaelis, *Kavalleriedivisionen*, p. 7 give 15 November, 1939 as a date for this change.

<sup>149</sup> Ruth Bettina Birn, *Die höheren SS- und Polizeiführer: Himmlers Vertreter im Reich und in den besetzten Gebieten*. (Düsseldorf, 1986), pp. 187-188.

<sup>150</sup> Birn, *Die höheren SS- und Polizeiführer*, p. 187; Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen*, p. 7.

<sup>151</sup> Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 6.

<sup>152</sup> Tät.Ber. Reit. Batt. 1. SS-T-RS v. 27.2. 1940, BArchF, RS 4/496, quoted in: Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>153</sup> Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 5.

German supreme commander in Poland, colonel general von Blaskowitz. Finally, light and heavy machine guns, field guns and grenade launchers could be obtained, supplemented by engineering, anti-tank and signals equipment. Some of the weapons came from the former Polish and Czech armies.<sup>154</sup>

Other things also proved to be in short supply: there were not enough uniforms, meaning that some of the men had to wear civilian clothes. Some of the squadrons did not have warm clothing for the winter.<sup>155</sup> The men were also malnourished as the units did not receive enough supplies. Sometimes the soldiers just stopped trains or truck columns and requisitioned coal, food or other goods – a fact that sparked protest from Himmler and Göring.<sup>156</sup> In March 1940, Himmler prohibited the acquisition of foodstuffs altogether, especially the requisitioning of cattle.<sup>157</sup> Suffering from hunger and a lack of medical care led to a generally bad state of health in some of the squadrons. In the 5<sup>th</sup> squadron of the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, for example, many men reported sick and shirking was a common phenomenon.<sup>158</sup>

A lack of discipline could also be observed amongst the higher ranks: they were involved in acts of theft and corruption. In Warsaw, where the regimental staff was based, officers sold stolen luxury goods to an army depot and tried to exchange invalid Polish Zloty into legal currency.<sup>159</sup> The most notorious example for the ruthless practice of the cavalry officers was *SS-Sturmbannführer* Albert Faßbender. In 1940, he embezzled large amounts of money after liquidating a well-known former Jewish fur business, the Apfelbaum company. He also got the secretary of the previous owner pregnant and had her husband shot in a *Gestapo* prison in Warsaw.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-9.

<sup>155</sup> Tät.Ber. 5. Schwdr. 1. SS-T-RS v. 2.5. 1940, in: BArchF, RS 4/540, quoted in Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 32; Tät.Ber. 9. Ersatz-Schwdr. 1. SS-T-RS v. 28.1. 1940, in: BArchF, RS 4/495, *ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Bef. Kdr. SS-T-RS v. 19.2. 1940, in: BArchF, RS 4/418, *ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 8.

<sup>158</sup> Tät.Ber. Reit. Batt. 1. SS-T-RS v. 27.2. 1940, in: BArchF, RS 4/496, quoted in Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 32; Tät.Ber. 5. Schwdr. 2. SS-T-RS v. 27.9. 1940, in: BArchF, RS 4/66, *ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>160</sup> Eugen Kogon, *Der SS-Staat. Das System der deutschen Konzentrationslager* (Munich, 2000), p.

Hermann Fegelein, the commander of the unit, was accused of getting a Polish woman pregnant and of forcing her to abort the child.<sup>161</sup> In March 1940 the SS riding school at Munich was searched by the *Gestapo* and many of the stolen goods were found there. Fegelein claimed not to have enriched himself personally but to have transferred profits to the riding school. Thanks to his good connections to Himmler the charge was withdrawn.<sup>162</sup>

Despite grave logistical difficulties, the SS cavalry regiment continued to grow until it had reached its authorised strength of 4,000 men at the end of April, 1940.<sup>163</sup> The leaders of the unit were well aware of the fact that a change in quality was necessary now: more than half of the regiment consisted of farmers, show jumpers and competition riders who were in the SS cavalry ‘because they loved horses’. They had been members of riding clubs before 1933, then entered the *Allgemeine SS* and volunteered or were drafted into the *verstärkte Totenkopfstandarten* after the war had broken out. Another group were draftees who had originally applied for police service and were enlisted when the regiment was still part of the *Polizeiverstärkung* in late 1939. For the most part these men were more than thirty years old and had difficulties in getting through a harsh training schedule.<sup>164</sup> Thus, they were not exactly the military elite Himmler sought to create with the *Waffen-SS*. Although Hermann Fegelein and *SS-Sturmbannführer* Franz Magill (a squadron commander in the SS cavalry who from late 1939 prepared the deployment of a second cavalry regiment) were full of praise about their achievements, it was clear that most of the men from the original *Reiterstandarten* would be of no use during future missions

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372; Riess, ‘Fegelein’, p. 164.

<sup>161</sup> Riess, ‘Fegelein’, p. 164.

<sup>162</sup> Riess, ‘Fegelein’, p. 164; see also Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 30.

<sup>163</sup> Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 7 and p. 10.

<sup>164</sup> Stimmungsbericht des 1. SS-Totenkopf-Reiterregiments, 13 August 1940, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 7; Stimmungsbericht des SS-Totenkopf-Reiterregiments 2 Lublin, 13 August 1940, *ibid.*; Zwischenbericht der Sonderkommission Z [des LKA Niedersachsen] vom 12.11. 1962, in: StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Nr. 1268, p. 48.

and could serve their country better in their original professions.<sup>165</sup> Their place was to be taken by young recruits, many of whom had joined the regiment already. The composition of these three groups – farmers and equestrians, police candidates, and young volunteers – reflected the methods of recruitment used by the *Waffen-SS* in 1939 – 1940 and at the same time shows the elements which became characteristics of the SS cavalry: its foundation in equitation as well as the high degree of voluntariness and rural background of many of its soldiers.

In order to improve the combat readiness of the unit, three measures were taken: up to August, 1940, 2,043 reservists aged thirty years or older were discharged. This changed the social composition of the squadrons as the proportion of farmers was greatly reduced: 90% of those who left the units had an agricultural background. Some of them, however, still remained in the horse units along with other older troopers who had been enlisted as auxiliary policemen.<sup>166</sup> As a second step, the regiment was divided into two detachments in May, 1940, allowing the organisation of the SS cavalry. This was an improvement as those who stayed now formed the cadre for the existing regiment as well as a new one, the *2. SS-Totenkopf-Reiterstandarte* (2<sup>nd</sup> SS Death's Head Cavalry Regiment).<sup>167</sup> The new formation was based at Lublin and commanded by Franz Magill.<sup>168</sup> Another measure was the ongoing enlistment of young SS volunteers: on 28 July, 1940 the two regiments had

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<sup>165</sup> Stimmungsbericht des 1. SS-Totenkopf-Reiterregiments, 13 August 1940, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 7; Stimmungsbericht des SS-Totenkopf-Reiterregiments 2 Lublin, 13 August 1940, *ibid.* For the career of Franz Magill, see *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, pp. 28-29; see also the excursus on the officer corps of the SS cavalry regiments in chapter 3.

<sup>166</sup> Stimmungsbericht des 1. SS-Totenkopf-Reiterregiments, 13 August 1940, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 7. The discharge of older soldiers was a process that concerned the entire *Waffen-SS* at the same time and mirrored a large-scale demobilisation the *Wehrmacht* carried out after the victory over France; see Rohrkamp, *Weltanschaulich gefestigte Kämpfer*, p. 310, pp. 328-329, and p. 331.

<sup>167</sup> Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 164-165.

<sup>168</sup> Martin Cüppers, 'Wegbereiter der Shoah. Ein Vergleich der Einsätze beider SS-Kavallerieregimenter im August 1941', in T. C. Richter (ed.), *Krieg und Verbrechen. Situation und Intention: Fallbeispiele* (Munich 2006), p. 90.

reached the strength of 1829 and 1511 men respectively.<sup>169</sup> Based on these three steps, the growth of the units continued until the beginning of operation 'Barbarossa'.

After the change of personnel in the summer of 1940, the group of the young volunteers began to form the third major component of the unit's manpower alongside the SS reservists and police volunteers, who were considerably older. The new recruits belonged to the group of the so-called 'adapted pupils' who had been brought up in Nazi Germany and reached adulthood after 1933.<sup>170</sup> They joined in the winter of 1939 – 1940 and during two other recruitment drives in April and autumn, 1940. At their enlistment, their future branch of service within the *Waffen-SS* had not been specified so that they could have been allocated to any other unit as well.<sup>171</sup> In the SS cavalry, these recruits added to the general heterogeneity of the lower ranks.

Their reasons to volunteer for the SS were varied. A veteran who compiled a unit history after the war mentioned a sense of duty, the readiness to stand up for one's nation, and the desire to serve in an elite force as possible motivations.<sup>172</sup> The same attitude can be found in the self-published accounts of another former SS cavalryman who stated that he and his comrades 'only wanted one thing: to be good soldiers defending their fatherland in times of war'.<sup>173</sup> It can be assumed that the memoirs only show one side of the truth as veterans of the SS cavalry had good reason to stress these 'apolitical' motives and their own integrity during the post-war years. In the volumes put together by Wachter, contributions from alleged

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<sup>169</sup> Kliemann, *Die Waffen-SS*, p. 355.

<sup>170</sup> Dieter Frey and Helmut Rez, 'Population and Predators: Preconditions for the Holocaust From a Control-Theoretical Perspective', in L. S. Newman and R. Erber (eds.), *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 213-214.

<sup>171</sup> Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 7; interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011.

<sup>172</sup> Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 7.

<sup>173</sup> Wachter, *Unsere Kavallerie-Division in der Dokumentation des II. Weltkrieges*, inside cover of the front page. The quote is part of a 'disclaimer' which describes Wachter's motivation to compile the work. He distances himself and his former comrades from right-wing ideology and claims that the book only aims at commemorating their wartime experience.

perpetrators are followed seamlessly by those from younger men who only served at the front during the second half of the war, which casts doubt on the selection of the contributors and the content.<sup>174</sup> Apart from the rather euphemised versions presented by veterans in their memoirs, other factors for joining the *Waffen-SS* may have played a role in wartime, such as interest in a military career or a secure job after a period of military service.<sup>175</sup>

The cavalymen, like all members of the *Waffen-SS*, were not only to carry out their duty as soldiers but also to be instructed on National Socialism. In a general service regulation from September, 1940, the chief of staff of the *SS-Führungshauptamt*, *SS-Gruppenführer* Hans Jüttner, formulated the aim of their education: to turn the men into political soldiers.<sup>176</sup> Instruction on National Socialist policy and concepts of the enemy has been documented for the SS cavalry during that time as well as screenings of propaganda films and lectures on the life of Adolf Hitler. It becomes evident, however, that this effort has not been very consistent: the schooling, which was supposed to be conducted by squadron commanders on a weekly basis and battalion commanders every month, often did not take place at all as the officers had other commitments. Sometimes the recruits' command of German was insufficient to understand the content of the lessons: many of the volunteers from Eastern Europe had to take German lessons first. Celebrations of the *Führer's* birthday and the showing of films (anti-Semitic propaganda films like *Jud Süß* and *Der ewige Jude* as

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<sup>174</sup> The book *Unsere Kavallerie-Division in der Dokumentation des II. Weltkrieges*, for example, contains a foreword which was written by Johannes Göhler. During the missions in the Pripet Marshes, Göhler had led a platoon in the third squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment of the SS Cavalry Brigade. In the Lombard trial, he was questioned as a defendant; like other former officers from the regiment, he was acquitted in 1970. He later became chairman of the 'Veterans Association of the Cavalry Divisions of the former Waffen-SS'. See Wachter, *Unsere Kavallerie-Division in der Dokumentation des II. Weltkrieges*, p. 6, Führerstellenbesetzungsliste beider Kavallerie-Regimenter vom 30.7. 1941, BArchF, RS 3-8/91, and Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., pp. 1746-1747.

<sup>175</sup> According to Rolf Michaelis, *Die Waffen-SS. Dokumentation über die personelle Zusammensetzung und den Einsatz der Waffen-SS* (Berlin, 2006), p. 312, volunteers were offered a takeover into police or public service after their time in the SS.

<sup>176</sup> Dienstanweisung für WE-Führer, SS-Führungshauptamt, 14 September, 1940, in: BArchF, RS 4/215, pp. 4-5.

well as war movies or unpolitical films) were generally well received but it is unlikely that they, together with the instructions, provided a very thorough indoctrination.<sup>177</sup> The most important aspect about the education of the men in Poland is the priority given to anti-Semitic content: new recruits often learned about ‘the Jewish problem’ before they were even introduced to topics such as German history or Bolshevism.<sup>178</sup>

Although it is not possible to generalise when it comes to assessing a group of about 2,000 men, a higher level of political motivation can be assumed for the younger SS candidates than for the older reservists: in one squadron, recruits did not need a special ideological induction before participation in propaganda lessons as they were said to have undergone appropriate schooling in the *Hitlerjugend* already.<sup>179</sup> One soldier who had entered the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment in autumn, 1940 was even a protégé of *SS-Gruppenführer* Oswald Pohl, the head of the SS main office for economic administration who was responsible for all concentration camps. According to Pohl, the private had graduated from a Nazi elite school, came from an old soldier family and intended to become an SS officer. In a letter to Hermann Fegelein, Pohl recommended sending him on an officer training course; Fegelein replied in favour of this request.<sup>180</sup>

Another example proves the attitude of the young recruits in the SS cavalry even more vividly. In a field-post letter to a friend, dating from 19 March, 1942, a trooper of the veterinary training company at Radom expressed his grief about having

<sup>177</sup> Jürgen Förster, ‘Die weltanschauliche Erziehung in der Waffen-SS: ‘Kein totes Wissen, sondern lebendiger Nationalsozialismus‘’, in J. Matthäus (ed.), *Ausbildungsziel Judenmord? ‘Weltanschauliche Erziehung’ von SS, Polizei und Waffen-SS im Rahmen der Endlösung* (Frankfurt, 2003), pp. 97-99. See also Schreiben des SS-Führungshauptamtes an das SS-T-Kavallerieregiment 1 vom 4.2. 1941 betr. Anfertigung von Monatsberichten der Führer des Referates W[eltanschauliche]E[rziehung], in: BArchF, RS 4/215, pp. 2-3.

<sup>178</sup> Cüppers, ‘SS-mäßige Art’, pp. 94-95 and Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 103.

<sup>179</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 104.

<sup>180</sup> Oswald Pohl, SS-Gruppenführer und Generalleutnant der Waffen-SS, an Standartenführer Hermann Fegelein, 14 August, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/212 (1 von 2), pp. 88-89; Hermann Fegelein an SS-Gruppenführer und Generalleutnant der Waffen-SS Oswald Pohl, 4 September, 1941, *ibid.*, p. 83.

missed a raid by his unit:

Dear Armin,

I think I wrote to you some time ago already that I ended up in the beautiful Polish country again. The service here is alright, we learn to ride [horses], you can imagine that I quite enjoy that. For a few days, I have been lying in the sick bay with terrible diarrhoea. In a way it is quite nice for one can have a real lie-in again, but it has its disadvantages as well. Yesterday I missed a really big thing. The company cracked down on three Polish villages and shot a great lot of Poles.

Whether I will stay here in Radom is uncertain again. Hopefully we will get to the front soon. Our riding training is quite done so that we can count on getting out in fourteen days to three weeks.

How are you? Are you *Jungenzugführer* yet? [...] How is Siegfried Löwenberger, is he still leading a *Jungenzug*, please write to me in detail whom you put in charge as subalterns etc. [...] Please go to the *Bann* [administrative office of the *Hitlerjugend*] and tell them to send me my leadership ID and a service certificate, I urgently need it because I want to apply as an officer candidate in the SS. I've written to the *Bann* a couple of times already but not received anything. Please do me that favour and see that I get these things.

Now [I am] finished. All best and regards,

Your friend Emmerich.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Letter from SS-Oberreiter Emmerich, member of a Veterinär-Ersatzkompanie in Radom, Poland, to Armin Düsterfest in Rückwerda, near Litzmannstadt (Lodz), 19 March, 1942, in: WLL, file 703. The archive does not have any background information on this document, such as how it was obtained or what happened to the SS trooper. The terms *Jungenzugführer* and *Jungenzug* are misspellings in the original: the correct forms are *Jungzugführer* and *Jungzug*.

This rare personal document refers to crimes of the SS cavalry and bears witness to the fact that its training units in Poland were involved in acts of mass violence. The soldier jumps between the missions of his unit and his former occupation with the *Hitlerjugend* back home without any difficulty, showing how quickly he became integrated into a new frame of reference in which shootings of Poles were perfectly acceptable. The letter exemplifies the sometimes astonishing openness with which the men spoke about the crimes they committed.<sup>182</sup> However, it has to be approached cautiously as it was written during a later period. But despite the fact that the writer had not witnessed the murders in Belorussia, this document might serve as an illustration of the cavalry soldiers' possible mentality in 1940. It can be assumed that the situation described in the letter applied to many SS cavalymen who had joined the units earlier: like the writer, they had come to the *Waffen-SS* directly from the *Hitlerjugend*. For men like him or Pohl's protégé, a career in this institution became an option worth considering. As the cavalry regiments were in constant need of qualified subalterns, this was much encouraged: there was often a smooth transition between the rank groups as experienced ordinary soldiers became non-commissioned officers either through NCO training courses or later through battlefield promotions; others underwent officer training.<sup>183</sup>

Although the SS cavalry units were struggling to adjust to the military role and did not seem to have undergone very intense propaganda indoctrination, their members fulfilled the political function very quickly: the squadrons of the SS cavalry regiment were significantly involved in the implementation of the occupation policy from the outset. Under the authority of the HSSPF 'Ost', *Waffen-SS* units formed a 'decisive executive body' of the German occupation forces alongside the regular police and

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<sup>182</sup> For similar examples and their interpretation, see Welzer, *Täter*, pp. 102-104, p. 116.

<sup>183</sup> Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 15.

the *Sicherheitspolizei*.<sup>184</sup> All three phases of the SS cavalry's deployment in Poland are characterised by an involvement in ideologically motivated crimes: throughout the rank groups, there was a high willingness not only to engage in expulsions and executions by command but also to commit criminal acts out of their own volition, many of which were triggered by personal anti-Semitism. What stands out in this context is the role of the officers, especially the squadron leaders, who led the way by enforcing a policy of oppression of Poles and Jews; their orders, which were full of anti-Semitic statements and racial stereotypes, prove the humiliation, abuse, and murder of the local population, sometimes with hundreds of victims. It can be assumed that the officers in particular now saw their prejudices against Jews confirmed by the appalling conditions under which many Polish Jews were living.<sup>185</sup>

One of the first missions of the SS cavalry was the killing of Poles who were considered as belonging to the country's elite: politicians, aristocrats, businessmen, academics, clerics and officers. The regimental staff and the 1<sup>st</sup> cavalry squadron were employed alongside police units in mass executions in and near Warsaw. These took place in the Palmiry forest and in the garden of the parliament from 7 December, 1939. In the forest alone, more than 1700 people were killed, members of the elite as well as many Jews. The massacres continued at least until October 1940.<sup>186</sup> In Lodz, too, drastic measures against the local elites were taken: between September and November 1939, hundreds of people were arrested by the *Gestapo*.<sup>187</sup> They were then transported to nearby Lucmierz in trucks and shot by members of the SS cavalry's recruit training squadron. According to Polish witnesses the killings continued until the unit's withdrawal in spring 1941.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Cüppers, 'SS-mäßige Art', p. 96.

<sup>185</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 36-60.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>187</sup> According to Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 163, the massacres occurred between November, 1939 und April, 1940.

<sup>188</sup> Cüppers, 'SS-mäßige Art', pp. 99-100.

*Waffen-SS* troops were also largely involved in the displacement of Jews from the Warthegau, a part of western Poland that had been annexed to Germany. The cavalrymen helped to establish a ghetto in Lodz into which the evicted Jews were deported. Some of them were also interned in smaller ghettos in the Lodz region.<sup>189</sup> Poles, too, were driven into the General Government by the SS riders. At the same time, they supported the resettlement of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe. These measures were part of Himmler's policy of 'Germanization', a project that was intended to expand German settlement and influence further eastward.<sup>190</sup> After the deportation of Jews and Poles, Gypsies from the western provinces suffered the same fate.<sup>191</sup> The final destination for many Polish Jews became the Lublin district, the designated area for the so-called '*Judenreservat*' or '*Reichsghetto*'. After the arrival of deportation trains, local German commanders in some cases decided to push the Jews even further eastward, across the river Bug into the Soviet occupied zone.<sup>192</sup>

To an increasing degree, Jews were not only disadvantaged, humiliated and segregated but also murdered. The killings were carried out by *Waffen-SS* or police units, often in cooperation. There is evidence that the SS cavalry regiment took part in these actions as well: in early December, the 5<sup>th</sup> squadron guarded a transport of 1018 Jewish men who were to be driven over the German-Soviet line of demarcation. The Jews were marched some 25 miles from Chelm to Hrubieszow near the border. At least 440 of them were shot along the way because they were too weak; these killings took place in public. Once Hrubieszow was reached, 1000 local Jews were forced to join the group but the Soviet guards refused to let the deportees cross the border. Survivors later spoke of a 'death march'.<sup>193</sup> A few weeks later, 600 Jews from Lublin arrived at Chelm by train. Along the way, dysentery had broken

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>190</sup> Browning, 'Nazi Resettlement Policy', pp. 501-503; Cüppers, 'SS-mäßige Art', p. 100.

<sup>191</sup> Longerich, *Himmler*, pp. 689-692.

<sup>192</sup> Browning, 'Nazi Resettlement Policy', pp. 501-503.

<sup>193</sup> Cüppers, 'SS-mäßige Art', pp. 97-98.

out amongst the passengers and some of them had died already. The commander of the cavalry squadron, *SS-Obersturmführer* Reichenwallner, decided to execute all of the remaining Jews to avoid a health hazard for the Chelm district. On the next day, more than 550 Jews were shot outside the town by the cavalry squadron and local German police.<sup>194</sup>

The German forces also fought ruthlessly against partisans and saboteurs of any kind. For the SS cavalry, this became another important task: whereas some squadrons, such as the first squadron under Waldemar Fegelein, Hermann's brother, predominantly carried out executions, subunits in rural areas frequently were engaged in operations against insurgents.<sup>195</sup> In late March and early April 1940 the SS cavalry regiment and other German formations attempted to eliminate a group of partisans which consisted of former soldiers of the Polish army. This led to a large-scale operation in the area between Radom and Kielce. Although Fegelein's riders and a police battalion tried to encircle the insurgents, half of the approximately one hundred men managed to escape. Despite heavy criticism from the German supreme command in Poland, Fegelein was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class for this operation.<sup>196</sup> Extreme brutality was shown in the course of action: in a neighbouring village, all men of military age were shot by units of the 8<sup>th</sup> SS Death's Head regiment on 7 April.<sup>197</sup> On the following day, members of SS cavalry squadrons executed 250 Polish men in other nearby villages.<sup>198</sup> Both the proceedings of this operation and the way it was viewed by Hermann Fegelein became characteristic for the unit's later conduct in the Soviet Union. He himself gave the following comment in his report of 10 April: 'The set tasks of burning down guilty villages and

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>195</sup> Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry*, pp. 148-151, and Müller-Tupath, *Becher*, pp. 22-27.

<sup>196</sup> Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 164.

<sup>197</sup> Einsatzbericht Kdr. 8. SS-T-St. v. 18.5. 1940, in: BArchB, NS 19/3505, quoted in: Cüppers, 'SS-mäßige Art', p. 100.

<sup>198</sup> Gefechtsbericht Kdr. 1. SS-T-RS v. 10.4. 1940, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 3, file 22, quoted in: Cüppers, 'SS-mäßige Art', p. 100.

executing sinister elements were completed in such a clean and decent SS-worthy way that every doubt about the troops' strength of character had to be eliminated'.<sup>199</sup>

When examining the motives of SS cavalymen, it is striking that members of all hierarchy levels quickly adjusted to the role of the unit and their particular task within it. Even when the mounted formations were still in the process of being established, they were already deployed for occupation duties including expulsions and killings. As a reason for the motivation and spirit of officers and NCO's and commending their good example, Franz Magill stated that they were 'old SS men' for the most part.<sup>200</sup> Despite some frictions, the ordinary men did their duty as well, as Hermann Fegelein stated in a report to the command of the *Waffen-SS*: 'Sometimes it was not easy to carry out all the executions and *Sonderaktionen* as the most severe strains of morale had to be asked from the men day by day'. He continued by saying that he did not 'have to punish a man for disobedience or breach of duty in a single case'.<sup>201</sup> What he did not say was that his soldiers often went far beyond their orders and humiliated, abused, robbed, or even killed Jews and Poles without any orders, often out of base motives. Many of them, including their officers up to Fegelein himself, behaved more like an unleashed band of mercenaries than the highly disciplined soldiers he intended to develop. With and without displaying personal anti-Semitism, they exploited the exceptional circumstances of serving in an occupied country.<sup>202</sup>

It is significant that the officer corps of the SS cavalry managed to implement a brutal occupation policy with two different (although partly overlapping) contingents of men without difficulties regarding the obedience of killing orders: both the 'older'

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Stimmungsbericht des SS-Totenkopf-Reiterregiments 2 Lublin, 13 August 1940, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 7.

<sup>201</sup> Stimmungsbericht des 1. SS-Totenkopf-Reiterregiments, 13 August 1940, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 7.

<sup>202</sup> Cüppers, 'SS-mäßige Art', pp. 90-111, especially pp. 90-91, pp. 96-97, and pp. 102-104; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 36-42.

group (reservists and police volunteers) and the ‘younger’ group consisting of *Waffen-SS* volunteers functioned as planned. As protocols from questionings and original documents from the SS in most cases do not contain personal testimony on the reasons for participation in executions, research has to balance various arguments and facts, one of which is membership in National Socialist organisations.<sup>203</sup> The high percentage of members of the *Allgemeine SS* amongst the men of the SS Cavalry Brigade – more than 40% – was interpreted by Martin Cüppers as a ‘distinct commitment to National Socialism’ that proves their classification as ‘ideological soldiers’.<sup>204</sup> This analysis appears to be justified when viewed in the context of the crimes the SS cavalymen were involved in from 1939 – 1941; also, it is possible that this applied to a large number of non-commissioned officers and men as well as to the majority of the officer corps.

What this assumption does not take into account, however, is that membership in the *Allgemeine SS* and joining the *Waffen-SS* were two different things: SS reservists who were called up according to the *Notdienstverordnung* of 15 October, 1938 did have the opportunity to join the *Wehrmacht* and were not forced to participate in atrocities. Those who stayed chose to remain within a frame of reference which was characterised by radical measures and ultimately resulted in even worse crimes against humanity. They were joined by young volunteers, for whom it can be assumed that voluntariness also meant a willingness to follow any orders, including criminal ones.<sup>205</sup> These findings regarding call-up procedures and voluntary entry into the SS also apply to the *Reiterstandarten* in Poland: being a member of the pre-

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<sup>203</sup> In postwar questionings, former SS cavalymen were not asked about their membership in the Nazi party. Some gave particulars about this voluntarily but in most of the protocols no information on political activity can be found.

<sup>204</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 353. Cüppers does not mention a particular date on which this percentage has been found; from the reference to the SS Cavalry Brigade in the text it can be concluded that this must have been between the formation of the brigade in the summer of 1941 and the beginning of the battle between Rzhev and Toropez in the winter of 1941 – 1942.

<sup>205</sup> Rohrkamp, *Weltanschaulich gefestigte Kämpfer*, pp. 332-333.

war mounted SS units alone cannot be viewed as an indicator of support for Nazi ideology as both the paramilitary *Reiterstandarten* and the *SS-Totenkopf-Reiterstandarten* (until the summer of 1940) mostly consisted of former members of equestrian associations which had been integrated into the SS without further ado a few years earlier. As has been stated above, these institutions were made up of sportsmen who did not necessarily share the views and participate in radical measures of the regime. Moreover, the figure given by Cüppers almost exactly matches the contingent of about 2,000 soldiers (or 40 – 50% of the 4,000 men who had been incorporated since the beginning of the war) who remained in the two SS cavalry regiments after the discharge of the reservists in the summer of 1940.<sup>206</sup> Despite the fact that many young recruits had been enlisted as well, it can be assumed that there still was a strong element of older equestrians present in the units.<sup>207</sup>

The years 1940 and 1941 saw further organisational changes both in the SS in general and the mounted formations. In August, 1940 the *SS-Führungshauptamt* (SS main command office) was founded, an institution responsible for the deployment and equipment of all *Waffen-SS* units. The newly-formed reinforced SS infantry and cavalry regiments, which had been under the control of the *Inspekteur der verstärkten Totenkopfstandarten* (inspection of the reinforced Death's Head regiments) nominally and under the command of an SS, police or military authority in Germany or the occupied territories locally, were now also integrated into the *Waffen-SS*. Their command was transferred to the *Kommando der Waffen-SS*

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<sup>206</sup> Stimmungsbericht des 1. SS-Totenkopf-Reiterregiments, 13 August 1940, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 7. This document states that 90% of the 2,043 men who were discharged had an agricultural background; it does not give the proportion of men from the *Allgemeine SS*, volunteers etc.

<sup>207</sup> See also Stimmungsbericht des SS-Totenkopf-Reiterregiments 2 Lublin, 13 August 1940, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 7; the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment stated that many replacements who had been drafted later were also older, which indicates that they had come from the pre-war *Reiterstandarten*.

(*Waffen-SS* command) as the inspection of the reinforced Death's Head regiments was disbanded.<sup>208</sup> The two cavalry regiments were renamed *SS-Totenkopf-Reiter-Regimenter*, a designation which was to be short-lived.<sup>209</sup>

As the separation of command structure and training units proved to be problematic the two regiments were amalgamated again in November, 1940. They were then reorganised as two half-regiments, consisting of two detachments each. The formations were now referred to as *SS-Totenkopf-Kavallerie-Regimenter* (SS Death's Head Cavalry Regiments).<sup>210</sup> Nominally, the second regiment was still subordinate to the first regiment and there was only one regimental staff. When assessing the organisation of the regiments in early 1941, Fegelein found that this situation would not be practicable, should the two regiments be employed in combat. He therefore requested the forming of a second staff unit and made further suggestions as to the composition and armament of the SS cavalry, with the aim of deploying two fully combat-ready regiments. For training purposes, a new recruit depot was to be established at Warsaw.<sup>211</sup>

In order to obtain information on possible improvement regarding the structure of the units, Hermann Fegelein also sought advice from the staff of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division of the *Wehrmacht*, which was based in Warsaw at that time, too.<sup>212</sup> The relationship with the army officers seems to have been rather cordial, as is proven by mutual visits; on one occasion, 27 officers from the division were guests of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment.<sup>213</sup> This fact was not unusual: in an earlier report, Fegelein had

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<sup>208</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 27.

<sup>209</sup> Michaelis, *Dokumentation*, p. 312 and p. 314.

<sup>210</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 30; Klietmann, *Die Waffen-SS*, p. 355; Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 165.

<sup>211</sup> Schreiben des Kommandeurs des SS-Kavallerieregiments 1 an den Befehlshaber Ost der Waffen-SS im Generalgouvernement vom 15.2. 1941, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 4; Vorschlag zur Kriegsgliederung der Kav.-Regimenter vom 15.2. 1941, *ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> Schreiben des Kommandeurs des SS-Kavallerieregiments 1 an den Befehlshaber Ost der Waffen-SS im Generalgouvernement vom 15.2. 1941, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 4.

<sup>213</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht der Abt. Ia, 1. Kavalleriedivision, Woche vom 3.3. - 9.3. 1941, in: BArchF, RH 29-1/3, p. 32; the visit took place on 7 March, 1941.

already mentioned the good rapport SS cavalry units had built with army and air force commanders in Poland, amongst them general Max von Schenckendorff, who later was to play an important role for Fegelein and his men.<sup>214</sup> With the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, however, it was different as there was not only consultation: according to situation reports of the deputy commander from February and March, 1941, a second brigade staff within the division was being considered to which the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment would become subordinate, and thus an incorporation of the unit into a larger army formation.<sup>215</sup> This idea, which certainly would not have been to Himmler's liking, was not implemented but it does show how keen Fegelein was to turn his cavalry into a combat unit (or at least to attach it to one) even before the German attack on the Soviet Union.

Fegelein's other plans found the approval of the *SS-Führungshauptamt* and were implemented according to his suggestions.<sup>216</sup> In March, 1941, the two regiments and their squadrons were restructured again and renamed for the third time within a year, this time to *SS-Kavallerie-Regimenter*. The 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment was now an independent unit.<sup>217</sup> The transition of the SS cavalry from the Death's Head units to the *Waffen-SS* was also marked by a formal change: instead of death's head insignia the soldiers now wore SS runes on the collar of their uniform.<sup>218</sup> This composition, which was to last until after the beginning of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, comprised a new partition of both regiments. There were two regimental staffs now and the horse squadrons were combined in a *Reitende Abteilung* (cavalry

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<sup>214</sup> Stimmungsbericht des 1. SS-Totenkopf-Reiterregiments, 13 August 1940, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 7.

<sup>215</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht der Abt. Ia, 1. Kavalleriedivision, Woche vom 17.2. - 23.2. 1941, in: BArchF, RH 29-1/3, p. 30; Tätigkeitsbericht der Abt. Ia, 1. Kavalleriedivision, Woche vom 3.3. - 9.3. 1941, *ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>216</sup> Befehl zur Umgliederung des SS-Kav.Rgts vom 26.2. 1941, in: BArchB, NS 19/3489, fol. 6.

<sup>217</sup> Befehl des Kommandeurs des SS-Kavallerieregiments 1 vom 21.3. 1941, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 4; Befehl des Kommandeurs des SS-Kavallerieregiments 1 vom 28.3. 1941, *ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> Michaelis, *Dokumentation*, p. 314.

detachment). In the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment under Hermann Fegelein, this detachment was commanded by *SS-Sturmbannführer* Gustav Lombard; in the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment under Franz Magill, it was headed by *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Herbert Schönfeldt.<sup>219</sup> In an earlier personnel review, Magill had been assessed as not qualified for commanding a cavalry regiment. He was therefore replaced as regimental commander by *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Heimo Hierthes on April 10 and given command of the *Reitende Abteilung*.<sup>220</sup> Schönfeldt became head of the fifth squadron in the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment.<sup>221</sup>

Each of the two cavalry regiments was composed of a staff squadron, a supply unit, four cavalry squadrons, and four so-called ‘technical squadrons’ equipped with heavy weapons. The staff squadron comprised administration and other services, such as a signals platoon, a reconnaissance platoon on motorcycles, a platoon that acquired and broke in new horses, and a drum and bugle corps. Supplies were provided by the *Leichte Kavallerie-Kolonne*. Its three sections were responsible for the transport of ammunition for the entire unit, oats for its horses, and personal belongings of the SS cavalymen; it also comprised a blacksmith’s shop. The *Reitende Abteilung* was made up of the first four squadrons of the regiment. The first, second, and third squadron were regular mounted subunits with infantry arms and one or two light machine guns each; they consisted of three platoons (with four squads each) and a supply troop. The fourth squadron was the mounted machine gun squadron; it had two machine gun platoons with four machine guns each and a platoon armed with grenade launchers. The cavalry detachment was headed by a

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<sup>219</sup> Führerstellenbesetzungsliste der SS-Kavallerie-Regimenter 1 und 2 vom 18.3. 1941, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 1.

<sup>220</sup> According to *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 39, Hierthes was assigned command of the regiment in April. On 21 June, 1941, he was promoted to *SS-Standartenführer* and officially appointed commander. See also Beurteilung Franz Magill vom 21.8. 1940, in: BArchB, SSO Franz Magill.

<sup>221</sup> Führerstellenbesetzungsliste beider Kavallerie-Regimenter vom 30.7. 1941, BArchF, RS 3-8/91.

staff squadron, which also had its own anti-tank platoon. The fifth squadron consisted of three platoons, each of which was armed with two 7,5 cm infantry support guns; the sixth squadron comprised an engineer platoon and an anti-tank platoon; the seventh squadron was a reconnaissance squadron on bicycles and the eighth squadron was the *Reitende Batterie* which comprised four platoons armed with one 10,5 cm field gun each.<sup>222</sup>

To assure the successful cooperation of all squadrons and services of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment in its new structure, a field exercise in the Rembertów training area near Warsaw was conducted in early June, 1941. During this practice, a quick advance of the entire regiment towards enemy positions with machine guns and artillery was demonstrated. Special attention was paid to artillery support, covering fire and the quick exchange of information between the heavy weapons squadrons.<sup>223</sup> On the same day the situation for the field exercise was announced, Fegelein also issued a long list of complaints and orders for improvement of parade duty and combat training.<sup>224</sup> It shows that he was aiming at creating a formation that worked absolutely precisely in peacetime, down to the last turn and piece of clothing. In a battle situation, however, every man was to know his duty and to carry it out with confidence, swiftness and momentum. The new orders were addressed to all sections and subunits of the regiment and involved many points which soon were to gain importance, such as reconnaissance patrols, training of specialists who were able to fight on their own if necessary, regulations for marches and signals, camouflage and

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<sup>222</sup> Befehl zur Umgliederung des SS-Kav.Rgts vom 26.2. 1941, BArchB, NS 19/3489, fol. 6; Abschlußbericht der ZStL vom 20.8. 1963, Beteiligung der SS-Kavalleriebrigade Fegelein an Vernichtungsaktionen gegenüber der jüdischen Bevölkerung im Pripjetgebiet / Weißrußland im Sommer 1941 (Lombard u.a.), in: BArchL, B 162/5527, pp. 356-359; this source will from now on be abbreviated as 'Abschlußbericht der ZStL vom 20.8. 1963'. *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 39-40; Vernehmung Otto Prade vom 30.10. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5543, p. 29.

<sup>223</sup> Lage – Blau für das Gefechtsschießen am 6.6. 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/724, pp. 9-12.

<sup>224</sup> Beanstandungen bei den Schwadronen im Exerzier- und Gefechtsdienst vom 5.6. 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/724, pp. 13-18.

the use of heavy weapons. Evidently, the SS cavalry had ceased to be a motley crew of horse riding enthusiasts and already progressed beyond being a mere police auxiliary or occupation unit. It was now intensely preparing for mobile warfare that required the successful collaboration of a multitude of men, arms and equipment.

The SS had a far bigger body of troops at its disposal in 1941 than it had enjoyed two years before, an improvement that greatly facilitated the preparation for the upcoming campaign in the east. Compared to the last pre-war figures, the personnel of the armed SS had exploded in number in late 1939 and early 1940. Beside the two cavalry regiments, twelve new infantry regiments had been formed, for the most part in Poland, Bohemia and Moravia.<sup>225</sup> These Death's Head units had served as occupation forces either at their place of formation or at other locations throughout Europe. At the beginning of the German campaign against Holland, Belgium, and France in April, 1940 they had a combined strength of more than 125,000 men.<sup>226</sup> This number rose further to around 150,000 in August, 1940, thus marking a sixfold increase in manpower in only one year.<sup>227</sup> Also, ethnic Germans, the so-called *Volksdeutsche*, joined SS units in the areas of deployment, mainly in Eastern Europe. To those who could be mustered in newly occupied areas were added many others who came from Romania, Yugoslavia or Slovakia after intense SS recruitment campaigns in their native regions.<sup>228</sup> This general trend also applied to the SS cavalry: many *Volksdeutsche* joined the two regiments in Poland.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> For a list of these new units, see Michaelis, *Dokumentation*, pp. 312-319.

<sup>226</sup> Stein, *The Waffen SS*, p. 27.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>228</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 87-89.

<sup>229</sup> Cüppers, 'SS-mäßige Art', p. 94; Michaelis, *Kavalleriedivisionen*, p. 10; see also Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 8. The allocation of ethnic Germans to the subunits of the SS cavalry varied from squadron to squadron but became significantly higher after the turnover of personnel in the summer of 1940. The exact contingent of *Volksdeutsche* for the two regiments cannot be ascertained. From the available documents, however, it becomes clear that it could be as high as 41% of the rank and file in some squadrons; see Personalliste 1. Schwdr. SS-KR 2 v. 27.4. 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/912, quoted in Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 370. Another example for this development was given by a former platoon leader from the second squadron of the same regiment. He testified after the war that the men of the platoon he took over in the spring of 1941 came from the Banat and Transylvania regions in Romania; see Vernehmung von Helmut Guggolz vom 14.3. 1962, in: StAW,

This development is no coincidence: as two recent studies on Nazi perpetrators have shown, there was a connection between provenance and political radicalism.<sup>230</sup> In the samples researched by Michael Mann as well as Gerhard Paul and Klaus-Michael Mallmann, the number of people from contested German border regions such as Upper Silesia or from provinces which had been annexed by other countries as a consequence of the Treaty of Versailles was disproportionately high.<sup>231</sup> Ethnic Germans who had lived outside the borders of Germany during the interwar period often had experienced unrest, oppression or expulsion. Many of them responded to this with extreme nationalism, anti-Semitism and revisionism, a development that helped to turn them into perpetrators when genocide began. From 1939, they displayed great brutality as members of German military or paramilitary formations.<sup>232</sup> This is exemplified by the crimes of the so-called *Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz*, a militia consisting of ethnic Germans that was organised by the SS in Poland. Units of the *Selbstschutz* became responsible for the murder and displacement of tens of thousands of Polish citizens: between 20,000 and 30,000 people were killed by the German militias within the first months of the Second World War.<sup>233</sup>

As the command structure of the SS in the occupied territories was about to move further eastward in the course of strategic planning for the invasion of the Soviet

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62 Nds. Fb.2, Befehle (Kopien) 1941, Nr. 1019, p. 294.

<sup>230</sup> Michael Mann, *Die dunkle Seite der Demokratie: eine Theorie der ethnischen Säuberung* (Hamburg, 2007); Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Gerhard Paul (eds.), *Karrieren der Gewalt: Nationalsozialistische Täterbiographien* (Darmstadt, 2004). Based on West German court files from proceedings against Nazi perpetrators, Mann surveyed 1581 people from different groups: former members of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA), Higher SS and Police Leaders, Nazi party *gauleiter* and high-ranking officers of the Einsatzgruppen; see Mann, *Die dunkle Seite der Demokratie*, pp. 321-323. The work edited by Mallmann and Paul presents 23 biographies of perpetrators (21 of them male, 2 female) from various branches of the SS and police as well as the *Wehrmacht*; see Mallmann and Paul, *Karrieren der Gewalt*, p. 6.

<sup>231</sup> Mann, *Die dunkle Seite der Demokratie*, pp. 329-336, Mallmann and Paul, *Karrieren der Gewalt*, p. 7.

<sup>232</sup> Mann, *Die dunkle Seite der Demokratie*, pp. 288-289, p. 315, p. 341, and p. 351; Mallmann and Paul, *Karrieren der Gewalt*, p. 7.

<sup>233</sup> Böhler, *Auftakt zum Vernichtungskrieg*, pp. 231-234. On the crimes of the German militias, see also Christian Jansen and Arno Weckbecker, *Der 'Volksdeutsche Selbstschutz' in Polen 1939/40* (Munich, 1992).

Union, the institution of the *Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer 'Ost'* (HSSPF 'Ost') was no longer needed in Poland and was therefore dissolved. The two SS cavalry regiments were put under the control of the *SS-Führungshauptamt* on April 9, 1941 but remained based in Poland.<sup>234</sup> At the same time, Himmler developed new institutions that were to perform special tasks under his command: a new command organisation within the SS and three new HSSPF who were to be installed in the western parts of the Soviet Union as his direct representatives. On 7 April, 1941 the so-called *Einsatzstab Reichsführer-SS* was formed. On 6 May, it was renamed the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS im SS-Führungshauptamt*. This special agency was to act as the central SS command of forces deployed in the territories for which the new HSSPF were responsible. It was organised like an army staff with branches for training, reconnaissance, administration, military intelligence and medical services. The troops that were to be put under the control of this staff could be deployed by the HSSPF as an executive force but remained subordinate to Himmler at the same time.<sup>235</sup>

Like in Poland in 1939, the HSSPF in the Soviet Union were to be responsible for safeguarding the occupied territories by means of using SS and police units to combat insurgents and to persecute Jews and members of communist organisations. Regarding logistic support, the HSSPF were subordinate to the army; they also had to coordinate SS operations with army commanders in their area of responsibility. All of these tasks were established by an order from 21 May, 1941.<sup>236</sup> As heads of the SS occupation administration in the Soviet Union, three men were appointed in the spring and summer of 1941: *SS-Gruppenführer* Hans-Adolf Prützmann was

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<sup>234</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 70.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-66.

<sup>236</sup> Hans Buchheim and others (eds.), *Anatomie des SS-Staates. Bd.2: Nationalsozialistische Konzentrationslager, 1933-1945. Befehl und Gehorsam*. (Munich, 1967), pp. 184-185; Ruth Bettina Birn, *Die höheren SS- und Polizeiführer: Himmlers Vertreter im Reich und in den besetzten Gebieten* (Düsseldorf, 1986), pp. 169-172.

responsible for the Baltic states and northern Russia as HSSPF *'Rußland-Nord'*, *SS-Gruppenführer* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski was in charge of Belorussia as HSSPF *'Rußland-Mitte'* and *SS-Obergruppenführer* Friedrich Jeckeln controlled the third sector with southern Russia and the Ukraine as HSSPF *'Rußland-Süd'*.<sup>237</sup>

At a meeting with Himmler in Berlin on 16 June, Fegelein reported that the formation of the SS cavalry was now complete.<sup>238</sup> On 20 June, their command was transferred to the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS*, effective from the next day.<sup>239</sup> In addition to the cavalry regiments, further units were integrated into the forces of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS*. In late April, the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Infantry Brigade had been formed out of the SS infantry regiments 8 and 10 which were based in Poland. The former staff of the HSSPF *'Ost'* had become the new brigade staff. At the same time, the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Infantry Brigade was formed out of the SS infantry regiments 4 and 14 in the Netherlands. The new brigade was transferred to Warsaw soon afterwards.<sup>240</sup> To these formations added the newly-formed *Begleitbataillon Reichsführer-SS* which was to guard Himmler's command posts in the east, a number of smaller supply companies and a unit from Hamburg consisting of Danish SS volunteers.<sup>241</sup> Thus, Himmler was able to deploy almost twenty thousand highly mobile SS troops under his immediate command. On 22 June, 1941, the combat strength of the two cavalry regiments and the two infantry brigades totalled 16,328 men: 4,036 in the cavalry, 5354 in the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Infantry Brigade and 6938 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Infantry Brigade.<sup>242</sup>

As a result of the two years of being stationed in Poland, the SS cavalry units had

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<sup>237</sup> Birn, *Die höheren SS- und Polizeiführer*, pp. 73-75.

<sup>238</sup> Peter Witte, *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers 1941/42* (Hamburg, 1999), p. 175.

<sup>239</sup> Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1 des Kommandostabes-RFSS (16.6. – 31.12. 1941), entry from 20 June, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 100; according to Befehl RFSS vom 17.6. 1941, BArchB, NS 33/231, quoted in Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 73, and Befehl RFSS vom 17.6. 1941, BArchB, NS 19/3508, quoted in Longerich, *Himmler*, p. 539, Himmler had ordered this transfer on 17 June already, also with effect from 21 June.

<sup>240</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 71.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72; Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1 des Kommandostabes-RFSS (16.6. – 31.12. 1941), entry from 20 June, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 100.

<sup>242</sup> Aufstellung der Stärken und Verluste der SS-Divisionen vom 24.3. 1942, in: BArchB, NS 19/1520.

become a force that managed to combine men with many different backgrounds. Under the command of fanatical officers, both those who had been socialised in the society of Nazi Germany (sportsmen as well as SS volunteers) and those who had entered the regiments as volunteers from other countries worked together in fulfilling mostly ideological tasks. Difficulties in their completion, such as an adjustment to killing, hardly appear in the documents; non-conformist behaviour such as a refusal to participate is completely absent from the reports. Although the SS cavalry was still in the process of becoming a military unit and field exercises on a regimental scale could only be conducted in the late spring of 1941, officers aimed at turning the men into willing subordinates by enforcing a strict regime from the very beginning.

Regarding the initial research question, it can be stated that the two SS cavalry regiments had become an instrument of ideological terror whilst serving in Poland. Of the three factors which were prominent in the development of the mounted units between 1939 and 1941, drill and discipline as well as the involvement in radical measures can be considered as more important than the effect of propaganda on the men. Political instruction could not be given on a regular basis; moreover, many of the younger recruits had been indoctrinated to some extent already. The strong National Socialist attitude and strictness of the officers served as a guideline for all of the men; after the personnel turnover of mid-1940, the radical element grew even stronger and now included more of the ordinary soldiers as well. In combination with the immediate involvement in the German policy of transforming the General Government, these factors served as the first steps in turning the SS cavalrymen into 'ideological soldiers'. From the summer of 1941, they showed that they were as brutal and efficient as any other military or paramilitary formation involved in mass violence in the East, including the soon notorious *Einsatzgruppen*.

### 3) The SS cavalry at the beginning of operation 'Barbarossa'

#### The *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS* and the SS Cavalry Brigade in the first phase of the campaign

Within four weeks of the German attack on the Soviet Union, three important developments shaped the further deployment and character of the SS cavalry regiments. Firstly, the war in the East was a war of annihilation in which military and ideological aims coincided; secondly, the vast distances and a lack of German troops soon took their toll, both regarding difficulties in occupation and in combat; and finally, the mounted SS units under Fegelein's command combined the necessary features to fulfil both functions, which is why Heinrich Himmler sent them into the Soviet Union. There, they fully developed the 'dual role' which became the main feature of their operations until mid-1942. The period from late June until early July, 1941, can be considered the key turning point in this context: the SS cavalrymen had their first encounter with Soviet troops; shortly afterwards, Himmler informed them about their new task and operational area in Belorussia. Despite the fact that Fegelein's men were involved in combat operations that were comparatively small and localised, this aspect, too, is of importance: these missions were detached from the mass killings committed by the two regiments in August as they did not include civilians. This chapter describes how the duality of the unit's character originated during the opening phase of operation 'Barbarossa', and how its capabilities were first put to the test at Bialystok and in the Pripet Marshes. In addition, the officer corps of the SS cavalry is analysed with a special focus on ideological motivation and military skills.

From the second half of 1940, an invasion of the Soviet Union was planned by Adolf Hitler and the German army High Command. According to the military objectives presented by Hitler's order from 18 December, 1940, 'the bulk of the Russian army, based in western Russia, was to be destroyed in bold operations by advancing tank columns'. The German force was to be subdivided into three army groups: one each for the northern, middle, and southern sector of the front. A retreat of Soviet forces was to be prevented. The final intention was to reach a general line between the Volga and the town of Arkhangelsk. Thus, the Soviet air force would not be able to attack Germany anymore; German bombers in turn would be able to destroy the remaining Soviet industry in the Urals. The plan for attack received the code name 'Barbarossa'.<sup>243</sup>

There was a strong interdependence of strategic and economic aims: not only should the Soviet military and political power be destroyed but living space and resources for Germans were to be conquered. In the long term, autarky was to be achieved, especially by using Ukrainian grain and Caucasian oil.<sup>244</sup> This would make Germany invulnerable to attacks from Great Britain and the United States. The annihilation of the Soviet Union would also deprive the Allies of another partner and would eventually allow Germany to fight for global power.<sup>245</sup> The expansion of the German sphere of influence was to be achieved at a high cost. In order to procure food supplies for the German population and the army, the government and its economic and military experts aimed at a radical exploitation of Soviet agricultural resources and accepted possible famines and the decimation of the local population in some parts of the occupied territories. The death of twenty to thirty millions of

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<sup>243</sup> Weisung Nr. 21 Fall Barbarossa vom 18.12. 1940, BArchF, RW 4 / v. 522, quoted in Gerd R. Ueberschär and Wolfram Wette (eds.), *Der deutsche Überfall auf die Sowjetunion. 'Unternehmen Barbarossa' 1941* (Frankfurt, 1991), p. 244 ff.

<sup>244</sup> Rolf-Dieter Müller, 'Von der Wirtschaftsallianz zum kolonialen Ausbeutungskrieg', in: H. Boog and others (eds.), *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, Bd. 4: Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart, 1987), pp. 113-119.

<sup>245</sup> Ueberschär and Wette, *'Unternehmen Barbarossa'*, p. 87.

Slavs was anticipated.<sup>246</sup> Ideology became the third important factor. In order to implement the Nazi doctrine in the new theatre of war, Hitler issued several orders in quick succession between March and June, 1941. They aimed at coordinating the German forces and their tasks, at identifying, dehumanising, and destroying opponents, and at providing legal protection for perpetrators.

First, the military objectives were extended. On 3 March, 1941, Hitler amended the strategic plan developed by the German army High Command and made clear that this war was to be fought differently on the German side. In his opinion the impending confrontation was not only a clash of two armies but also of two ideologies: National Socialism and its antagonist, 'Judaeo-Bolshevism'. The Soviet form of government was to be destroyed along with its leading class, the so-called 'Judaeo-Bolshevist intelligence', and the enemy armed forces. The Soviet Union was to be dissolved and the formation of a Russian nation state was to be prevented.<sup>247</sup>

Ten days later, the army and the SS arrived at an agreement to ensure a successful cooperation and to avoid frictions between the two institutions as there had been during the Polish campaign. The quartermaster-general of the *Wehrmacht*, general Eduard Wagner, and the head of the SS security police and security service, *SS-Gruppenführer* Reinhard Heydrich, conceptualized a division of labour: whereas the army was to conquer the country, the SS was to 'pacify' the hinterland of the front and thus to prepare the ground for establishing a new administration. Forces deployed by the SS were to carry out 'special tasks' in the prospective operational area of the army.<sup>248</sup> On 28 April, the new directive was further specified by an order issued by the supreme commander of the German army, field marshal Walther von

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<sup>246</sup> Götz Aly and Susanne Heim, *Architects of annihilation: Auschwitz and the logic of destruction* (London, 2002), pp. 234-252.

<sup>247</sup> Percy Ernst Schramm, (ed.), *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Wehrmachtführungsstab) 1940 – 1945. Bd. 1, 1. August 1940 – 31. Dezember 1941* (Frankfurt, 1965), p. 341.

<sup>248</sup> Richtlinien auf Sondergebieten zur Weisung Nr. 21 (Fall Barbarossa) vom 13.3. 1941, IMT, vol. 26, p. 53 ff., quoted in Ueberschär and Wette, *'Unternehmen Barbarossa'*, pp. 246-248.

Brauchitsch. He described the tasks of the SS formations as intelligence and combat missions: information and material on organisations, groups, and individuals deemed to be ‘enemies of the Reich’ was to be secured; these enemies were to be destroyed. In order to execute these tasks, special operation forces of the SS were to be deployed. They were subordinate to the army only in matters of logistics and received their orders directly from Heydrich. Within the scope of their missions, they were authorised to ‘implement executive measures towards the civilian population on their own authority’.<sup>249</sup>

These two documents provided the legal basis for the deployment of the so-called *Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD* (task forces of the security police and the security service, the Nazi party secret service). According to von Brauchitsch’s order, these SS units were to consist of *Einsatzkommandos*, which operated in rear areas, and *Sonderkommandos*, which followed close behind the advancing army units.<sup>250</sup> Despite the use of camouflage language, such as ‘investigation of and combat against enemy activity’, the army command knew very well that from the beginning of the campaign against the Soviet Union, the *Einsatzgruppen* and other SS and police units would primarily pursue the aim of killing Jews and communists in the occupied territories.<sup>251</sup>

Four *Einsatzgruppen* were assembled in May and June, 1941. Their personnel came from all branches of the SS and police. Each *Einsatzgruppe* was assigned to a German army group or other military force: *Einsatzgruppe A* was to follow Army Group North into the Baltic states towards Leningrad, *Einsatzgruppe B* was to be

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<sup>249</sup> Regelung des Einsatzes der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD im Verbands des Heeres vom 28.4. 1941, quoted in Ueberschär and Wette, “*Unternehmen Barbarossa*“, pp. 249-250.

<sup>250</sup> Helmut Langerbein, *Hitler’s death squads. The logic of mass murder* (College Station, TX 2004), p. 29. The terms *Einsatzkommando* and *Sonderkommando* both translate as ‘task force’, as does *Einsatzgruppe*.

<sup>251</sup> Jürgen Förster, ‘Das andere Gesicht des Krieges: Das ‘Unternehmen Barbarossa’ als Eroberungs- und Vernichtungskrieg’, in R. G. Förster (ed.), “*Unternehmen Barbarossa*. Zum historischen Ort der deutsch-sowjetischen Beziehungen von 1933 bis Herbst 1941’ (Munich, 1993), p. 155.

deployed with Army Group Centre in Belorussia, *Einsatzgruppe C* was attached to Army Group South and was to advance into the northern Ukraine, and *Einsatzgruppe D* was to move forward into the southern Ukraine and towards the Crimea with the Romanians. The combined manpower of the four task forces amounted to just under 3,000 men; an *Einsatzgruppe* comprised about 500 to 990 men and was subdivided into two *Einsatzkommandos* and two *Sonderkommandos*.<sup>252</sup>

Immediately before the allocation of the German forces for 'Barbarossa' was completed, the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS* became involved as well. The staff unit received the order to relocate from Berlin to Treskau near Poznan on 16 June and arrived there on the following day.<sup>253</sup> On 19 June, 1941, the commander of the *Kommandostab*, *SS-Brigadeführer* Kurt Knoblauch, liaised with the First General Staff Officer of Army Group B, lieutenant colonel Henning von Tresckow, at Poznan.<sup>254</sup> They discussed the future tasks for the brigades and cavalry regiments of the *Kommandostab* and their cooperation with the army group.<sup>255</sup> Knoblauch was ordered to move his staff forward to Arys in East Prussia, a town close to the German-Soviet line of demarcation, where it was to be put under the control of the Ninth Army. The subordinate units of the *Kommandostab*, which were based in Poland and Germany, were to follow.<sup>256</sup> Their mission, according to von Tresckow's instructions to the command of the Ninth Army, was to improve the defence

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<sup>252</sup> Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges. Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1938-1942* (Stuttgart, 1981), pp. 141-147.

<sup>253</sup> Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1 des Kommandostabes-RFSS (16.6. – 31.12. 1941), entries from 16 and 17 June, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 100; this source will from now on be abbreviated as 'KTB KDOS'.

<sup>254</sup> According to Christian Gerlach, Men of 20 July and the War in the Soviet Union, in H. Heer and K. Naumann (eds.), *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941 – 1944* (New York, Oxford 2000), p. 131, this meeting took place in the military training area at Arys, where the *Kommandostab* only arrived two days later. Army Group B was renamed Army Group Centre on June 22, 1941; KTB KDOS, entry from 19 June, 1941.

<sup>255</sup> Staff of the Reichsführer-SS at the SS main command office, chief of staff, to Chief of SS main command office, 19 June, 1941, in: BArchF, SF-02/37542, quoted in Gerlach, Men of 20 July, p. 131; BArchB, NS 33/43, quoted in: Winfried Heinemann, 'Kriegführung und militärischer Widerstand im Bereich der Heeresgruppe Mitte an der Ostfront', in: G. R. Ueberschär (ed.), *NS-Verbrechen und der militärische Widerstand gegen Hitler* (Darmstadt, 2000), p. 79.

<sup>256</sup> KTB KDOS, entry from 19 June, 1941.

readiness of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Corps in the sector between Augustowo and Ostrolenka and to prevent the Red Army from entering East Prussia. This was only temporary: the SS formations were to return under Himmler's command as soon as possible.<sup>257</sup>

On the following day, the first of Knoblauch's units were on their way to Arys and an order from the Ninth Army gave the necessary details about their deployment and subordination under the 42<sup>nd</sup> Corps, a reserve formation that was to provide cover for the left flank of the army during the attack. It is remarkable that this order stated that the SS forces were subordinate to the corps 'in every respect, incl. deployment', a fact that was soon to be capitalised on by the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>258</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Infantry Brigade arrived in Arys around 22 June.<sup>259</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry regiment was supposed to move from Warsaw into a designated assembly area near Arys on 24 June via a waypoint further south; the squadrons of the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment only arrived at their destination between 29 June and 1 July as they had to cover the distance from Krakow to East Prussia.<sup>260</sup>

Together with the *Einsatzgruppen* and the troops of the *Kommandostab*, Heinrich Himmler was able to deploy twenty-three battalions of the German order police for the invasion of the Soviet Union; these formations had a combined manpower of 11,640 men and 420 officers. The central institution that coordinated this effort were the three Higher SS and Police Leaders, each of whom was assigned one of three police regiments intended for deployment in the East. Every regiment consisted of three battalions. In each of the three sectors of the operational area, three more

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<sup>257</sup> Kriegstagebuch der 9. Armee, entry from 19 June, 1941, in: BArchF, RH 20–9/11; and Anlagen vom 18. und 20. Juni 1941 zum Kriegstagebuch der 9. Armee, *ibid.*, RH 20–9/20, quoted in Günther Gillissen, 'Tresckow und der Entschluß zum Hochverrat. Eine Nachschau zur Kontroverse über die Motive', *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 58 (2010), p. 374.

<sup>258</sup> KTB KDOS, entry from 20 June, 1941.

<sup>259</sup> Kommandobefehl Nr. 2 vom 21.6. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170; KTB KDOS, entries from 22 June, 1941.

<sup>260</sup> Kommandobefehl Nr. 2 vom 21.6. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170; Befehl zum Heranziehen des SS-Kavallerie-Rgt. 1 vom 21.6. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170; KTB KDOS, entry from 1 July, 1941; Lebenserinnerungen Gustav Lombard, p. 16.

battalions were to be deployed with a security division of the *Wehrmacht* in the hinterland. To these eighteen units added three battalions of a Special Purposes police regiment and a police cavalry battalion, both of which were to be deployed in the Ukraine, and the four companies of Police Battalion 9, which were divided up amongst the *Einsatzgruppen* to serve along the entire front.<sup>261</sup> The main aim of these paramilitary and military formations under the command of the HSSPF was the safeguarding of the German rear. This rather broadly defined task and the units which were assembled for its implementation were covered by the decree of Heydrich and Wagner from 13 March, 1941.<sup>262</sup>

When the allocation of troops reached its final stage in May, 1941, two other important orders were issued. A decree on military jurisdiction ordered German soldiers to fight relentlessly against civilian insurgents, authorised reprisals against the civilian population and exempted military personnel from prosecution.<sup>263</sup> This order of the regular army also applied to the SS: as civilians had been withdrawn from military jurisdiction, the *Einsatzgruppen* had unlimited authority over them.<sup>264</sup> The second order was the so-called *Kommissarbefehl*, a direct order for the murder of Soviet political commissars. These officers were viewed as ‘initiators of barbaric Asian combat methods’ who would incite Red Army soldiers to put up stubborn resistance and mistreat German prisoners of war. German soldiers were to kill them immediately in combat or when they resisted against their capture.<sup>265</sup> By laying out

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<sup>261</sup> Westermann, *Hitler's Police Battalions*, pp. 163-164; Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler. Biographie* (Munich, 2008), p. 539.

<sup>262</sup> Andrej Angrick and others, ‘Da hätte man schon ein Tagebuch führen müssen’. Das Polizeibataillon 322 und die Judenmorde im Bereich der Heesgruppe Mitte während des Sommers und Herbstes 1941’, in H. Grabitz and others (eds.), *Die Normalität des Verbrechens. Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung zu den nationalsozialistischen Gewaltverbrechen. Festschrift für Wolfgang Scheffler zum 65. Geburtstag* (Berlin, 1994), p. 326; for the decree of Heydrich and Wagner, see footnote 6.

<sup>263</sup> Erlaß über die Ausübung der Kriegsgerichtsbarkeit im Gebiet ‘Barbarossa’ und über besondere Maßnahmen der Truppe vom 13.5. 1941, quoted in Ueberschär and Wette, ‘*Unternehmen Barbarossa*’, pp. 252-253.

<sup>264</sup> Langerbein, *Hitler's death squads*, p. 30.

<sup>265</sup> Richtlinien für die Behandlung politischer Kommissare vom 6.6. 1941 mit Ergänzungen des ObdH vom 8.6. 1941, quoted in Ueberschär and Wette, ‘*Unternehmen Barbarossa*’, pp. 259-260. The

these directives and setting up special formations to implement them, Hitler had overcome all obstacles to the kind of warfare he envisioned. The combination of military, economic and ideological objectives aimed at a war of annihilation. Especially the SS units adopted this principle, but it soon became clear that all German military and paramilitary formations involved in the hostilities and the establishment of an occupation administration were part of this cruel concept.

Operation 'Barbarossa' was launched on 22 June, 1941. More than 3.5 million soldiers of the *Wehrmacht*, the *Waffen-SS* and the German allies invaded the Baltic states, Belorussia and the Ukraine along a front stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. The German force comprised 153 divisions which were concentrated in three army groups: Army Group North aimed its advance on Leningrad, Army Group Centre headed for Moscow and Army Group South targeted Kiev.<sup>266</sup> The Soviets were taken by surprise. As the majority of their forces were concentrated in areas close to the border and the Germans sought to attack with a local superiority, many units were overrun in the first days of the offensive. By destroying large numbers of Soviet planes on the ground, the German air force gained air superiority along the entire front. Tank columns of the *Wehrmacht* penetrated deep into Soviet territory and carried out pincer movements, especially in the sector of Army Group Centre, the focal point of the campaign. This strategy led to several large battles of encirclement; in the battle of Bialystok and Minsk alone, more than 300,000 Red Army soldiers were taken prisoner. Despite the fact that the Red Army offered fierce resistance, the German advance went on quickly. After three weeks the Germans had taken Riga, Minsk and large parts of the Ukraine. The German High Command was generally optimistic about reaching all objectives as planned.<sup>267</sup>

current status of research is outlined very thoroughly in Felix Römer, *Der Kommissarbefehl: Wehrmacht und NS-Verbrechen an der Ostfront 1941/42* (Paderborn, 2008).

<sup>266</sup> Ueberschär and Wette, 'Unternehmen Barbarossa', pp. 88-89.

<sup>267</sup> Ernst Klink, 'Die Operationsführung. Heer und Kriegsmarine', in Boog, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, pp. 451-486; Ueberschär and Wette, 'Unternehmen Barbarossa', pp. 89-90.

The combat troops of the *Kommandostab* did not play an active role on the first day of the invasion. Their mission in the occupied territories was not to start until ten days after the beginning of the attack, when a German military administration was established. But on 23 June, Hitler ordered the closing of a gap in the front of the Ninth Army, which was attacking Soviet positions near Bialystok. This strategic decision required the assignment of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment to the 87<sup>th</sup> infantry division, a unit of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Corps.<sup>268</sup> At the same time, the two regiments of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Infantry Brigade and one regiment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Infantry Brigade were ordered to secure the border area around Grajewo and Augustowo.<sup>269</sup>

Instead of proceeding to Arys, the 1<sup>st</sup> SS cavalry regiment now headed for the sector of the 87<sup>th</sup> infantry division. Hermann Fegelein was able to liaise with the divisional commander, lieutenant general von Studnitz, on the same day.<sup>270</sup> The division had broken through the fortifications on the German – Soviet line of demarcation on the first day of the attack.<sup>271</sup> Two days later, it was given the task of pursuing the retreating Soviets eastward and blocking crossings over the Biebrza and Narew rivers. The final aim was the capture of the fortress at Osowiec, an important stronghold on the way to Bialystok.<sup>272</sup> The motorised elements of the SS cavalry regiment covered the right flank of the division and relieved a vanguard of the 187<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment at Wizna on 24 June. It was not possible to employ the mounted squadrons for this as they still lagged far behind.<sup>273</sup> A former cavalryman later stated that they had had to ride from Warsaw towards Bialystok in forced marches to reach

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<sup>268</sup> Dienstbesprechung des SS-Gruppenführers Jüttner beim Kommandostab RF-SS am 2.7. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170.

<sup>269</sup> KTB KDOS, entries from 23 and 24 June, 1941; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 127.

<sup>270</sup> Kurzer Gefechtsbericht über die Tätigkeit der 87. Div. v. 22. – 27.6. 1941, in: BArchF, RS 26-87/27, pp. 81-82. This source will from now on be abbreviated as ‘Kurzer Gefechtsbericht’.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 78-81.

<sup>272</sup> Korps-Befehl Nr. 3 für den 24.6. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RF-SS, box 1, file 170.

<sup>273</sup> Kriegstagebuch Nr. 4 der 87. Infanteriedivision (25.5. - 19.8. 1941), in: BArchF, RH 26-87/22, entries from 23 and 24 June, 1941; this source will from now on be abbreviated as ‘Kriegstagebuch Nr. 4 der 87. Infanteriedivision’; see also Kurzer Gefechtsbericht, p. 82.

the combat zone as quickly as possible. After two days, the horses were exhausted and had to be left behind. The soldiers were then transported to the front in lorries and took part in the fighting as infantrymen.<sup>274</sup> The horse-drawn artillery batteries had the same problem; some of their gun crews improvised by taking whatever was available as a towing vehicle, even staff cars, and kept pushing forward.<sup>275</sup>

On 25 June, the advanced subunits were ordered to cross the Narew at Wizna and to push forward in a northeasterly direction to cut off the garrison at Osowiec. After ferrying across the river they encountered resistance at a destroyed bridge a few kilometres east of Wizna. As they were unable to break it, the commander of the 87<sup>th</sup> division ordered them to retreat and to cross the Biebrza river further north.<sup>276</sup> The rerouted mobile forces of the regiment negotiated the stream and the swampy and densely wooded lowlands east of it while the cavalry squadrons were moving up to them. At midnight on 26 June, the SS cavalry had reached its destination; the fortress was taken on the same day by the 187<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment.<sup>277</sup> The cavalrymen were then ordered to conduct reconnaissance to the east and southeast, in the direction of Bialystok. Soon afterwards, they received a new order: their assignment with the 87<sup>th</sup> division ended as Himmler assumed their command again on the evening of 27 June, a decision which also affected the other units of the *Kommandostab*.<sup>278</sup> Although they had been surprised by the Germans, Soviet troops in the Bialystok area had defended well, counterattacked wherever possible and made good use of the difficult terrain and their own artillery.<sup>279</sup> As a result, the *Wehrmacht* suffered high

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<sup>274</sup> Vernehmung von Otto Krumwiede vom 14.3. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, p. 43; Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 21.

<sup>275</sup> Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 21.

<sup>276</sup> Kurzer Gefechtsbericht, p. 82.

<sup>277</sup> Kurzer Gefechtsbericht, pp. 83-85; Kriegstagebuch Nr. 4 der 87. Infanteriedivision, entry from 26 June, 1941.

<sup>278</sup> Kriegstagebuch Nr. 4 der 87. Infanteriedivision, entry from 27 June, 1941; KTB KDOS, entry from 27 June, 1941.

<sup>279</sup> Kurzer Gefechtsbericht, pp. 78-84.

casualties.<sup>280</sup> The commander of the Ninth Army, colonel general Adolf Strauß, personally thanked the commander of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS*, *SS-Brigadeführer* Kurt Knoblauch, for the support of the SS in his sector, a gesture that also referred to the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Infantry Brigade which had been deployed further north at the same time.<sup>281</sup>

Himmler's decision to reassume control had been brought about by a conflict of interest with the *Wehrmacht*, which had sent the SS cavalry and subunits of the two infantry brigades straight into combat instead of only deploying them as a reserve. The Ninth Army even tried to keep the *Kommandostab* units after the threat of a Soviet invasion of East Prussia had been eliminated; parts of the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Infantry Brigade were to support the occupation of Vilnius.<sup>282</sup> Himmler then intervened and prohibited this mission; in his order to the *Kommandostab* of 27 June, he made clear that he did not want his troops to be deployed for occupation duties as this 'was contrary to the general agreements'. Unless combat situations necessitated it, Himmler wanted to prevent SS forces from being assigned to the *Wehrmacht* longer than necessary.<sup>283</sup> This question of authority was finally solved later on the same day by the withdrawal of the remaining *Kommandostab* forces. Officially, Himmler justified this by referring to 'other tasks' his combat troops were to carry out.<sup>284</sup> In reality, he was less worried about his troops using up their strength in exhaustive battles and occupation duties but rather irate about the arrogance of *Wehrmacht* commanders who used SS units as they pleased, scattered them over a wide area and

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<sup>280</sup> Kurzer Gefechtsbericht, p. 85; 87. Infanterie-Division, Abt. Ia, an A.O.K. 9, 16 July, 1941, in: Anlage III zum KTB der 87. ID, Teil 4 (Meldungen), in: BArchF, RH 26-87/26.

<sup>281</sup> KTB KDOS, entry from 27 June, 1941.

<sup>282</sup> KTB KDOS, entry from 26 June, 1941.

<sup>283</sup> KTB KDOS, entry from 27 June, 1941. The 'general agreements' are not specified in the *Kommandostab* files; they could refer to the talks between Heydrich and Wagner, but also to those between Knoblauch and von Tresckow. See Gillissen, 'Tresckow und der Entschluß zum Hochverrat', p. 375.

<sup>284</sup> KTB KDOS, entry from 27 June, 1941.

placed older SS officers under the command of young army officers.<sup>285</sup>

As the 1<sup>st</sup> SS cavalry regiment had now successfully passed its baptism of fire, Hermann Fegelein organised a parade of the regiment which was attended by the commander of the 87<sup>th</sup> division on 28 June.<sup>286</sup> On the same day, he wrote to *SS-Brigadeführer* Walter Krüger, the former commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Infantry Brigade, and asked him to leave the regiment at the front.<sup>287</sup> Apparently Fegelein hoped that a senior officer would convince Knoblauch or even Himmler that the SS cavalrymen were as capable and combat-ready as any army regiment. This document is of special importance as it shows Fegelein's ambition to improve the standing of the SS cavalry by depicting the endurance and valour of his men. According to the letter, the vanguard of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS cavalry regiment had managed to cross the Narew river quickly and with low casualties, despite a difficult encounter with Soviet troops. Since the beginning of the campaign, the SS riders had covered a distance of 500 kilometres without any rest. They were still employed as foremost German reconnaissance unit in this sector of the front. Even though this first combat mission had only lasted a few days and infantry formations of the *Wehrmacht* had borne the brunt of the fighting, Fegelein stressed the distinguished conduct and the still arduous situation of his unit. He also expressed his concern that no one would believe the exploits and difficulties his soldiers had mastered if the regiment was withdrawn from the fighting after just a few days.<sup>288</sup>

Like in Poland, where the SS cavalry had taken part in a rather unsuccessful anti-

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<sup>285</sup> Aktenvermerk Knoblauch vom 28.6. 1941, in BArchF, SF-02/37542, quoted in: Gillissen, 'Tresckow und der Entschluß zum Hochverrat', p. 376. In his article, Gillissen stresses the urgent action by Himmler and disagrees with Gerlach, who had interpreted this intervention as a conflict about 'minor tactical misunderstandings'; see Christian Gerlach, 'Hitlergegner bei der Heeresgruppe Mitte und die 'verbrecherischen Befehle'', in G. R. Ueberschär (ed.), *NS-Verbrechen und der militärische Widerstand gegen Hitler* (Darmstadt, 2000), p. 75, footnote 54. Cüppers, too, views this incident as a question of authority, not a tactical issue; see Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 127.

<sup>286</sup> Kriegstagebuch Nr. 4 der 87. Infanteriedivision, entry from 28 June, 1941.

<sup>287</sup> Schreiben Fegeleins an *SS-Brigadeführer* Krüger vom 28.6. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

Partisan operation, Fegelein exaggerated the role played by the regiment as he viewed the flank cover and reconnaissance near Bialystok as a combat mission worthy of a fully-fledged military unit, a position he would later take up again in Belorussia. Later, Fegelein's position was partially supported by the glorifying depiction given in the memoirs of Hanns Bayer, formerly of the 5<sup>th</sup> squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS cavalry regiment. He describes an encounter during which a mixed unit consisting of men of the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> squadron destroyed Soviet artillery, anti-tank, and machine gun positions at a river crossing. Although he admits that the SS cavalrymen only experienced the battle near Bialystok from the fringes, including the forced surrender of the cavalry role due to the exhaustion of the horses, he views the fighting as a baptism of fire during which even the youngest and least experienced cavalrymen stood their ground.<sup>289</sup>

Others from the rank and file, however, gave a different account of their first combat mission. Because of the quick German advance and transport problems, only some of the men actually took part in combat. A former member of the infantry support gun squadron said that his section crossed the Narew but did not fire a single shot.<sup>290</sup> The mounted machine gun squadron patrolled the forests in their sector but did not make contact with the enemy.<sup>291</sup> It is also hard to ascertain the losses of the SS cavalry during this mission. Whereas Fegelein described them as 'low', another former officer only stated that there had been casualties.<sup>292</sup> The files of the regiment only list the loss of one cavalryman who had died on 26 June near Monki.<sup>293</sup> By

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<sup>289</sup> Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 22.

<sup>290</sup> Vernehmung von Rudolf Schmidt vom 11.6. 1968, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j132.

<sup>291</sup> Vernehmung von Josef Zorn vom 21.5. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i27.

<sup>292</sup> Schreiben Fegeleins an Krüger vom 28.6. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170; Vernehmung von Willi Geier vom 14.9. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i13.

<sup>293</sup> Verlustmeldung an die Auskunftsstelle f. Kriegerverluste d. Waffen-SS [Berlin] vom 29.8. 1941, 1. Totenkopf-Reiter-Rgt.; Versetzung, Urlaub, Verleihung von Auszeichnungen usw. von Juli – September 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/212 (2), p. 65. This file does not contain information about wounded or missing cavalrymen. Bayer, however, mentions the injury of an *SS-Untersturmführer* from the bicycle squadron; see *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 22.

contrast, 132 soldiers of the 87<sup>th</sup> division were killed, 511 were wounded and 27 went missing during the first five days of operation Barbarossa.<sup>294</sup>

By demanding further deployment of the SS cavalry at the front, Fegelein aimed at two different objectives: testing the skills of his men in combat and enhancing the prestige of his unit, which in turn would also improve his own reputation as a military leader. His burning ambition was a key factor in developing the combat role of the SS cavalry as he had created the unit and was responsible for its missions in the operational area. This characterisation is also supported by court files from the proceedings against former members of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS cavalry regiment. Here, Fegelein was depicted as being eager to fight and impatiently striving for promotions and decorations.<sup>295</sup> In this respect, Fegelein's efforts proved to be quite successful as some of the SS cavalymen were awarded the Iron Cross Second Class by the 87<sup>th</sup> division. When this unit had used up its contingent of decorations, Himmler personally requested more medals.<sup>296</sup> As a result, ten SS soldiers were awarded the Iron Cross Second Class and Hermann Fegelein received the Iron Cross First Class for his leadership.<sup>297</sup>

On 28 June, the combat units received orders for relocation to the area between Arys and Lyck in East Prussia, where the staff had taken its headquarters already. The 1<sup>st</sup> SS Infantry Brigade was sent on to Cracow from there after two days; the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Infantry Brigade and the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment remained in the region, together with the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, various support formations and an anti-aircraft battalion. All of these formations had arrived in the designated area in late

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<sup>294</sup> Kurzer Gefechtsbericht über die Tätigkeit der 87. Div., p. 85.

<sup>295</sup> Abschlußbericht der Zentralen Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen vom 20.8. 1963, p. 359 and p. 378. According to a former SS cavalry officer, Fegelein even approached *Wehrmacht* commanders for combat missions but was unsuccessful. See Vernehmung von Egon Birkigt vom 22.3. 1960, in: BArchL, B 162/5544, p. n44.

<sup>296</sup> KTB KDOS, entry from 1 July, 1941.

<sup>297</sup> Situation report of the HSSPF Centre, 16 August, 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4; Dienstbesprechung des SS-Gruppenführers Jüttner beim Kommandostab RF-SS am 2.7. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170.

June and early July and were billeted in small villages.<sup>298</sup> From the beginning of July, the missions and combat-readiness of the *Kommandostab* units were assessed. On 2 July, the chief of staff of the *SS-Führungshauptamt*, *SS-Gruppenführer* Hans Jüttner, held a meeting with the head of the *Kommandostab*, *SS-Brigadeführer* Kurt Knoblauch, and the subordinate brigade and regimental commanders. Jüttner, who was responsible for all supplies, training, and recruitment of the *Waffen-SS*, found that there were significant shortages of men, vehicles, and equipment in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Infantry Brigade, mostly caused by the rapid expansion and restructuring of the *Waffen-SS* in the spring and summer of 1941. The two cavalry regiments were in a better position as they had almost full manpower and enough vehicles; the only issue for them was a lack of signallers and signals equipment. The *Kommandostab* was pressed for time to redress these problems as further deployment of its formations in the Soviet Union was imminent.<sup>299</sup>

While the SS forces of the *Kommandostab* had experienced the beginning of the campaign in the East behind the frontline in Lithuania and in combat near Bialystok, the first phase of the Holocaust was implemented by SS and police units, but also by the *Wehrmacht*. From the outset of hostilities between Germany and the Soviet Union, radical anti-Jewish policy not only took the form of searches and subsequent executions in rural areas, but also that of mass executions. On 27 June, 1941, the men of Police Battalion 309 committed hundreds of killings in the Jewish quarter of Bialystok and drove several hundred more Jews into a synagogue, which was then set on fire. This massacre resulted in the deaths of at least 2,000 Jews and was the first large independent killing operation committed by a police battalion in the Soviet

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<sup>298</sup> Kommandobefehl Nr. 10 vom 28.6. 1941, in: in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170; KTB KDOS, entries from 27, 28 and 30 June and 1 July, 1941.

<sup>299</sup> Dienstbesprechung des SS-Gruppenführers Jüttner beim Kommandostab RF-SS am 2.7. 1941, in: in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170. According to the files of the commander of the rear area of Army Group Centre, the two regiments had 3500 horses and 430 vehicles including motorcycles at their disposal before they left East Prussia again; see Korpsbefehl Nr. 32 v. 21.7. 1941, in: BArchF, RH 22/224, p. 164.

Union.<sup>300</sup> In mid-July, Police Battalion 307 murdered about 4,000 Jews and 400 non-Jewish Soviet citizens at Brest-Litovsk over the course of several days.<sup>301</sup> Both units, however, still had refrained from the killing of Jewish women and children for the most part: the executions at Bialystok and Brest-Litovsk did not constitute attempts to eliminate all Jews in that particular town.<sup>302</sup>

After the killings had begun, they were soon extended to more groups of victims. On 2 July, Reinhard Heydrich sent a letter to the higher SS and police leaders in which he ordered to execute all functionaries of the Comintern, all communist party leaders, party officials of the central committee and local committees, Jews in party and state positions, saboteurs, snipers and assassins.<sup>303</sup> This order is of great importance as the groups of people mentioned served as mere guidelines: SS commanders were given the freedom to select whom they executed, according to the situation in the field.<sup>304</sup> Nine days later, the commander of Police Regiment Centre, lieutenant colonel Max Montua, gave out an order he had received from the HSSPF Centre to the men of the three police battalions under his command. This directive further specified the existing orders regarding the Jews: all male Jews who were

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<sup>300</sup> Westermann, *Hitler's Police Battalions*, pp. 174-175; Curilla, *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei und der Holocaust im Baltikum und in Weißrußland 1941 – 1944*, pp. 511-518. See also Stefan Klomp, 'Nicht ermittelt'. Polizeibataillone und die Nachkriegsjustiz. Ein Handbuch (Essen, 2011), pp. 272-275. This work represents the current state of research on the German order police. It is the second edition of the book, which was originally published in Essen in 2005. It consists of a revised version of the original and contains significantly more information on various police units, court proceedings, and numbers of victims.

<sup>301</sup> Westermann, *Hitler's Police Battalions*, pp. 176-177; Curilla, *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei und der Holocaust im Baltikum und in Weißrußland 1941 – 1944*, pp. 570-574; Klomp, 'Nicht ermittelt', pp. 261-263.

<sup>302</sup> Both at Bialystok and Brest-Litovsk, some Jewish women and children were killed as well. Apart from individual shootings which were described by witnesses, it is not possible to quantify this further regarding the massacres as a whole. See Westermann, *Hitler's Police Battalions*, p. 175, Curilla, *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei und der Holocaust im Baltikum und in Weißrußland 1941 – 1944*, pp. 515-516 and pp. 571-574, and Klomp, 'Nicht ermittelt', p. 274. For a more detailed delineation of this aspect, see chapter 4.

<sup>303</sup> BAArchK, R 70 Sowjetunion/32 and R 58/241, quoted in *Die Einsatzgruppen in der besetzten Sowjetunion 1941/42: Die Tätigkeits- und Lageberichte des Chefs der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD*, ed. P. Klein and A. Angrick (Berlin, 1997), p. 325.

<sup>304</sup> Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg, 2002), pp. 559-561.

between seventeen and forty-five years old were to be shot immediately as looters.<sup>305</sup>

As opposed to battalions of the order police, the *Einsatzgruppen* only entered the Soviet Union from the last days of June onwards. However, they began carrying out their tasks immediately after crossing the border.<sup>306</sup> Their strategy was to follow army units closely so that as many Jews as possible could be captured. It was part of the agreement between the army and the SS that mobile killing units were allowed to enter front-line areas as well. But they did not only move eastward: split up into independent subunits, they also operated in rear areas, covering great distances in the occupied territories.<sup>307</sup> SS commanders soon developed a standardised system to kill their victims. They assembled killing squads depending on the number of Jews in their operational area; the size of the units varied from four men to a whole company-sized *Einsatzkommando* or *Sonderkommando*. Supported by army and police units as well as local collaborators, they rounded up the local Jewish men and led them to a prepared grave outside their village or town. There, they took their clothes and valuables and murdered them in groups by shooting them in the neck or machine-gunning them. The victims, unarmed and confused, offered no resistance.<sup>308</sup>

Along the entire eastern front, the four *Einsatzgruppen* began to shape the Holocaust and German occupation policy. To the initiative of the commanders and the activity of the killing squads added other factors: in some regions, especially in the Baltic states and the Ukraine, the Germans were supported by many willing collaborators who took part in pogroms or formed militias which joined in the

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<sup>305</sup> Order from the commander of Police Regiment Centre, 11 July, 1941, in: VUA, N POL.RGT. (1), file 7. This order also contained particulars about killing methods: Executions were to be conducted outside towns and villages and away from roads; graves were to be levelled and it was forbidden to watch and photograph the killings. Battalion and company commanders were to look after the men who carried out the operations and erase the impressions of the day by organising 'comradely evenings'. See also Hilberg, 'The Kommandostab Revisited', pp. 360-361.

<sup>306</sup> Krausnick and Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges*, pp. 173-196.

<sup>307</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The destruction of the European Jews* (New York 1978), p. 191.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208-210.

killing.<sup>309</sup> The combination of a very effective division of labour and habituation to violence within the units, together with the cooperation of locals and different German agencies, caused enormous bloodshed within the first five weeks of operation 'Barbarossa': until the end of July, 1941, 63,000 people were murdered by the forces of the SS security police and the security service. About 90% of the victims were Jews.<sup>310</sup>

The *Wehrmacht* also became involved in acts of mass violence as it fought a war of annihilation parallel to the operations against the Red Army. An unprecedented brutality was shown and basic humanitarian principles were not observed.<sup>311</sup> Some of the first victims were Soviet prisoners of war, many of whom were killed or died under the appalling living conditions in the camps.<sup>312</sup> In accordance with the orders issued before the attack, captured political commissars were murdered. Jewish prisoners of war soon fell victim to mass executions as well. *Wehrmacht* and SS worked hand in hand: military units singled out the victims while *Einsatzgruppen* or

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<sup>309</sup> Pogroms at Lvov in the Ukraine, for example, claimed the lives of at least 5,000 Jews until the end of July, 1941. In Latvia, the Germans could dispose of an auxiliary police force under the command of Viktors Arajs which killed hundreds of Jews and other 'undesirables' in cooperation with *Einsatzgruppe A* in mid-July, 1941; see Jürgen Matthäus, 'Das 'Unternehmen Barbarossa' und der Beginn der Judenvernichtung, Juni – Dezember 1941', in Browning, *Die Entfesselung der 'Endlösung'*, p. 392. In Lithuania, local collaborators formed a subunit of *Einsatzkommando 3* under the command of Joachim Hamann, the notorious '*Rollkommando Hamann*', which shot at least 60,000 Jewish men, women, and children until the beginning of October, 1941 and thus killed almost half of the 133,346 mostly Jewish victims reported by *Einsatzkommando 3* until the end of the year; see Krausnick and Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges*, pp. 283-284, and Matthäus in Browning, *Die Entfesselung der 'Endlösung'*, p. 399. Further south, Ukrainian militias composed of locals supported the killing operations of *Einsatzgruppe C* and *Einsatzgruppe D*; see Yaacov Lozowick, 'Rollbahn Mord. The Early Activities of Einsatzgruppe C', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 2 (1987), pp. 9-11.

<sup>310</sup> Matthäus in Browning, *Die Entfesselung der 'Endlösung'*, pp. 380-383.

<sup>311</sup> The crimes of the *Wehrmacht* in the war against the Soviet Union were also the subject of a controversial exhibition, which had been organised by the Institute for Social Research at Hamburg. Under the title „Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 – 1944“, it toured Germany and Austria from 1995 to 1999. After sparking harsh criticism for misinterpreting sources and generally accusing German soldiers of having committed atrocities, it ceased to be shown for two years and reopened under the title “Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941 – 1944“ in 2001. It was shown until 2004; see the homepage of the exhibition, <http://www.verbrechen-der-wehrmacht.de> (accessed on 5 July, 2012).

<sup>312</sup> In the autumn of 1941, about 6,000 Red Army soldiers died in German prison camps on a daily basis. Until the spring of 1942, more than two million of the 3,5 million Soviet prisoners of war had lost their lives. See Matthäus in Browning, *Die Entfesselung der 'Endlösung'*, pp. 360-361.

their subunits carried out the killings.<sup>313</sup> Some army formations even played an active role in genocide: the 707<sup>th</sup> infantry division was responsible for the killing of more than 10,000 Jews in 1941.<sup>314</sup>

It is, however, still difficult to ascertain the contribution of the German army to the Holocaust. According to the actual state of historical research, the role of *Wehrmacht* soldiers was determined by several factors such as division of labour, distance from the front, and branch of service. The main responsibility of the army in this context, as has been identified by Christian Hartmann, is based on the fact that it tolerated, supported or even welcomed the Nazi policy of annihilation.<sup>315</sup> Within this frame of general acceptance, two main groups of perpetrators can be identified: high-ranking staff officers such as the commanders of armies and army groups who coordinated the deployment of *Wehrmacht* and SS units, and army formations which became killing squads themselves.<sup>316</sup> As far as the *Ostheer* as a whole is concerned, a clear distinction has to be made: the main purpose of the majority of its soldiers was the fight against the Red Army and the involvement of front-line troops in executions of Jews was an exception. Guard troops in the hinterland, such as units of the military police and military secret police, local military headquarters, and some security divisions committed most of the killings that can be attributed to army units.<sup>317</sup> These

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<sup>313</sup> Christian Streit, 'Die Behandlung der sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen und völkerrechtliche Probleme des Krieges gegen die Sowjetunion', in Ueberschär and Wette, *'Unternehmen Barbarossa'*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>314</sup> Peter Lieb, 'Täter aus Überzeugung? Oberst Carl von Andrian und die Judenmorde der 707. Infanteriedivision 1941/42', *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 52 (2004), p. 536.

<sup>315</sup> Christian Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg. Front und militärisches Hinterland 1941/42* (München, 2009), p. 659. The supporting role of the army will be explained in more detail in chapter 4 and chapter 5.

<sup>316</sup> Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, pp. 659-660. Of special importance in this context are the supreme commanders of the army rear areas who supervised a network of occupation forces and agencies. The cooperation of the supreme commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre, general Max von Schenckendorff, with the SS will be outlined in chapter 4. On the institution of the supreme commanders of the army rear areas, see Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*.

<sup>317</sup> Christian Hartmann, 'Verbrecherischer Krieg – verbrecherische Wehrmacht? Überlegungen zur Struktur des deutschen Ostheeres 1941 – 1944', *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 52 (2004), pp. 31-32.

formations are not, however, representative for the German army in the East.<sup>318</sup> It can be assumed that only a comparatively small number of *Wehrmacht* soldiers took part in executions.<sup>319</sup>

But not only the designated killing units and the army committed atrocities. The *Gestapo* at Tilsit, for example, was tasked with assembling an *Einsatzkommando* of all available forces in order to execute Jews and Lithuanian communists in a zone of 25 kilometres east of the border. As the Tilsit *Gestapo* only had a limited number of men at its disposal, members of the security service, the border police, and Lithuanian collaborators were ordered to carry out arrests and executions as well. At Naumiestis, 220 Jews were executed by a killing squad consisting of SS men from subunits of *Reiterstandarte 20* and *SS-Standarte 105* from Memel, German border policemen and Lithuanian militiamen in July, 1941. This massacre was supervised by the commander of the *Reiterstandarte* and one of his squadron commanders; in the course of this operation, they also had dozens of local Jews arrested and transported them back to Germany for forced labour.<sup>320</sup> Thus, men from the paramilitary mounted SS participated in the Holocaust in the Soviet Union even before the SS cavalymen under Fegelein's command.

In East Prussia, *Kommandostab* officers hastened to improve the training of their soldiers as men from the two SS infantry brigades in particular were still lacking

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<sup>318</sup> Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, p. 660.

<sup>319</sup> Dieter Pohl estimates that "several tens of thousands" of *Wehrmacht* soldiers were involved in "selection, organisation, execution, cordon duty at shootings or handovers [of victims] to the security police". This can be considered a very small group given that about 10 million members of the *Wehrmacht* served in the Soviet Union throughout the war; see Dieter Pohl, *Die Wehrmacht und der Mord an den Juden in den besetzten sowjetischen Gebieten*, in W. Kaiser (ed.), *Täter im Vernichtungskrieg. Der Überfall auf die Sowjetunion und der Völkermord an den Juden* (Berlin, 2002), p. 50, quoted in Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, p. 661.

<sup>320</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, pp. 277-378; *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 17*, pp. 417-495. The exact date of the killing could not be defined in the two postwar trials against the perpetrators; the courts assumed it took place either on 5 July, 1941, or on 19 July, 1941. For their role in the massacre, the two SS officers from the *Reiterstandarte* both received a sentence of lifelong imprisonment. See also Wilson, *Himmler's Cavalry*, p. 172, and Krausnick and Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges*, p. 601.

combat experience. Therefore, they underwent field exercises which aimed at preparing them for situations they might encounter in their new theatre of operations, for example fighting in wooded and built-up areas and encircling and annihilating an enemy who might also appear in the form of partisan groups.<sup>321</sup> The SS cavalry, on the other hand, was more experienced. This had been acknowledged by *SS-Gruppenführer* Jüttner as well; in the meeting, he had complimented Fegelein on the conduct of his men in battle and on winning the Iron Cross First Class.<sup>322</sup> Nevertheless, both cavalry regiments also used the time in East Prussia for intense preparation. In the military training area at Arys and the vicinity, they received further instruction and conducted manoeuvres. These included infantry and cavalry exercise, route and night marches, target practice, and alert drills. Training continued for almost three weeks until mid-July.<sup>323</sup> At the same time, weapons and equipment were repaired and replenished as part of the daily routine.<sup>324</sup> The SS cavalrymen also got some free time and enjoyed the summer in Masuria while they could. Some viewed the time they spent in East Prussia as a rather lazy rest period and complained about boredom but others enjoyed the break as they anticipated further combat.<sup>325</sup>

In addition to the military training, indoctrination was part of the schedule as well: a former soldier of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment recalled how one of the officers lectured his squadron on treatment of the population in the occupied territories, stating that ‘Russians, Slavs and Jews were inferior people’. The SS soldiers ‘could

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<sup>321</sup> KTB KDOS, entries from 9 July and 14 July, 1941.

<sup>322</sup> Dienstbesprechung des SS-Gruppenführers Jüttner beim Kommandostab RF-SS am 2.7. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170.

<sup>323</sup> KTB KDOS, entries from 9, 13, 14, and 18, July 1941; activity reports of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment from 4 to 7 July, 1941, and 17 to 24 July, 1941, in: VUA, box 24, file 1; activity reports of the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment from 10 to 20 July, 1941, *ibid*.

<sup>324</sup> Activity reports of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment from 4 July to 7 July, 1941, and 17 July to 20 July, 1941, in: VUA, box 24, file 1.

<sup>325</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 130; Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, pp. 24-26.

shoot them without qualms or compunction'.<sup>326</sup> This briefing followed detailed directives which had been given out by the *Kommandostab* in mid-July regarding the content of instructions: SS officers were to teach their soldiers about the Soviet Union, with a special focus on the Jewish population, politics, the Soviet state and economy. Jewry and Bolshevism were identified as the main enemies of the Germans. As before in Poland, however, political indoctrination did not play a major role in the summer of 1941: the implementation of the lessons was soon rendered almost impossible due to the constant relocations and missions of the subordinate units. Propaganda only reached the men in different forms, namely occasional distributions of SS and Nazi newspapers such as *Das Schwarze Korps* and *Völkischer Beobachter*, and the propagation of field marshal von Reichenau's order of 10 October, 1941, regarding the treatment of the enemy and the intended destruction of the 'Jewish-Bolshevist system'.<sup>327</sup> By this time, the soldiers of the *Kommandostab* were already following their own radical interpretation of ideology in the field.

Despite the favourable assessment Fegelein had received from his superiors, the first mission also had shown severe shortcomings of the cavalry units. Though considered to be highly mobile, the mounted squadrons depended on many baggage and support vehicles to provide food and medical care for the horses and were far too slow and ponderous.<sup>328</sup> As a result, they had not been able to keep up with the fast moving front. The two SS cavalry regiments could be considered the gem of the *Waffen-SS* but they were not suitable for mobile warfare, a flaw that was unsustainable in the fast advances of the campaign against the Soviet Union.<sup>329</sup> Apart from the enforcement of an intense training schedule and maintenance of weapons

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<sup>326</sup> Vernehmung von Friedrich Bischoff vom 14.11. 1969, in: BArchL, B 162/5541, pp. g120-121.

<sup>327</sup> Förster in Matthäus, *Ausbildungsziel Judenmord*, pp. 100-102 and pp. 198-201.

<sup>328</sup> Abschlußbericht der ZStL vom 20.8. 1963, pp. 357-358.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., pp. 359.

and vehicles, Fegelein also sought another way to improve the mobility of the SS cavalry. Whilst based in Arys, he convinced Himmler to let him turn the two regiments into a cavalry brigade under his superior command, a development that was implemented step by step in the following weeks including a combination of the heavy weapons squadrons and the formation of a reconnaissance battalion.<sup>330</sup>

It was easy for Fegelein to gain access to Himmler as his benefactor was in East Prussia at that time: on 25 June, he had travelled to East Prussia in a special train, the so-called '*Sonderzug Heinrich*', and now he directed the deployment of SS and police units in occupied Europe from the front.<sup>331</sup> This train was then based near Hitler's headquarters, the '*Wolfsschanze*' at Rastenburg, and served as a mobile command post. From here, Himmler went to briefings at the '*Wolfsschanze*' and stayed in touch with the SS main office in Berlin.<sup>332</sup> He also met with SS commanders there: on 30 June, the head of the *Kommandostab*, *SS-Brigadeführer* Kurt Knoblauch, the two brigade commanders and Hermann Fegelein attended a meeting at the train.<sup>333</sup>

Five days later, Himmler visited the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment. He inspected a parade of its squadrons and delivered a speech to the men about their upcoming deployment in the Soviet Union. According to former cavalry soldiers, he said that 'hard days and tough missions' lay ahead of them in the course of which they 'would ride until the Urals and many of them would not return'.<sup>334</sup> Himmler hinted at an operation in the Pripet Marshes, an area in which 80% of the population were Jews.

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Witte, *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers*, p. 180.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., p. 29-30.

<sup>333</sup> Radio message to the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment from June 30, 1941, in: VUA, box 1, file 170.

<sup>334</sup> KTB KDOS, entry from 5 July, 1941; Einstellungsverfügung StA München 117 Js 1/64 gg. Gesele, Lombard u.a. vom 22.12. 1970, in: BArchL, B 162/5531, p. 1752; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 131; Vernehmung von Samuel Grieb vom 23.7. 1963, BArchL, B 162/5538, p. b53; see also Vernehmung von Rudolf Fröhlich vom 19.4. 1963, BArchL, B 162/5538, p. b23; Vernehmung von Heinz Frenken vom 24.6. 1963, BArchL, B 162/5539, p. c3; Vernehmung von Johann Schmid vom 30.10. 1962, BArchL, B 162/5541, p. h36; Vernehmung von Paul Klose vom 2.12. 1968, BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j137; Vernehmung von Willy Geier vom 14.9. 1962, BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i13.

The task of the SS cavalrymen was to completely rid this region of them and he hoped that he could rely on his soldiers in this respect.<sup>335</sup> According to one soldier, Himmler offered each man who could not cope with the ‘special tasks’ which would be asked of him a transfer to another unit. Nobody took this offer because the men did not anticipate mass shootings of Jews.<sup>336</sup> He ended by saying, ‘The tasks of the future will demand of you to be hard but bear in mind that every hard day, every hard hour in your life has its meaning for the future of the German people’, and added, ‘You have to be hard as stone, but not brutal’.<sup>337</sup>

It is striking that most of the former cavalrymen who were questioned about this incident after the war turned to what appear to be exculpatory statements: they said that they had not heard the speech because they were occupied with other tasks such as guard duty or because they had been too far away from Himmler; some said they did not remember the content, others claimed to have heard about it through their comrades.<sup>338</sup> Whereas several men recalled references to ‘hard days’ and a ‘ride to the Urals’, the upcoming ‘special tasks’ and the possibility to evade participation in them were only mentioned by one former SS soldier respectively. Other veterans explicitly negated either one or both of these details in their interrogation.<sup>339</sup> Interestingly, neither the intention of fighting against regular Soviet troops nor against partisans was mentioned by any of the witnesses as part of the speech although many former cavalrymen stated that these had been their actual tasks in the

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<sup>335</sup> Vernehmung von Paul Kloose vom 2.12. 1968, BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j137.

<sup>336</sup> Vernehmung von Horst Winkler vom 17.7. 1962, BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j2; Vernehmung von Arno Kuk vom 18.10. 1965, BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j119.

<sup>337</sup> Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 24; Vernehmung von Arno Kuk vom 18.10. 1965, BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j119.

<sup>338</sup> Vernehmung von August Gerber vom 24.6. 1963, BArchL, B 162/5541, p. h7; Vernehmung von Daniel Teske vom 4.10. 1962, BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j36; Vernehmung von Karl Neumann vom 30.7. 1962, BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j9; Vernehmung von Bruno Schröder vom 4.10. 1962, BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j43; Vernehmung von Heinz Frenken vom 24.6. 1963, BArchL, B 162/5539, p. c3; Vernehmung von Rudolf Fröhlich vom 19.4. 1963, BArchL, B 162/5538, p. b23.

<sup>339</sup> In the testimonies quoted here, the mention of executions was negated by Johann Schmid and Arno Kuk. An exemption from the mission (without a reference to executions) was denied by Heinz Frenken. Both exemptions and executions were negated by Karl Neumann and Daniel Teske.

Pripet Marshes. This omission and the fact that many other details did come to light in the course of the postwar investigations make it likely that most of the men denied the real content of the speech. Thus, the investigators could not accuse them of cognisance and of not having taken an opportunity to stay out of the killing.

The speech is of great importance for the history of the SS Cavalry Brigade as it was given immediately before its deployment in Belorussia. At that time, the unit had already been used in a ‘dual role’ – as a military formation as well as a killing squad. It was now to be fully included in the German war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, where it would play the same role on a much larger scale and claim an even higher death toll. The significance of Himmler’s address lies in its timing as well as its content: although he and other high SS and police officials such as Kurt Daluege and Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski visited many different units and spoke to the men, sometimes explicitly referring to the destruction of Jews and communists, this mostly happened *after* the beginning of executions, not before.<sup>340</sup> And as far as the duty of the men is concerned, there is only one other documented case which is comparable: Reserve Police Battalion 101. Its commander, major Trapp, briefed the men about an upcoming killing mission as well and offered them to step out if they did not feel up to their task.<sup>341</sup> Unlike him and his policemen, Himmler and his cavalrymen were used to the murder of innocent people. But like Trapp, Himmler gave them a choice and even the option to ask for a transfer. As the aim, the cleansing of the Pripet Marshes and the victims of this policy, the Jews, were clearly defined, his speech was much more than a ‘pep talk’ but rather a preparation of what was to come. For the SS cavalry it was a pivot: from now on this formation, like the

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<sup>340</sup> Other examples are the visit Himmler and Daluege paid to Police Battalion 322 at Bialystok on 8 July, 1941, just after this unit had started to execute Jews. Here, Daluege demanded the destruction of Bolshevism in a speech; see Browning, *Ordinary men*, p. 13. On 12 or 13 July, 1941, the Higher SS and Police Leader Centre, Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, delivered a justifying speech at a site outside Bialystok where killings were conducted by members of Police Battalions 316 and 322; see *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>341</sup> Browning, *Ordinary men*, p. 2.

police battalions and the *Einsatzgruppen*, would spearhead the German policy of mass violence in a designated sector, instead of being deployed locally as an executive force.

At the same time, Himmler finalised his plan of ‘pacifying’ the occupied territories in the east by developing a concept for the deployment of the *Kommandostab* units. They were to be used alongside the *Einsatzgruppen* and police battalions; their main task was to eliminate all political and ‘racial’ enemies of the Germans.<sup>342</sup> Not only did they constitute an elementary part of the manpower available to the *Waffen-SS* on the eastern front; their immediate availability and the experience of some of the units in Poland made them the ideal tool for the war of annihilation. As some of their regiments had already seen combat, the evaluation of that first mission could now be considered in the planning as well. The intended deployment in the hinterland did not require rapid movements over great distances of the cavalry as they did in the opening phase of the campaign; instead the two SS cavalry regiments would act on their own initiative like the *Einsatzgruppen*. Also, they were to be ‘hardened’ by these tasks and the cavalymen, especially the officers, could gain more experience without having to be in the front line, an aspect that was to improve their performance in later combat missions. This also applied to the still rather unproven infantry brigades of the *Kommandostab*.<sup>343</sup>

As the fighting continued, the German government developed plans on how to secure the newly occupied territories. At the beginning of hostilities, the executive authority in the operational area was the supreme commander of the German army.<sup>344</sup> Two weeks later, the troops had advanced so far eastward that a military administration could be formed. The territory under its control was divided into three

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<sup>342</sup> Büchler, ‘Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS’, p. 15.

<sup>343</sup> Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., pp. 1749-1750.

<sup>344</sup> Jürgen Förster, ‘Die Sicherung des ‘Lebensraumes’’, in H. Boog and others (eds.), *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, Bd. 4: Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart, 1987), p. 1030.

*Rückwärtige Heeresgebiete* (Army Group Rear Areas), which constituted most of the occupied areas, three *Rückwärtige Armeegebiere* (Army Rear Areas) closer to the front and the combat zone at the frontline itself. Army Group and Army Rear Areas corresponded to the sectors of the army groups North, Centre, and South; they were established on 2 July, 3 July and 9 July respectively.<sup>345</sup> The main objective of the military agencies was the protection of supply depots, supply lines, railway lines, communications facilities, and airports. They were also responsible for guarding and deporting Soviet prisoners of war. At their command were *Feldkommandanturen* (FK or regional headquarters) and *Ortskommandanturen* (OK or urban headquarters), army and police forces, and military police units. The commanders of rear areas could also dispose of the *Waffen-SS* and police formations under the control of the higher SS and police leaders in their sector, if necessary.<sup>346</sup>

Although the organisation of army and SS in the hinterland seemed to be clearly defined, the coordination of SS troop movements with the *Wehrmacht* did not work very well at the beginning of the German campaign. The military administration was not notified when contingents of the *Kommandostab* crossed the Reich border. General Wagner, the quartermaster-general of the *Wehrmacht*, requested to be informed about the intentions of *Waffen-SS* formations before they entered the army group rear areas so that army commanders could ensure their logistical support via the HSSPF. The SS also was to give the names, strength, places of deployment and tasks of these units.<sup>347</sup> Himmler responded to this request by going even one step

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<sup>345</sup> Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia 1941 – 1945. A study in occupation politics* (London, 1981), p. 96; Förster in Boog, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, p. 1033; Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht. Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941 – 1944* (Munich, 2008), pp. 97-103.

<sup>346</sup> For a detailed description of the structure and functions of the staff of an army group rear area (using the example of the commander of the rear area of Army Group North, general Franz von Roques), see Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, pp. 135-140. See also Förster in Boog, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, p. 1031. The work by Hasenclever also provides a definition of the functions of *Feldkommandanturen* and *Ortskommandanturen*; see *ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>347</sup> Hilberg, 'The Kommandostab Revisited', p. 360; Schreiben des OKH an den Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS vom 5.7. 1941 zum Einsatz von Verbänden der Waffen-SS im rückw. Heeresgebiet, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170.

further: on 10 July, he emphasised the authority of the HSSPF by ordering that ‘all SS and police formations are explicitly subordinate to the higher SS and police leaders after crossing the Reich borders’.<sup>348</sup> This order also included the *Einsatzgruppen*, as was specified in the war diary of the *Kommandostab*.<sup>349</sup> Thus, SS and police forces were now also tactically assigned to the HSSPF, a measure which enhanced their status and gave them much more power than before, especially compared to the army commanders in the rear areas. Himmler in turn was in the comfortable position of being able to leave the planning of missions and deployment of the units to his representatives who knew the situation in the field better than himself.<sup>350</sup> On 14 July, a corresponding order was issued to the formations of the *Kommandostab*.<sup>351</sup>

Heinrich Himmler announced the assignment of the SS cavalry units to the HSSPF Mitte, von dem Bach-Zelewski, during a visit to his headquarters at Bialystok on 10 July, when their imminent deployment was planned as well.<sup>352</sup> But before more German paramilitary units were sent on their way, another important condition had to be met: the establishment of a political administration.

On 16 July, 1941 a conference was held at which Hitler presented his ideas of the future occupation policy in the east and consulted high government and military representatives such as Hermann Göring, Alfred Rosenberg and Wilhelm Keitel about the executive positions which were to be filled in the civilian occupation administration. Rosenberg was appointed minister for the occupied eastern territories; subordinate to him were Hinrich Lohse and Erich Koch, two Nazi

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<sup>348</sup> Berlin RMDI Nr. 494 10/7 1817 [10 July, 1941], BArchB, NS 19/1671, quoted in Westermann, *Hitler's Police Battalions*, p. 165; see also VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170.

<sup>349</sup> KTB KDOS, entry from 10 July, 1941.

<sup>350</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 132.

<sup>351</sup> Kommandobefehl Nr. 18 vom 14.7. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170.

<sup>352</sup> Witte, *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers*, p. 183; *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, pp. 41-42; Peter Longerich, *Politik der Vernichtung. Eine Gesamtdarstellung der nationalsozialistischen Judenverfolgung* (Munich, 1998), pp. 366-367.

*gauleiter* who were to govern newly-formed provinces in the Baltic states and the Ukraine as ‘Reich commissars’. Heinrich Himmler, who did not attend the meeting, was to have the same responsibilities as in the Reich, a role which was defined in a decree issued by Hitler on the following day. According to this document, Himmler became responsible for securing the east by exercising police powers. For this task he had to use his governors, the higher SS and police leaders, whose work was to be coordinated with the Reich commissars.<sup>353</sup>

This summit talk coincided with a slowdown of the German advance and the emergence of security problems in the hinterland. Although the primary objectives had largely been achieved, the Red Army had been underestimated: it had not been destroyed west of the Dvina – Dnieper line as planned and its fighting spirit could not be quelled. Moreover, the flaws of the German strategy became obvious. The forces were spread too thinly and suffered high losses, reserves became scarce and vast territories had not been occupied in the first phase of the campaign. Most important in this context were the Pripet Marshes in southern Belorussia and the northern Ukraine. This lowland, which was also known as Polesie, stretched 250 miles from west to east and 130 miles from north to south. For the most part it had been avoided by German troops; it now lay like a wedge between Army Group Centre and Army Group South. While these groups kept on pushing eastward, Soviet forces which had retreated into the marshes threatened their flanks. They conducted counterattacks, a development that not only delayed but increasingly jeopardised German operations, especially in the Ukraine.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Erlaß des Führers über die polizeiliche Sicherung der neu besetzten Ostgebiete vom 17. Juli 1941, quoted in Longerich, *Politik der Vernichtung*, pp. 362-363.

<sup>354</sup> Ueberschär and Wette, ‘*Unternehmen Barbarossa*’, pp. 97-98; Klink in Boog, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, p. 457 and pp. 483-486. On the problem of the Pripet Marshes in German and Soviet strategy, see also Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Der Feind steht im Osten. Hitlers geheime Pläne für einen Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion im Jahr 1939* (Berlin, 2011), p. 226. According to this work, the use of the Pripet Marshes as a natural barrier providing cover for troops defending the western Soviet Union was already described by marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky in 1920. His ideas were taken into account by the *Wehrmacht* twenty years later: by downplaying the possibility of a threat to the

To the regular enemy troops who were trapped behind the German lines was added another problem: the possible threat from Soviet partisans. In his first speech to the Soviet people after the German invasion, Joseph Stalin called for a people's war against the invaders. He demanded that 'guerrilla units' and 'diversionist groups' were formed in the occupied areas. These formations were supposed to destroy enemy transport, communication and logistics so that the Germans and their allies would find it impossible to control Soviet territory.<sup>355</sup> Despite this address, partisans did not pose a threat to German troops in the summer of 1941. Although the training of guerrilla fighters had been part of the Soviet military doctrine, the government could not deploy them now: partisan warfare had been neglected as an option in the 1930s, when the Red Army was built up as an offensive and highly mechanised force. Supply depots for partisans had been closed and instructors had fallen victim to Stalin's purges. As a result, no plans or preparations had been made.<sup>356</sup> There was no organised partisan movement: resistance, if existent, was isolated and the Soviet government did not make an effort to coordinate the forces of the Communist party, the state security organs and the Red Army.<sup>357</sup> Guerrilla groups lacked training, military experience, and leadership. They were poorly equipped and often did not even have enough weapons.<sup>358</sup> The Germans, though, saw a possibility to justify their harsh measures against the Soviet population.<sup>359</sup> At the meeting of 16 July, Hitler said, referring to Stalin's speech: 'This partisan warfare gives us an advantage by

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German flanks which came out of the marshes, colonel general Franz Halder ensured that Hitler accepted his operational plan with the focus on a quick advance on Moscow.

<sup>355</sup> Pravda, 3 July, 1941, p. 1, translated in Stalin, Joseph, *The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union* (New York, 1945), p. 15, quoted in: Kenneth Slepyan, *Stalin's guerrillas: Soviet partisans in World War II* (Lawrence, KS 2006), p. 15.

<sup>356</sup> Slepyan, *Stalin's guerrillas*, pp. 19-22; Richard J. Overy, *Russia's War*. (London, 1999), p. 143. For an overview of partisan warfare in the Soviet Union that presents the relevant literature, especially on the prewar period and the opening phase of the war, see Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, p. 345.

<sup>357</sup> Benjamin V. Shepherd, *War in the Wild East: the German army and Soviet partisans* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), pp. 60-63; Slepyan, *Stalin's guerrillas*, p. 25.

<sup>358</sup> Slepyan, *Stalin's guerrillas*, pp. 27-28 and pp. 31-32.

<sup>359</sup> Matthäus in Browning, *Die Entfesselung der 'Endlösung'*, pp. 406-407.

enabling us to destroy everything in our path. [...] In this vast area, peace must be imposed as quickly as possible, and to achieve this, it is necessary to execute even anyone who doesn't give us a straight look'.<sup>360</sup>

Not only German combat units lacked personnel. The mobile killing squads, too, were overstretched, especially in Belorussia and the Ukraine, to the point of a 'security vacuum'.<sup>361</sup> In many areas of dense Jewish population, no measures could be taken, especially in some parts of Belorussia and the Ukraine. In order to persecute Jews and also to combat Red Army units and partisans who had taken refuge in these areas, special German units were needed as the Pripet Marshes in particular posed a huge problem. Regular army formations had proven to be inadequately equipped and trained for combing through the marshes; also, they were urgently needed elsewhere.<sup>362</sup> The *Einsatzgruppen*, on the other hand, were not able to conduct fast, large-scale operations in the intended area as they lacked manpower and mobility.<sup>363</sup>

As opposed to the less flexible army and *Einsatzgruppen* units, the two SS cavalry regiments were seen as the German formations which met the criteria for this task. They were equipped to army standards and considered to be a perfect match for the role of a light patrol unit in difficult terrain. Moreover, their men had experience in serving as an occupation force and had already proven their brutality in Poland. Their problems with the slower supply units could be tackled by Fegelein's plan of restructuring the two regiments. Now that a political administration in the occupied territories had been established, all obstacles for the deployment of *Kommandostab*

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<sup>360</sup> *Trial of the major war criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, 14 November 1945 - 1 October 1946: official text in the English language. Vol. 38, Documents and other material in evidence, numbers 185-L to 1216-RF* (Nuremberg, 1949), document L-221, pp. 68-94, quoted in Böhler, 'Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS', p. 14.

<sup>361</sup> Böhler, 'Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS', p. 13.

<sup>362</sup> Klink in Boog, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, pp. 477-478; Böhler, 'Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS', p. 13.

<sup>363</sup> Matthäus in Browning, *Die Entfesselung der 'Endlösung'*, p. 407.

units had been removed and Himmler decided to send them into the Soviet Union again.

On 14 July, the *Kommandostab* had reported operational readiness to the *SS-Führungshauptamt* in Berlin. The 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment was combat-ready; the motorised subunits of the second regiment were not yet fully operational.<sup>364</sup> Five days later, on 19 July, the SS Cavalry received an order from Himmler to relocate to the area of Baranovichi in Belorussia on 21 July. There, its formations would be subordinate to the Higher SS and Police Leader Centre, *SS-Gruppenführer* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski. Any deployment of the cavalry was subject to Himmler's approval. Hermann Fegelein was now also assigned command over the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment; thus, the two units, which had a combined strength of 3,970 men when their departure was ordered, collectively became a cavalry brigade.<sup>365</sup> On the same day, von dem Bach-Zelewski was informed by Himmler that the SS Cavalry had been placed at his disposal. Their task was 'to comb the Pripet Marshes systematically', an operation which was to be planned elaborately by the HSSPF.<sup>366</sup> In this last telex, the unit was referred to as '*SS-Reiterbrigade*' (SS Cavalry Brigade) for the very first time whereas the previous order had only called it '*Kavallerie-Verband*' (cavalry formation). The two messages are the first proof of the amalgamation of the two units to form an SS Cavalry Brigade.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> KTB KDOS, entry from 14 July, 1941.

<sup>365</sup> Kommandobefehl Nr. 19 vom 19.7. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 135. For the numerical strength, see Kommandostab RFSS, Kriegsstarke nachweisungen und Sollstarke v. 19.7. 1941, in: VUA, box 14, file 107, quoted in: Klaus-Michael Mallmann and others, *Deutscher Osten 1939 – 1945. Der Weltanschauungskrieg in Fotos und Texten* (Darmstadt, 2003), p. 143.

<sup>366</sup> Fernschreiben Nr. 110 v. 19.7. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170.

<sup>367</sup> Abschlußbericht der ZStL vom 20.8. 1963, pp. 359-360; see also Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 14.

### Minor combat operations in the Pripet Marshes

Before the SS cavalry had even fully arrived in Belorussia, it already got caught up in the German struggle for the security of the vast hinterland of the front. For some of its soldiers, a mission similar of that to the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment at Bialystok was now about to develop: without a clear concept of the enemy, they were deployed as a support force of the *Wehrmacht* in a particular sector, whereas most of their comrades began to target the Jewish population at the same time. Although only a few squadrons of the brigade took part in this operation, which was a mere side scene to the much larger context of the fighting of German Army Group Centre, it is important to view this episode as it exemplifies many later missions during which the SS cavalrymen were confronted with similar threats. Apart from regular Soviet forces, many of which had been bypassed by the Germans, small groups and individual stragglers occurred as well, applying hit-and-run tactics that were hard to counter for the inexperienced German soldiers.

On the northern fringe of the Pripet Marshes a serious threat to the German advance emerged in late July: Soviet contingents with an estimated strength of two cavalry divisions had pushed forward from the gap between Army Group Centre and Army Group South and tried to break through the German lines to escape encirclement. As there were few transport routes in this sector, this development threatened to disrupt the German supply lines, particularly the railway from Minsk to Bobruisk and the important road from Brest-Litovsk to Bobruisk, which was one of the main east – west thoroughfares in the rear area of Army Group Centre and referred to as *Rollbahn 1*. To defend this road, the commander of the rear area sent ahead a vanguard of the SS cavalry regiments and subordinated it to the 162<sup>nd</sup> infantry

division of the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>368</sup> The advance party consisted of the sixth squadron and a platoon with infantry support guns of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS cavalry regiment and the bicycle squadrons of both regiments. Its subunits arrived in the designated area late on 27 July and early on 28 July.<sup>369</sup>

On 2 August, a squad of the motorcycle platoon of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment was ambushed by a group of about 30 Red Army stragglers and lost an NCO in the ensuing fight. Two other SS soldiers were wounded.<sup>370</sup> In the following days, the sixth squadron of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, with its engineer and anti-tank platoons operating separately, attempted to track down the troop that had attacked their comrades. The stragglers could not be located; moreover, in another fire-fight that took place in the same area on 6 August, an SS trooper of the light cavalry column was wounded. The failure of the initial searches sparked harsh criticism from Fegelein towards Hierthes, the regimental commander. After another unsuccessful raid on 11 August, the anti-tank platoon received a tip from a local and carried out a patrol in the swamps near Starobin on 13 August. This led to the destruction of an abandoned Soviet border fortress and the discovery of a still occupied Soviet barracks in the swamps. This

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<sup>368</sup> KTB KDOS, entries from 27 and 28 July, 1941; see also Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 24. – 27.7. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 1, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 1; Korpsbefehl Nr. 35 vom 28.7. 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, in: BArchF, RS 22/224, p. 183; Tätigkeitsbericht Nr. 9 [des Kommandostabes] für die Woche vom 4.-10.8. [19]41, August 12, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 10, file 93, p. 53.

<sup>369</sup> Bericht über die Tätigkeit der V[oraus].A[bteilung] vom 27.7. – 3.8. 1941, 12 August, 1941, in *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 221; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 28. – 30.7. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 2; Kriegstagebuch der 162. Infanteriedivision (23.5. – 20.11. 1941), in: BArchF, RS 26-162/7, p. 36; Funkspruch Nr. 9, Kav.-Brig an Kdo. Stb. RF-SS, 28 July, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170.

<sup>370</sup> For the ambush on the motorcycle squad, see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 31.7. – 3.8. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2; see also radio message no. 3 from HSSPF Mitte to KDOS RFSS, 3 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4. According to the final report of the vanguard, one NCO was killed and four soldiers were wounded, two of them badly; see Zusammenfassende Meldung über die Kampfhandlungen der Vorausabteilung der SS-Kav.Brigade, 11 August, 1941, in *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, pp. 227-228. As the report of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment for this incident only speaks of two wounded and Fegelein wrongly lists it under operations of the vanguard (to which the motorcycle platoon did not belong), it can be assumed that he wanted the report to sound more intense as far as the engagement of his men in combat is concerned. Another source backs the version of the dead soldier: according to a former corporal of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment's engineer platoon, his unit suffered the first deadly casualty due to an ambush on 2 August, 1941. See Vernehmung von Fritz Gierisch vom 10.3. 1962, in: StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Befehle (Kopien), Nr. 1010, pp. 276-277.

outpost, which had been bypassed by the German advance, was taken in an infantry assault, in the course of which five Soviet soldiers were killed and about 20 were wounded; others escaped into the swamps. The anti-tank platoon suffered no losses during this mission, which according to the platoon commander destroyed the Soviet group that had carried out the ambush earlier. It was probably the only time soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment were involved in combat during the first mission in the Pripet Marshes.<sup>371</sup>

In the combat zone between Sluck and Bobruisk, the situation was confusing. The main German force in this sector was the 162<sup>nd</sup> infantry division; it was overstretched as it had been pushed forward hastily as a task force just a few days before, together with units from the 87<sup>th</sup> and 252<sup>nd</sup> infantry division as well as Security Regiment 2. Since 25 July, they had been fighting against Soviet troops around Sluck in the forests and near the main road, where German defences had been pushed back but enemy attacks could be repelled.<sup>372</sup> Three days later, the 162<sup>nd</sup> infantry division was ordered to continue securing the *Rollbahn* and to locate the positions of enemy units. For this purpose, it was now also reinforced with Police Battalion 307 and two battalions of the 252<sup>nd</sup> infantry division.<sup>373</sup> When the SS vanguard arrived at Starye Dorogy east of Sluck, where its mission was to start, three enemy units had been spotted. The 32<sup>nd</sup> Soviet cavalry division stood north of the highway for the most part; some of its subunits were south of it and shelled it with artillery. Two others, the 43<sup>rd</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> Soviet cavalry divisions, operated south of the *Rollbahn*. During the following three days, the SS squadrons conducted

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<sup>371</sup> Bericht über den Einsatz des Pak-Zuges am 13.8. 1941 in Wielickowicze Nowe, 15 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3. For the wounding of the trooper, see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 6.-10.8. 1941, 11 August, 1941, SS Cavalry Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; for Fegelein's criticism, see Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 181.

<sup>372</sup> Kriegstagebuch der 162. Infanteriedivision (23.5. – 20.11. 1941), in: BArchF, RS 26-162/7, pp. 28-36.

<sup>373</sup> Korpsbefehl Nr. 35 vom 28.7. 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, in: BArchF, RS 22/224, p. 183.

reconnaissance on both sides of the road and thus helped to prepare an attack of the 162<sup>nd</sup> infantry division to the south, which started on 1 August. In the scouting area, the vanguard got caught up in skirmishes with Soviet cavalry squadrons repeatedly; in some of these situations, the soldiers had to defend themselves in every direction but they suffered no losses.<sup>374</sup> Police Battalion 307, which had scouted a sector near Sluzk further west, had found itself in the same situation. In the village of Starobin, a part of the unit suddenly came under fire, pushed forward and outflanked a group of about 150 Soviet soldiers; some of them died in the fighting, the remainder was executed.<sup>375</sup>

When the German forces began the assault on the Soviet cavalry divisions south of the road from Sluck to Bobruisk, the SS vanguard advanced with them. It was to destroy enemy troops, stragglers and partisans in the area between Starye Dorogy and Gluck.<sup>376</sup> Thus, the SS squadrons, together with units of the 252<sup>nd</sup> infantry division, formed the western boundary of encirclement and kept Soviet forces from evading, whereas the 162<sup>nd</sup> division carried out the main thrust to the south further eastward.<sup>377</sup> The offensive went according to plan: the opposing forces were pushed away from the main road and driven to the southeast. At the same time, the 87<sup>th</sup> division fought off attacks from the north and deployed troops against enemy cavalry northeast of the *Rollbahn*, towards the railway line Minsk – Bobruisk. South of the road, the SS squadrons and units of the 252<sup>nd</sup> infantry division blocked escape routes

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<sup>374</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 27. – 31.7. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 1, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 1, p. 485; Bericht über die Tätigkeit der V[oraus].A[bteilung] vom 27.7. – 3.8. 1941, in *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, pp. 221-222; Bericht über die Kämpfe im rückw[ärtigen] Heeresgebiet Mitte v. 24.7. – 11.8. 1941, 17 August, 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, in: BArchF, RS 22/224, p. 220.

<sup>375</sup> Erkundungs- und Aufklärungsergebnis vom 29.7. 1941 südlich Sluzk, 30 July, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/20.

<sup>376</sup> Bericht über die Feindlage bei der SS-Kav.-Brigade am 8.8. 1941 [received by the *Kommandostab* on 12 August, 1941], in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 10, file 93, p. 61.

<sup>377</sup> Bericht über die Tätigkeit der V[oraus].A[bteilung] vom 27.7. – 3.8. 1941, in *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, pp. 222-223; Kriegstagebuch der 162. Infanteriedivision (23.5. – 20.11. 1941), in: BArchF, RS 26-162/7, pp. 40-43; Korpsbefehl Nr. 36 vom 1.8. 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, in: BArchF, RH 22/224, p. 186.

to the west, combed the forests and engaged Red Army forces in combat where they met them, mostly having to deal with small and medium-sized combat groups. After six days, the bulk of the 32<sup>nd</sup>, 43<sup>rd</sup>, and 47<sup>th</sup> Soviet divisions had been surrounded, scattered, and destroyed on both sides of the main thoroughfare. However, the fighting in this area continued as another Soviet unit, the 121<sup>st</sup> infantry division, appeared; it had not made contact with the enemy so far as its regiments had kept themselves hidden in the forests northwest of Sluck for several weeks. On 6 August, this division broke through German defences and crossed *Rollbahn 1* to the south. Although it was well-equipped with artillery and other heavy weapons and fortunate enough to overrun thinly spread opposing forces, it was surrounded in the following days by units of the 162<sup>nd</sup> and 252<sup>nd</sup> infantry divisions, Police Battalions 307 and 316, and the vanguard of the SS cavalry. After about five days, the division had suffered the same fate as the Soviet cavalry before. The commander of the rear area of Army Group Centre considered the two missions, which had destroyed four enemy divisions, a complete success.<sup>378</sup>

During this operation, there were thousands of Soviet casualties: in total, 2,593 Red Army men were taken prisoner and about 4,000 had been killed. The SS vanguard alone reported having destroyed or dispersed five Soviet squadrons and two artillery batteries, which led to the annihilation of two Soviet cavalry regiments. At least 200 enemy soldiers were killed and more than 400 were captured. The 162<sup>nd</sup> division

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<sup>378</sup> Kriegstagebuch der 162. Infanteriedivision (23.5. – 20.11. 1941), in: BArchF, RS 26-162/7, pp. 43-53; Kriegstagebuch Nr. 4 der 87. Infanteriedivision (25.5. - 19.8. 1941), Abschnitt d (27.7. – 19.8. 1941), in: BArchF, RH 26-87/22; Korpsbefehl Nr. 36 vom 1.8. 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, in: BArchF, RH 22/224, p. 186; Bericht über die Tätigkeit der V[oraus].A[bteilung] vom 27.7. – 3.8. 1941, in: *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 223-226; Bericht über die Feindlage bei der SS-Kav.-Brigade am 8.8. 1941, [received by the *Kommandostab* on 12 August, 1941], in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 10, file 93, p. 62; Korpsbefehl Nr. 38 vom 8.8. 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, in: BArchF, RS 22/224, p. 192; Bericht über die Kämpfe im rückw[ärtigen] Heeresgebiet Mitte v. 24.7. – 11.8. 1941, in: *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 220 and pp. 224-226; Korpsbefehl Nr. 39 vom 11.8. 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, in: BArchF, RS 22/224, p. 201. The combat operations in the entire sector were also outlined in a sketch which can be found in the *Kommandostab* files; see VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 10, file 93.

counted another four hundred prisoners; many others, though, escaped to the east or hid in the forests. Also, 1100 horses were captured and 36 artillery and anti-tank pieces as well as great scores of small arms and ammunition could be secured.<sup>379</sup>

German losses were far smaller: in the SS vanguard, eight men were wounded and one had gone missing.<sup>380</sup> Of the 162<sup>nd</sup> division, 89 soldiers had been killed, 257 had been wounded and nine were missing.<sup>381</sup> The 87<sup>th</sup> division suffered losses of 77 dead and 144 wounded during the fighting in this area.<sup>382</sup>

Fighting in the densely wooded, swampy and often impassable area was largely patrol-based on both sides. It often ensued after chance encounters as the exact position of the Soviet cavalry was unclear; even after the beginning of the encirclement, the Germans could not always tell whether Soviet forces had been trapped or just escaped in another direction. The SS commanders had to cover great distances in order to reconnoitre and engage the enemy, who appeared in contingents ranging from patrols up to whole regiments and sometimes outnumbered the Germans. The Soviet cavalry divisions consisted mostly of Cossacks and Caucasians, who were described as ‘skilful and tough fighters’.<sup>383</sup> In their attempts to

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<sup>379</sup> Bericht über die Tätigkeit der V[oraus].A[bteilung] vom 3. – 12.8. 1941, in: *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, pp. 225-226; Bericht über die Kämpfe im rückw[ärtigen] Heeresgebiet Mitte v. 24.7. – 11.8. 1941, p. 224 and p. 226; Zusammenfassende Meldung über die Kampfhandlungen der Vorausabteilung der SS-Kav.Brigade, 11 August, 1941, in: *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, pp. 227-228. The number of Soviet casualties cannot be ascertained as only estimates are being given in the sources from *Wehrmacht* and SS.

<sup>380</sup> Zusammenfassende Meldung über die Kampfhandlungen der Vorausabteilung der SS-Kav.Brigade, 11 August, 1941, in: *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, pp. 227-228. This report also contains the ambush on the motorcycle platoon (see above), which was not part of the vanguard; therefore, I did not quote the casualties from that incident (1 killed, four wounded according to Fegelein as opposed to 1 killed, two wounded who were reported by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment). The HSSPF Mitte, however, spoke of two SS cavalrymen who had been killed during the vanguard operation when their car hit a landmine; see Maschinelle Abschrift des Tagebuchs des Chefs der Bandenkampfverbände, SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Polizei Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski vom 25. Juni 1941 bis 22. Jan. 1945, entry from 14 August, 1941, BArchB, R 20/45b, p. 8. In the files of the SS Cavalry Brigade, however, no information about these two losses can be found.

<sup>381</sup> Bericht über die Kämpfe im rückw[ärtigen] Heeresgebiet Mitte v. 24.7. – 11.8. 1941, 17 August, 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, in: BArchF, RS 22/224, p. 221 and p. 224.

<sup>382</sup> Bericht über die Kämpfe im rückw[ärtigen] Heeresgebiet Mitte v. 24.7. – 11.8. 1941, 17 August, 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, in: BArchF, RS 22/224, pp. 221-222; the war diary of 87<sup>th</sup> division does not give the number of losses but only describes them as „grave“.

<sup>383</sup> Bericht über die Tätigkeit der V[oraus].A[bteilung] vom 27.7. – 3.8. 1941, in: *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, pp. 222-223; Bericht über die Tätigkeit der V[oraus].A[bteilung] vom 3. – 12.8. 1941, August 12, 1941, in: *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, pp. 224-226; Kriegstagebuch der 162. Infanteriedivision, (23.5.

break out of the encirclement, they had carried out heavy attacks locally and used artillery. Some new tactics were applied in response to this which should be of use to the SS Cavalry Brigade throughout the entire course of the deployment in the swampland. Squadrons were split up into more effective platoons, for example bicycle or anti-tank units, to carry out long range patrols. To secure or seal off an area, they used the ‘hedgehog’ technique: along a given line, circular defence positions were formed which could observe and fight in all directions.<sup>384</sup>

As a result of the first two weeks in Belorussia, it can be stated that despite the involvement of large contingents of German and Soviet troops in the fighting, the SS vanguard had not taken part in a major combat operation. However, all of its parts had made contact with the enemy and gained some valuable experience in combat and also in coordination with other units and agencies, such as *Wehrmacht* divisions, the HSSPF, and the Command of the Rear Area of Army Group Centre, which would be very important for their further deployment in the Pripet Marshes. Step by step, the SS cavalrymen came closer to Himmler’s aim of ‘hardening’ by accustoming them to warfare.<sup>385</sup> The mission along the Brest – Bobruisk highway shows significant parallels to the earlier deployment of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment near Bialystok as only subunits of the SS cavalry were involved in both cases. Instead of operating independently, they rather supported the *Wehrmacht*. Moreover, Hermann Fegelein

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– 20.11. 1941), in: BArchF, RS 26-162/7, pp. 45-47; Kriegstagebuch Nr. 4 der 87. Infanteriedivision (25.5. - 19.8. 1941), Abschnitt d (27.7. – 19.8. 1941), in: BArchF, RH 26-87/22; Bericht über die Kämpfe im rückw[ärtigen] Heeresgebiet Mitte v. 24.7. – 11.8. 1941, in: *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 222; Bericht über die Feindlage bei der SS-Kav.-Brigade am 8.8. 1941, [received by the *Kommandostab* on 12 August, 1941], in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 10, file 93, p. 61.

<sup>384</sup> Bericht über die Tätigkeit der V[oraus].A[bteilung] vom 27.7. – 3.8. 1941, 12 August, 1941, in: *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, pp. 221-223; Bericht über die Tätigkeit der V[oraus].A[bteilung] vom 3. – 12.8. 1941, 12 August, 1941, in: *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, pp. 224-226; Bericht über die Feindlage bei der SS-Kav.-Brigade am 8.8. 1941, [received by the *Kommandostab* on 12 August, 1941], in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 10, file 93, p. 62; according to a sketch in the *Kommandostab* files, the SS vanguard took up hedgehog positions along a line from north to south. These hedgehogs were supposed to form the western boundary of encirclement and to secure the area to the rear at the same time. They sealed off the zone between the main road and a parallel road further south while Police Battalion 307 advanced along both roads; for this sketch, see VUA, box 1, file 170. This tactic had been introduced in the *Kommandosonderbefehl* of 28 July, 1941.

<sup>385</sup> Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., pp. 1749-1750.

again exploited the conduct of his officers and men in order to improve the standing of the unit.

The behaviour of the SS cavalrymen in combat was shaped by the nature of their mission, in this case a hasty improvisation in an operational area where the situation and intentions of the enemy were unclear. It can be assumed that they did well under the circumstances as they took hardly any losses and managed to master some difficult situations. But as only a small part of the SS cavalry force became involved in the fighting with the vanguard, it is not possible to draw conclusions on the performance of the entire unit. Combat on an institutional level only took place at the end of the year, when the brigade was based at Toropets. In Belorussia, the 'dual role' of the unit soon developed further as both the mounted squadrons and the motorised elements of the SS cavalry began to carry out criminal orders of an ideological nature which they had received from the *Wehrmacht* and SS commands respectively.

#### Excursus: The officer corps of the SS Cavalry Regiments

From the early days of the mounted SS, the officer corps shaped the development of the unit. Its members were mainly responsible for establishing a high standard of equitation in the initial phase during the 1930s. That horse-riding was more than just a leisure activity can be seen in the continuity with which it permeated the lives of several SS cavalry officers, both in civilian life and military service. To personal passion was added political opinion and career options in various forms. As far as equitation as a sport was concerned, the officer corps of the SS cavalry was active, successful, and skilled: Hermann Fegelein and his younger brother Waldemar won

great fame as show-jumpers even before the foundation of the SS riding school, while Franz Magill had worked as a riding instructor in the *Reichswehr* cavalry, at a riding school in Berlin (which later became home to *Reiterstandarte 7*), and at the *SS-Junkerschule* in Braunschweig. Others had been professional soldiers or reservists in the cavalry, such as war veterans Heimo Hierthes and Johann Schmid, or Kurt Wegener, who joined the mounted branch of the army after the First World War. Stefan Charwat was a captain in the Romanian cavalry before he came to Germany in 1940.<sup>386</sup>

When a regimental structure was being built up from late 1939, more officers joined the SS cavalry until it was fully operational two years later. The brigade commander, Hermann Fegelein, the regimental commanders, the leaders of the two *Reitende Abteilungen*, and the squadron commanders of these detachments (which were responsible for most of the killings), represent a sample of the officer corps of the entire unit during the year 1941, when the SS cavalry was involved in the invasion of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the Holocaust. This sample, which comprises thirteen men who were born between 1895 and 1912, is based on the roster of 30 July, 1941.<sup>387</sup> Two main groups can be identified here: the war veterans on the one hand, and the significantly younger members of the so-called war youth generation on the other. In the sample, both groups were almost equally represented:

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<sup>386</sup> Stammrollenauszug von Heimo Hierthes, in: BArchB, SSO Heimo Hierthes; Dienstlaufbahn von Johann Schmid, in BArchB, SSO Johann Schmid; *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 28; Lebenslauf von Kurt Wegener vom 8.3. 1938, in: BArchB, SSO Kurt Wegener; StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Personalunterlagen (Kopien), Nr. 1060, p. 36.

<sup>387</sup> Information on this group was obtained mainly through the former Berlin Document Center (now a part of the German Federal Archive at Berlin), which holds the so-called SSO (SS officers) database. There, personnel files of the group defined above were viewed with two exceptions: the file of Stefan Charwat is not in the database; as Charwat was an ethnic German from Romania who only came to Germany after the beginning of the war, it is possible that his file was stored by another agency within the SS. Some information on this officer could, however, be found in the court files from the trial against Franz Magill and others; see StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Personalunterlagen (Kopien), Nr. 1060, pp. 36-40. The file of Herbert Schönfeldt could not be accessed during a visit to the Federal Archive in the spring of 2011; thus, information on one person from the defined group of fourteen men was missing so that only thirteen men could be included in the sample. For the roster, see Führerstellenbesetzungsliste vom 30.7. 1941, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/91.

six were veterans, whereas seven belonged to the war youth generation.<sup>388</sup> The former could look back on military service in the First World War and sometimes in the interwar period as well. Some of them had joined divisions of the Nazi party before Hitler had come to power and thus were ‘old fighters’ of the Nazi movement. As opposed to them, the latter had been socialised in the interwar years and made a career in the Nazi state and the *Allgemeine SS*.<sup>389</sup> On the whole, however, war veterans and former *Reichswehr* soldiers continued to dominate the officer corps of the mounted SS until after the beginning of the Second World War: in August, 1940, their proportion of the squadron commanders in both cavalry regiments was given as 75%. Gradually, the units were joined by young war volunteers and officer cadets.<sup>390</sup>

The characteristics both age groups in the officer corps had in common were enthusiasm for horse-riding and a strong dedication to the National Socialist idea. As far as an extreme political attitude is concerned, several examples stand out: Hierthes had fought against the Weimar Republic in the *Freikorps Epp* and participated in the Beer Hall Putsch as a member of the same radical organisation as Heinrich Himmler, the *Bund Reichskriegsflagge*.<sup>391</sup> Siegfried Kotthaus was an ‘old fighter’ as well as he had joined the NSDAP before 1933, an attribute he shared with Walter Dunsch and Hermann Fegelein.<sup>392</sup> Gustav Lombard and Ulrich Goertz, too, managed to combine

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<sup>388</sup> Gustav Lombard is an exception in this sample: although he was born in 1895, he did not serve in the military during the First World War as he was living in the United States from 1913 – 1919. For his biography, see Martin Cüppers, ‘Gustav Lombard – ein engagierter Judenmörder aus der Waffen-SS’, in K. M. Mallmann and G. Paul (eds.), *Karrieren der Gewalt: Nationalsozialistische Täterbiographien* (Darmstadt, 2004), pp. 145-156; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 95. See also Lebenserinnerungen des Generalmajors der Waffen-SS und SS-Brigadeführers Gustav Lombard, in: BArchF, MSg 2/13509.

<sup>389</sup> The war youth generation is defined as the age cohort born between 1900 and the first years of the First World War; see Dieter Frey and Helmut Rez, ‘Population and Predators: Preconditions for the Holocaust From a Control-Theoretical Perspective’, in L. S. Newman and R. Erber (eds.), *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 210-211.

<sup>390</sup> Stimmungsbericht des 1. SS-Totenkopf-Reiterregiments, 13 August 1940, in: VUA, 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*, box 1, file 7; Michaelis, *Dokumentation*, p. 317; Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen*, p. 18.

<sup>391</sup> Stammrollenauszug von Heimo Hierthes (undated), in: BArchB, SSO Heimo Hierthes; Gesuch um Wiederverwendung vom 11.2. 1937, *ibid.* For Himmler’s role in the putsch, see Longerich, *Himmler*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>392</sup> Stammkartenabschnitt von Siegfried Kotthaus (undated), in: BArchB, SSO Siegfried Kotthaus;

personal interest in equitation with a career in the SS. Goertz, the second youngest man in the sample, stated at the age of 22 already that he intended to ‘take up service in the *Schutzstaffel* as a profession for life’.<sup>393</sup>

Once the men had become part of the leadership of the mounted SS, in some cases via training in the concentration camp system, they formed an effective hierarchy which is proven by the unit’s deployment in Poland: Hermann Fegelein received his orders from the higher SS and police leader ‘Ost’ in the General Government, but he left it to his subalterns to execute them. That he fully approved of their often very brutal conduct is illustrated by reports he compiled after missions of the cavalry squadrons, most notably by his infamous statement on the destruction of Polish villages after an unsuccessful counter insurgency operation between Radom and Kielce. This leadership principle, which first evolved between 1939 and 1941, shows the special role of the middle level of the chain of command within the hierarchy of the unit: upon general instructions from Fegelein, other officers took the initiative and implemented whatever task the unit was ordered to carry out. During the deployment in Poland, this middle level consisted of the squadron commanders; when the SS cavalry became a brigade in Belorussia, this task was fulfilled by the commanders of the mounted detachments, who in turn briefed their subordinates. It is notable that Fegelein hardly ever appeared at an execution site to supervise the killings. Thus, he did not have to suffer from mental-health problems which were triggered by those terrible scenes, as did his superior Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, who had visited the SS cavalry in the field very often.<sup>394</sup>

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Personalbericht und Beurteilung von Siegfried Kotthaus vom 18.6. 1940, *ibid.*; Dienstlaufbahn von Walter Dunsch (undated), in: BArchB, SSO Walter Dunsch; Dienstlaufbahn von Hermann Fegelein vom 15.8. 1931 bis zum 27.8. 1940, in: BArchB, SSO Hermann Fegelein.

<sup>393</sup> Erklärung [by Ulrich Goertz] vom 5.6. 1934, in: BArchB, SSO Ulrich Goertz.

<sup>394</sup> For von dem Bach-Zelewski’s problems, see Andrej Angrick, ‘Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski. Himmlers Mann für alle Fälle’, in R. Smelser and E. Syring (eds.), *Die SS – Elite unter dem Totenkopf. 30 Lebensläufe* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, Zurich 2000), p. 40. There are only two accounts that actually place Fegelein at a killing site. He is said to have been present at the failed attempt of driving Jews into a lake; see Müller-Tupath, *Becher*, p. 107. Also, he might have

Amongst the officers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment and later the SS Cavalry Brigade, Gustav Lombard began to stand out in Poland already because of his ruthlessness as well as strong anti-Semitism. This continued in Belorussia: as commander of the mounted detachment, he won Fegelein's favour by following an approach that was different from that pursued by the more hesitant Magill. Lombard's method of annihilating entire Jewish communities soon became the standard for all SS and police formations in Eastern Europe: by interpreting Himmler's orders in the widest possible way, he was 'working towards the *Führer*' just as his superiors expected him to do. Moreover, his loyal service in the SS cavalry, to which military fortune was later added, was the beginning of a career that was almost as impressive as that of Fegelein: until the end of the war, he rose to the official position of divisional commander and the rank of *SS-Brigadeführer*. His example shows that being unscrupulous, brutal, and well-connected as a protégé of Hermann Fegelein was even more important than being an 'old fighter' like Heimo Hierthes or a disciplined officer like the luckless Magill.<sup>395</sup> Moreover, Gustav Lombard was a prime example of a radical organiser who made the Holocaust possible in the first place.

Hermann Gadischke represents the middle level in the hierarchy of the SS cavalry: as squadron commander in Poland, he displayed such a brutality towards the Jews who lived near the garrison that his own men nicknamed him 'tiger of Kielce'.<sup>396</sup> Unlike Lombard who tried to be a fatherly superior to his men, Gadischke was

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radicalised the behaviour of the SS cavalymen at Mosyr in early September, 1941; see Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 197. A biographical study of Fegelein indicates faults in his character, such as unscrupulousness, an inclination to violence, and possible alcoholism but no mental problems as von dem Bach-Zelewski showed them. See Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 170.

<sup>395</sup> Cüppers, 'Gustav Lombard', pp. 145-156; see especially pp. 150-151; Martin Cüppers, 'Vorreiter der Shoah. Ein Vergleich der Einsätze beider SS-Kavallerieregimenter im August 1941', in T. C. Richter, (ed.), *Krieg und Verbrechen. Situation und Intention: Fallbeispiele* (Munich, 2006), pp. 87-99; Dienstlaufbahn von Gustav Lombard, in: BArchB, SSO Gustav Lombard. For the principle of 'working towards the *Führer*', see the correspondent chapter in Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889 – 1936*, pp. 663-744.

<sup>396</sup> Vernehmung von Paul Klose vom 2.12. 1968, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j137. According to another former trooper, Gadischke was called 'tiger of Lukow – Kamienna'; see Vernehmung von Klaas Kruizenga vom 9.4. 1964, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j67.

feared and disliked. Former cavalymen who served under him recalled him as being a brutal drunkard and referred to him as *'bluthund'* or *'sauhund'* even twenty years after the war. He led the machine-gun squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment in the Pripet Marshes, personally supervised executions and shot people himself on two occasions.<sup>397</sup> But not only did he become responsible for many killings as commanding officer: he also committed murder out of base motives. According to the testimony of a former soldier of his squadron, Gadischke ordered one man to shoot a two-year old child because it had cried and disturbed him when the unit was quartered in a village in Belorussia. The soldier obeyed the order.<sup>398</sup> Gadischke lacked the education and connections of men like Fegelein or Lombard; if they were the organisers of mass murder then he was the executioner. Of the men in the sample, he is perhaps most comparable with other low-level personnel of the Holocaust, such as junior ranks in the concentration camp guard units. By fighting bravely during the brigade's nemesis at Rzhev, however, he built on the valour for which he had been decorated during the First World War, and Hermann Fegelein recommended him for the German Cross in Gold.<sup>399</sup> Thus, Gadischke perfectly embodied the 'dual role' of the SS Cavalry Brigade.

The same applies to some of the younger officers from the sample, particularly Hans-Viktor von Zastrow and Ulrich Goertz. As members of the so-called war youth generation, they were missing Gadischke's frontline experience but soon distinguished themselves in the Soviet Union: von Zastrow was commended at Turov, whereas Goertz had won both classes of the Iron Cross since the beginning of

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<sup>397</sup> Abschlußbericht der ZStI vom 20.8. 1963, p. 370; Vernehmung von Karl Spiess vom 25.6. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, pp. i35-38; Vernehmung von Paul Klose vom 2.12. 1968, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j140; Vernehmung von Richard Gloth vom 14.8. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i2; Vernehmung von Klaas Kruizenga vom 9.4. 1964, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j67.

<sup>398</sup> Vernehmung von Josef Zorn vom 21.5. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i30.

<sup>399</sup> Vorschlag für die Verleihung des Deutschen Kreuzes in Gold an Hermann Gadischke vom 19.4. 1942, in: BArchB, SSO Hermann Gadischke.

the war.<sup>400</sup> In these two cases, too, personal gallantry and brutality went hand in hand: von Zastrow was responsible for the killing of at least 100 Jews at Serniki and for further acts of violence committed at Mozyr', whereas Goertz led the second squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment when it killed thousands of Jews at Khomsk, Ivanovo, Khoyniki and other places. Both officers were killed during the fighting at Rzhev.<sup>401</sup> Another casualty of the SS cavalry's winter campaign was Stefan Charwat, who had played a key role in organising the mass murder at Pinsk, where his conduct had been praised by Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski himself.<sup>402</sup> These cases are emblematic of the character of the SS Cavalry Brigade: men like Gadischke, von Zastrow, Goertz or Charwat could be placed in any situation by their superiors and carried out their orders regardless of any moral qualms. They quickly grew into the 'dual role' of the unit by becoming involved in killings and proving themselves in combat. Their deaths not only meant losses of qualified leaders for the SS cavalry but also complicated post-war investigations as the men could no longer be questioned about or indicted for the crimes they had committed in the Soviet Union.<sup>403</sup>

An analysis of the officers of the SS Cavalry Brigade has to go beyond the commanders of the mounted units during the summer of 1941. Even several officers from the lower levels of the unit's hierarchy made an astonishing career in the SS, most notably Kurt Becher, who served as a junior officer in the brigade staff and was involved in the composition of killing orders during the missions in the Pripet

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<sup>400</sup> For von Zastrow's commendation, see chapter 4. For Goertz's decorations, see Todesanzeige Ulrich Goertz (undated), BArchB, SSO Ulrich Goertz.

<sup>401</sup> Zusammenfassender Bericht der Tagesmeldungen der SS-Divisionen vom 13.1. 1942, BArchB, NS 19/1520, fiche 20-24; Zusammenstellung der Verluste der SS-Divisionen vom 17.4. 1942, *ibid.*, fiche 71-78; Todesanzeige Ulrich Goertz.

<sup>402</sup> For the involvement of von Zastrow, Goertz, and Charwat in crimes of the SS cavalry in Belorussia, see ch. 4.

<sup>403</sup> Gadischke did not survive the war either; the sources do not provide much information on his death but it can be assumed that he was killed at Budapest in 1945. See Abschlußbericht der ZStI vom 20.8. 1963, pp. 380-381; Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., p. 1772.

Marshes.<sup>404</sup> He became Fegelein's aide and remained with the SS Cavalry Brigade until the end of 1941, when he was transferred to the *SS-Führungshauptamt* and became responsible for the acquisition of horses for the SS throughout 1942 and 1943.<sup>405</sup> Becher established a close relationship with Heinrich Himmler, for whom he fulfilled special tasks in Hungary in 1944, such as the expropriation of a large industrial group, the Manfred Weiss company, which led to the incorporation of the group into the economic empire of the SS. But Himmler's interests went beyond such transactions: he also meant to establish contact with the Western allies through a trade which envisaged the exchange of one million Hungarian Jews for trucks and other supplies for the German army. Kurt Becher carried out the necessary negotiations with Jewish organisations; this deal, however, was not accepted by Germany's wartime enemies.<sup>406</sup>

In his importance to the *Reichsführer* (which also was reflected in the high decorations he received, along with reaching the rank of *Standartenführer* until the end of the war) and his relative youth, Kurt Becher resembled other men like Joachim Peiper and Hermann Fegelein. They all were protégés of Heinrich Himmler who had been selected by him personally to serve in key positions throughout the Third Reich and the Second World War. It is possible that Himmler believed to be able to form them as he thought best, as opposed to the older but more experienced soldiers under his command with whom he often was in conflict, such as Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich or Paul Hausser.<sup>407</sup>

As far as the officer corps of the SS Cavalry Brigade in general is concerned, its

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<sup>404</sup> Müller-Tupath, *Becher*, pp. 99-103.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114-122.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125-142 and pp. 149-157.

<sup>407</sup> For Dietrich, see Clark, 'Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich', pp. 119-133, especially p. 121-123; see also Weingartner, 'Sepp Dietrich, Heinrich Himmler, and the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler', pp. 264-284, especially pp. 274-275 and pp. 279-281. For Hausser, see Enrico Syring, 'Paul Hausser, 'Türöffner' und Kommandeur 'seiner' Waffen-SS', in R. Smelser and E. Syring (eds.), *Die SS – Elite unter dem Totenkopf. 30 Lebensläufe* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, Zurich 2000), pp. 190-207, especially p. 193.

key importance for the behaviour of the unit has to be noted. On different hierarchy levels, a very successful cooperation was established. This was based on four elements: Fegelein's ambition (which had helped to found the brigade in the first place), a strong National Socialist attitude, previous experience in the military (sometimes stretching back to the First World War), and a career in the SS. To this added a whole new dynamic once the SS cavalry was ordered to carry out ideological tasks: in their attempt of 'working towards the *Führer*', whose will was represented by their superiors Heinrich Himmler and Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, they executed the brutal mechanisms and intentions of the Nazi state. Although their military qualifications were often insufficient, the SS cavalry officers carried out their duty as best they could, which brought them to fulfil the 'dual role' of the unit in 1941 and 1942. Thus, it can be stated that the institutional-level conduct of the SS Cavalry Brigade was determined by the officer corps, which was characterised by ambition, fanaticism, endurance, and flexibility.

4) Conditioning to mass killing: the SS cavalrymen in the Pripet Marshes

With the start of their mission in Belorussia, the SS cavalrymen underwent another phase of radicalisation: from executions of small groups of people, the units went over to acts of mass violence with thousands of victims. The ideological role continued to dominate the military aspect as only a small number of soldiers from the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment had seen action near Bialystok, whereas for the vast majority of the men deployment in the Soviet Union began with killings of innocent people. This did not change until late 1941, with the exception of occasional skirmishes with Red Army stragglers and an encounter at Turov in August. It has to be noted that an intensification of violence was witnessed by many German soldiers both at the front and in the hinterland; the two SS cavalry regiments, however, soon carried out a murderous campaign that can only be compared to that of units which were deployed for that purpose only, namely the police battalions of the order police and the *Einsatzgruppen* of the SS. What set the brigade apart from these killing squads was an institutional brutalisation from above: the issuing of radical orders by Heinrich Himmler triggered a new dynamic of violence as Hermann Fegelein and his officers adjusted their instructions to the point of complete annihilation of those defined as enemies by National Socialist ideology. Within this frame of reference, most of the victims were unarmed civilians and predominantly Jews. As before in Poland, the soldiers became accustomed to the new situation very quickly.

After setting out from Arys, the SS cavalry advanced eastward through the territory in which the 1<sup>st</sup> SS cavalry regiment had just fought two weeks earlier. Via Osowiec, Bialystok, Volkovysk, and Slonim, they were to reach Baranovichi, from where their

new mission was to start on 28 July.<sup>408</sup>



Map 1: Operational area of the SS Cavalry Brigade, July – September, 1941

Hermann Fegelein and the staff of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment took their quarters at Liakhovichi, some 10 miles southeast of Baranovichi.<sup>409</sup> As soon as they had arrived in Belorussia, the commander of the *Kommandostab*, Knoblauch, and Fegelein consulted with the HSSPF, von dem Bach-Zelewski, about the deployment of the SS cavalry in the Pripet Marshes.<sup>410</sup> On this occasion, Knoblauch delivered a special order from Heinrich Himmler, the so-called *Kommandosonderbefehl*. It assessed the capabilities of the mounted SS units, defined the guidelines for their actions in this area, including military tactics, and also established the close collaboration between

<sup>408</sup> Kommandobefehl Nr. 19 vom 19.7. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 170.

<sup>409</sup> Abschlußbericht der ZStI vom 20.8. 1963, p. 367.

<sup>410</sup> KTB KDOS, entry from 27 July, 1941.

units of the *Waffen-SS* and order police. The marshes were to be patrolled and ‘cleansed’ of ‘marauders’ and partisans. As far as the local population was concerned, the order divided it up into groups which were viewed as being well-disposed to the Germans, such as Ukrainians, and potentially hostile groups like Russians and Poles. Jews were not mentioned explicitly but the order demanded that if the inhabitants of the area were ‘racially and humanly inferior’ they were to be shot ‘if they were suspected of supporting the partisans’. Moreover, women and children were to be deported (without any further specification), livestock and food should be seized and villages burned to the ground.<sup>411</sup>

This rather general and very brutal instruction included every possible political, military or racial opponent of the Germans and was in breach of the Hague Convention which forbade any inclusion of the civilian population in combat operations, let alone the pre-emptive destruction of settlements based on politically motivated suspicions. It marks the beginning of ideological warfare in the Pripet Marshes and was the first step of Himmler’s orders for murder. Based on the *Kommandosonderbefehl* Hermann Fegelein issued the first order regarding the mission of the two SS Cavalry Regiments in the Pripet Marshes on the same day. The general task was to ‘comb and pacify’ an operational area which was defined as a rectangle that stretched some 160 miles from west to east and about 50 miles from north to south. The river Pripet ran in the middle of it and roughly formed the dividing line between the sector of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment in the north and the 2<sup>nd</sup> in the south. Both units were ordered to dispatch their horse squadrons as fast moving detachments which were to cross the marshes along the main roads and to conduct reconnaissance missions deeper into the swamps. Whereas regular enemy soldiers were to be taken prisoner, ‘Russian soldiers in plain clothes’ and ‘armed and

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<sup>411</sup> Kommandosonderbefehl. Richtlinien für die Durchkämpfung und Durchstreifung von Sumpfgebieten durch Reitereinheiten, 28 July, 1941, in *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, pp. 210-213.

sabotaging civilians' should be shot. 'Combing' and 'pacifying' did not only refer to the securing of the area in this case but were also euphemisms for mass killing, as becomes clear by the detailed definitions given by Fegelein. He demanded that male Jews were 'to be treated as looters for the most part', which meant they were to be killed. Only doctors and skilled workers were exempt from this directive. Women and children, on the other hand, were to be 'driven away', an instruction that was not specified further at this point.<sup>412</sup> In the prospective operational area of the SS Cavalry Brigade, the SS leadership anticipated villages which were inhabited by 'criminals' who had been deported to the swamps, thus hinting at the Soviet prison camp system and Stalin's policies of exiling undesirables.<sup>413</sup> The orders by Himmler and Fegelein also aimed at the formation of local 'militias', which were to be recruited from volunteers.<sup>414</sup> The *Reichsführer* intended to deploy these *Schutzmannschaften* as guards and as a support force in killing operations.<sup>415</sup>

The content of the directives demonstrates that the Germans failed to fully take into

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<sup>412</sup> Regimentsbefehl Nr. 42 für den Einsatz Pripec-Sümpfe, 27 July, 1941, in: BArchL, Dokumenten-Sammlung, Ordner Verschiedenes 291-17, pp. 2-5. For the sequence, content and formulation of the two orders, see also Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 138-139, esp. p. 138, footnote 76. Although the wording of the order did not imply the killing of all Jews, the intention of mass executions becomes clear. This was also true for the general agreements between the SS and the *Wehrmacht*: as Christian Hartmann has proven, the nature of the agreements between Heydrich and Wagner, for example, was clearly criminal and aimed at giving the SS free rein for executions. See Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, p., p. 645.

<sup>413</sup> Kommandosonderbefehl, 28 July, 1941, in *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 212; Regimentsbefehl Nr. 42, 27 July, 1941, in: BArchL, Dokumenten-Sammlung, Ordner Verschiedenes 291-17, p. 4.

<sup>414</sup> Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: crimes of the local police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941-44* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 21 and p. 30. This directive was influenced by different agencies on the German side: the *Wirtschaftsstab Ost* (Economic Staff East) recommended the establishment of a local auxiliary police as a security measure that was supposed to aid the new occupation authorities in ensuring 'the intended policy for feeding the Army off the land'; see Martin Dean, 'Local Collaboration in the Holocaust in Eastern Europe', in D. Stone (ed.), *Historiography of the Holocaust* (Basingstoke, 2004), p. 127. This source does not state when exactly the *Wirtschaftsstab Ost* approached other German agencies for more security personnel. For the *Wirtschaftsstab Ost*, see also Rolf-Dieter Müller, 'Von der Wirtschaftsallianz zum kolonialen Ausbeutungskrieg', in H. Boog and others, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, Bd. 4: Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart, 1987), pp. 129-135. As the safeguarding of the rear areas was the task of the SS, the army high command asked for more security forces, which led Heinrich Himmler to the issuing of orders regarding the formation of so-called *Schutzmannschaften* (auxiliary police forces), consisting of 'Ukrainians, the inhabitants of the Baltic states and Belorussians'. See RFSS to the Higher SS and Police Leaders, 25 July, 1941, in: BArchF, RW 41/4, quoted in Dean, 'Local Collaboration in the Holocaust in Eastern Europe', p. 126.

<sup>415</sup> Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust*, pp. 27-28.

account the extremely bloody developments that had swept through Belorussia during the past twenty years. There were no villages which were inhabited by ‘criminals’, but the locals had been subject to many radical changes. After the end of the First World War, it was not until the treaty of Riga ended the Polish – Bolshevik war in 1921 that a real eastern border was established for Poland. The Soviet Union was founded in the following year, and Belarusians, Ukrainians and Poles found themselves living on both sides of the new border in a still heavily contested region.<sup>416</sup> There was now a Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic with a capital in Minsk, and the Polish ‘eastern border regions’, or ‘*Kresy Wschodnie*’, which stretched far to the east and included the provincial centres of Baranovichi and Pinsk.<sup>417</sup> After the beginning of the Second World War, the Soviet Union invaded eastern Poland and incorporated the ‘*Kresy Wschodnie*’ into the Belorussian Soviet Republic, which was thus significantly extended: its territory grew by 45% and the population rose from 5.6 million to 10.4 million.<sup>418</sup> The Jewish minority expanded from 400,000 to about one million.<sup>419</sup>

Ethnic minorities had become subject to different measures of the respective authorities during the interwar period: on the Polish side, Belarusian identity was

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<sup>416</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London, 2010), p. 8.

<sup>417</sup> Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569 – 1999* (New Haven, Conn., London, 2003), pp. 65-68. The ‘*Kresy Wschodnie*’ consisted of the voivodeships of Wilna, Nowogrodek, Polesie and Volhynia as well as the eastern parts of the Bialystok region; see Bernhard Chiari, *Alltag hinter der Front. Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrußland 1941-1944* (Düsseldorf, 1998), p. 32.

<sup>418</sup> David R. Marples, ‘Die Sozialistische Sowjetrepublik Weißrußland (1917-1945)’, in D. Beyrau and D. Lindner (eds.), *Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrußlands* (Göttingen, 2001), p. 148; Chiari, *Alltag hinter der Front*, p. 29 and pp. 36-38. Other parts of the ‘*Kresy Wschodnie*’ further south became part of the Ukraine; see *ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>419</sup> Before 1939, about 400,000 Jews lived in Soviet Belorussia; see Mikola Iwanou, ‘Die jüdische Welt in Weißrußland vom Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zum Holocaust’, in D. Beyrau and D. Lindner (eds.), *Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrußlands* (Göttingen, 2001), p. 402, and Joshua Rubenstein and Ilya Altman (eds.), *The Unknown Black Book. The Holocaust in the German-occupied Soviet Territories* (Bloomington, IN 2008), p. 233. Bernhard Chiari estimates that 940,000 Jews lived in Belorussia on the eve of the German invasion in 1941; see Chiari, *Alltag hinter der Front*, p. 48. Rubenstein and Altman, on the other hand, assume that 1,075,000 Jews lived in the Soviet republic in 1941. Their higher estimate is based on the assumption that many Jews fled from the German-occupied to the Soviet-occupied part of Poland; see Rubenstein and Altman, *The Unknown Black Book*, p. 233.

suppressed throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The Soviet government, on the other hand, strongly supported Belarusian and Polish culture and language in the 1920s in order to prepare the assimilation of Polish regions. The freedom granted to these ethnicities was taken from them again in the 1930s when national minorities were persecuted throughout the Soviet Union. Belorussia was russified, a process that was extended to the former parts of eastern Poland after their annexation by the Soviet Union in 1939.<sup>420</sup> The Belorussian Soviet Republic, before and after its wartime enlargement, also became the scene of massacres and deportations that were part of the so-called 'Great Terror' and other radical initiatives of the Stalin administration. Measures in the late 1920s and early 1930s were predominantly directed against peasants in the course of the 'collectivisation', the brutal synchronisation of Soviet agriculture. Later campaigns until the German attack in 1941 were aimed at ethnic minorities, especially the Poles, who had formed the elites in the western part of the Belorussian Soviet Republic.<sup>421</sup> It is estimated that at least some 200,000 people belonging to different ethnicities and social levels were deported from Belorussia or executed between 1921 and 1939, and another 120,000 between 1939 and 1941, when the Soviet government consolidated its power in the newly annexed territories.<sup>422</sup>

In their ignorance of the political situation and the composition of the population in the Pripet Marshes, the orders given out by Himmler and Fegelein somewhat

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<sup>420</sup> Snyder, *Bloodlands*, p. 98; Bernhard Chiari, 'Deutsche Herrschaft in Weißrußland. Überlegungen zum lokalen und historischen Umfeld', in: W. Kaiser (ed.): *Täter im Vernichtungskrieg. Der Überfall auf die Sowjetunion und der Völkermord an den Juden* (Berlin, 2002), pp. 142-143; Chiari, *Alltag hinter der Front*, pp. 28-32.

<sup>421</sup> Bernhard Chiari, 'Die Kriegsgesellschaft Weißrußland im Zweiten Weltkrieg (1939-1944)', in D. Beyrau and D. Lindner (eds.), *Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrußlands* (Göttingen, 2001), p. 412.

<sup>422</sup> Mikola Iwanou, 'Terror, Deportation, Genozid: Demographische Veränderungen in Weißrußland im 20. Jahrhundert', in D. Beyrau and D. Lindner (eds.), *Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrußlands* (Göttingen, 2001), pp. 431-433. Snyder estimates that 'as a result of executions and death sentences the number of Poles in Soviet Belarus fell by more than sixty thousand during the Great Terror'; see Snyder, *Bloodlands*, p. 99.

resemble the inadequate preparation of the *Einsatzgruppen* for their task.<sup>423</sup> Upon entering Belorussia and the Pripet Marshes, Fegelein's soldiers found themselves in a region 'where people proverbially had difficulty ascertaining the nationality of the locals'.<sup>424</sup> Their preconceptions of potentially hostile or friendly ethnic groups, however, proved to be false: the local population was not hostile at all but rather 'pro-German', an impression that was also shared by the HSSPF and the *Wehrmacht* commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre, general Max von Schenckendorff.<sup>425</sup> The SS cavalymen were presented with gifts of bread and salt; at one occasion they were even greeted by a band that played for them. Franz Magill noted that there were differences in how members of different ethnicities reacted to the presence of the Germans: whereas Ukrainians and Belorussians were very accommodating, Russians and Poles were more reserved. All of these groups, however, welcomed the fact that 'the Bolsheviks had been expelled'.<sup>426</sup> Gustav Lombard described the local population in the same way. Both officers also noted the anti-Semitism of the locals.<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> The personnel of the *Einsatzgruppen* had to deal with numerous shortcomings of their preparation immediately before and after the beginning of their deployment in the Soviet Union. As the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA), the SS agency that organised the killing squads, only had fragmentary information about the Soviet security apparatus, lists of enemy officials were incomplete; they even missed Lavrentiy Beria, the head of the Soviet security and secret police (NKVD). There also were not enough interpreters so that captured Soviet documents could not be evaluated straightaway. See Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg, 2002), p. 554, and Krausnick and Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges*, pp. 170-172.

<sup>424</sup> Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations*, p. 66.

<sup>425</sup> Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, pp. 207.

<sup>426</sup> Bericht über den Verlauf der Pripjet-Aktion vom 27.7. – 11.8. 1941, 12 August, 1941, SS-Kavallerie-Regiment 2, Reitende Abteilung, in: *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 217.

<sup>427</sup> Abschlußbericht des Rgts. 1 vom 11.8. 1941, in: BArchL, Dokumenten-Sammlung, Ordner Verschiedenes 291-17, pp. 6-7. For the anti-Semitism of the locals, see *ibid.*, p. 6 and Bericht über den Verlauf der Pripjet-Aktion vom 27.7. – 11.8. 1941, 12 August, 1941, in: *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 220.

### The first mission in Belorussia (30 July – 11 August, 1941)

The cleansing operations commenced immediately once the SS cavalry units had set up their command centre at Liakhovichi. The squadrons conducted extensive searches of woodlands as well as settlements, a procedure which involved the mounted detachments as well as parts of the staff units and other squadrons. Non-mounted units of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment remained stationary for the most part, whereas the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment sent out everything apart from its staff.<sup>428</sup> In Liakhovichi, SS cavalrymen also executed communists who had been denounced by the local population.<sup>429</sup> At Turki, a small village nearby, soldiers of the mounted battery of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment arrested six members of the Communist party and shot them.<sup>430</sup> The subunits of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment were ordered to conduct reconnaissance in the forests south and southeast of Liakhovichi, between the town and the northern boundary of the ‘combing’ sector of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment. Partly in collaboration with local militias, they searched forests, villages and houses, and arrested Jews, communists and suspected partisans; most of those arrested were shot straightaway. Within a week, 114 people were executed, most of them ‘Bolsheviks’ and male Jews.<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> Situation reports of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment give evidence on the involvement of three independent platoons, the infantry support gun squadron, the mounted battery and all of its baggage trains, which were combined in a separate detachment; see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 28. – 30.7. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 2; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 31.7. – 3.8. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, *ibid.*; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 3. – 6.8. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, *ibid.* The reason for the difference in deployment between the two regiments is not given in the original documents. I assume that, as the staff of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment took on the function of a brigade staff from early August, 1941, the other squadrons and support units were needed to provide security for the staff and reserves for the units in the field so that not all of them could be used for combing operations.

<sup>429</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 27. – 31.7. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 1, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 1, p. 485.

<sup>430</sup> Vernehmung Otto Prade vom 30.10. 1962 in BArchL, B 162/5543, p. 31; see also Vernehmung Heinz Büttner vom 19.5. 1961, *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>431</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 28. – 30.7. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 2; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 31.7. – 3.8. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, *ibid.*; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 3. – 6.8. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, *ibid.*; radio message no. 5 from HSSPF Mitte to KDOS RFSS, 4 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4. As in many other reports which were to follow, the reasons for some of these executions appeared to be constructed along the lines mentioned above: twenty Jews, who had been shot by the motorcycle

Three significant conclusions can be drawn from these first operations. First, the SS cavalrymen only targeted Jewish men at the beginning of their mission. This is important because it was in accordance with the general approach of the German killing units in the Soviet Union at this time but changed just a few days later to an even more radical method, the murder of all Jews in the operational area. Thus, by differentiating between the modus operandi at the beginning of the mission and during its further course, it is possible to demonstrate the effect of the brutal orders and the initiative of the leaders in the SS cavalry. Second, non-mounted components of both regiments were involved in the murder operations as well – in the case of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, almost the entire available manpower apart from the staff was employed in missions similar to those of the horse squadrons. They compensated for their comparatively limited mobility, which ruled out deployment in more difficult terrain, by ‘cleansing’ areas they could reach on roads, primarily near their quarters. Third, regional inhabitants actively supported the occupants by turning in former representatives of the Soviet system and by forming local militias, which also engaged in searching operations. They also supplied the Germans with information on the whereabouts of Red Army stragglers. Deeper in the marshes, where German forces had not yet penetrated, the mounted squadrons soon encountered the same phenomena and also triggered other forms of collaboration themselves, most importantly the identification of Jews, and the appointment of mayors.

From the beginning of their mission, the SS cavalry was integrated into the structure of the occupation administration. The Higher SS and Police Leader Centre, Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, and the commander of the rear area of Army Group Centre, general Max von Schenckendorff, closely coordinated the operations of

platoon, were accused of ‘sympathising with the Red Army’ and ‘suspected of supporting the gangs [of partisans] in the woods’; a Red Army man, on the other hand, was said to have returned to his village in the course of the Soviet retreat but allegedly had continued to uphold the connection with the Soviet army; see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 28. – 30.7. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 2.

troops under their respective command. These two officers shared the same concept of the enemy, defined as ‘Jewish Bolshevism’, which they intended to destroy. The *Wehrmacht* general approved of the massacres which were committed by SS and police forces as he viewed them as a contribution to the safeguarding of his sector. He was also involved in the planning of their operations and developed an excellent relationship with von dem Bach-Zelewski.<sup>432</sup>

On 30 July, 1941, the cavalry detachments of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment began with the ‘combing’ of the marshes from starting points along a north-south line that ran from Kobrin in south-western Belorussia to Kovel’ in the north-western Ukraine.<sup>433</sup> The sectors they had been assigned were quite different in nature. Whereas the subunits of the 1<sup>st</sup> regiment were to traverse a largely inaccessible area with small hamlets, villages and only a few towns north of the Pripet river, subunits of the 2<sup>nd</sup> regiment received orders to ‘pacify’ the more densely populated region south of it, which also included some market towns and the regional centre of Pinsk.<sup>434</sup> What the designated ‘combing’ areas of the two regiments had in common was their very mixed ethnic composition. The dominating groups were Poles and Ukrainians; Russians, Lithuanians and others were only minorities. Jews made up a strong contingent, especially in the larger villages and towns; at some places, they even constituted the majority of the population.<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, pp. 174-176 and pp. 474-496. With few exceptions, commanders of the *Wehrmacht*, SS and police generally cooperated very closely during the first months of the German war against the Soviet Union. This happened not only at command level, but also locally, for example between police units and *Feldkommandanturen* or *Ortskommandanturen*. Both sides profited from a division of labour: the army could delegate executions to SS and police units, which in turn could count on logistical and military support from the *Wehrmacht*. See Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht*, pp. 153-158.

<sup>433</sup> Regimentsbefehl Nr. 42, 27 July, 1941, in: BArchL, Dokumenten-Sammlung, Ordner Verschiedenes 291-17, pp. 2-3. Each squadron was allocated a front that was about 6 miles wide; see Abschlußbericht der Zentralen Stelle vom 20.8. 1963, p. 368. See also *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, pp. 45-46 and Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., p. 1752.

<sup>434</sup> Cüppers, ‘Vorreiter der Shoah’, p. 93.

<sup>435</sup> Bericht über den Verlauf der Pripjet-Aktion vom 27.7. – 11.8. 1941, 12 August, 1941, quoted in *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 217.

For operations in the swamps, a reporting scheme was given out by the regimental commanders: on a daily basis, the squadrons were to report their position, the numbers of prisoners, the numbers of 'looters' who had been shot, and their losses of weapons, horses, and men. Within this scheme, the third point should soon become infamous as 'looters' stood for the number of Jews killed by the SS cavalrymen.<sup>436</sup> The regimental staffs compiled these reports, added information on the general status of their units and passed on detailed situation reports to the *Kommandostab*. These two types of accounts are the main sources which give evidence about the missions of the SS cavalry in the Pripet Marshes.

While the motorised and mounted detachments had begun to operate, two important decisions were made regarding the new structure of the SS cavalry and the incorporation of the unit in mass killings in the Soviet Union. On 31 July, Heinrich Himmler came to Baranovichi and met with von dem Bach-Zelewski to discuss the 'pacification' mission of the mounted SS units. He also ordered the amalgamation of the two cavalry regiments, which now formed a brigade.<sup>437</sup> Thus, the structure the two regiments had assumed for the march into Belorussia was maintained and became the new institutional framework of the SS cavalry. It was, however, only officially acknowledged by the *SS-Führungshauptamt* with effect from 1 September, 1941, a step which lagged behind operational practice by about four weeks.<sup>438</sup> Whilst the regiments were deployed as a brigade in the second half of 1941, new subunits such as the bicycle reconnaissance detachment were formed as well, a development that began during the second mission in the Pripet Marshes.

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<sup>436</sup> Funkspruch des Stabs des SS-Kav.Rgts. 2 an Reitende Abteilung, 30 July, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/36.

<sup>437</sup> Witte, *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers*, p. 189.

<sup>438</sup> Verfügung des SS-Führungshauptamts über die Umgliederung der SS-Kav.Regimenter 1 und 2 vom 6.9. 1941, in: BArchB, NS 19/3487, fiche 19-20. This discrepancy was also noticed by the investigators in the 1960s. They did not find any explanation for this but stressed that the important restructuring of the brigade leadership under Fegelein's command had been completed when the official acknowledgement was issued; see Abschlußbericht der ZStI vom 20.8. 1963, pp. 359-361.

By means of an order which can be considered as the ‘founding document’ of the SS Cavalry Brigade, Hermann Fegelein appointed several brigade staff officers and made further administrative decisions concerning the cooperation of the two regiments with effect from 28 July, 1941. In his usual haughty manner, he expressed his aspiration that the brigade, as the first major cavalry formation of the *Waffen-SS*, might prove itself in battle and thus earn a reputation that would be known in the entire German army. This could only be done by showing unfaltering rigour and overcoming any weakness of character; according to Fegelein, Himmler would not tolerate flaws any longer and ‘decide cold-bloodedly’ about any officer who broke rank.<sup>439</sup>

Himmler’s visit in Baranovichi marks a turning point for the SS cavalry, not only because of the fusion of the two regiments. More importantly, he now changed the role of the unit from that of a security force to that of an ideological weapon. According to the communication between the regiments, the HSSPF Centre and the *Kommandostab*, about one thousand male Jews, communists and soldiers of the Red Army had been shot in the first few days of the new mission.<sup>440</sup> The cavalrymen had not even come across major Jewish communities yet, but nevertheless this policy was far from the ‘systematic combing of the marshes’ the *Reichsführer* had in mind. Thus, Himmler sent a telegram to Fegelein on 1 August in which he considered the number of civilians who had been killed so far as ‘too insignificant’. He stated that it was ‘necessary to act radically’ and that ‘the detachment commanders display too

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<sup>439</sup> Schreiben an die Kommandeure und Chefs der SS-Kav.Brigade, 1 August, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/20.

<sup>440</sup> Files of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment do not contain information on Jews who fell victim to its squadrons in the last days of July. A report of the HSSPF states that 788 people had been shot by the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment until 2 August; see situation report of the HSSPF Centre, 2 August, 1941, quoted in Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg, 1999), p. 559. Before the order of 1 August, members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment shot 20 male Jews; see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 28. – 30.7. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 2. In the four days after that, 173 people were killed; see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 31.7. – 3.8. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 2.

much leniency in carrying out their operations'. The number of people shot, he demanded, was to be reported to him daily.<sup>441</sup>

Not only were more potential enemies to be eliminated; Himmler also aimed at significantly increasing the scope of the killings by including Jewish women and children, which meant that the SS Cavalry Brigade was to target entire Jewish communities. This directive came in the form of a clarification of regimental order no. 42. It has been preserved in two different forms: the statement of a former messenger of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment and a radio message received by the mounted detachment of the same unit. According to the testimony, Himmler ordered to shoot all male Jews from the age of fourteen in the 'combing areas'. Women and children were to be driven into the swamps and drowned. The Jews were to be considered as the reservoir of the partisans and as their supporters. Executions were to be conducted on instructions of local branches of the security service of the SS. In the town of Pinsk, executions were to be carried out by the first and the fourth squadron of the regiment, which were to be dispatched at once. The operation was to start immediately and was to be reported on a regular basis.<sup>442</sup> The radio protocol, on the other hand, is very plain; it reads: 'Explicit order from the R[eichs]F[ührer-]SS: All Jews must be shot, drive Jewish women into the swamps'.<sup>443</sup>

The inclusion of women and children was an important amendment to the instructions the SS cavalry had received so far. Himmler's order of 1 August was the second step of the 'political pacification' of the Polesie region but had consequences

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<sup>441</sup> Radio message no. 37 from the commander of the SS Cavalry Brigade to the mounted detachments, quoted in: *Soviet Government Statements on Nazi Atrocities* (London, 1946), p. 46. This work does not give a date for the telegram. Cüppers dates it 1 August, 1941, by viewing it in the context of the Himmler order given out on August 1; he views the order as a follow-up of the message. See Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 142-143 and p. 153. Gerlach assumes that this telegram was sent on 2 August, 1941; see Gerlach, *Morde*, p. 559.

<sup>442</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 48. According to the findings in the Magill case, this order reached the mounted detachment either on 2 August, 1941, or the following day.

<sup>443</sup> Radio message, KavRgt. 2 an Reitende Abteilung, 1 August, 1941 (10 a.m.), in: BAArchF, RS 3-8/36.

that reached far beyond this particular area. Not only did the policy of the SS cavalry units become even more radical: soon, other killing squads of the SS and police in the occupied Eastern territories, who until now had followed orders like the one given out by the HSSPF on 11 July and only had executed male Jews of a certain age, started to abide by the same approach. By the end of September 1941, all of Himmler's murder units had gone over to killing Jews regardless of their gender and age; thus, Fegelein's men had become *'Wegbereiter der Shoah'*, as Martin Cüppers has put it, the precursors to the total annihilation of all Jews in Europe.<sup>444</sup>

In both regiments of the brigade, the commanders passed the instruction on to the mounted detachments which organised the deployment of individual units. Squadron leaders were informed about the Himmler order by a courier in most cases; some received it per radio message. They in turn briefed their subordinates and then sent them out to execute the order.<sup>445</sup> But despite the fact that all SS cavalrymen received the same instructions, documents from the two regiments and postwar testimonies prove that Himmler's directive was carried out in different ways by the two regiments of the brigade. *Sturmbannführer* Gustav Lombard, the commander of the

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<sup>444</sup> For a detailed delineation of the inclusion of Jewish women and children in the killings, see Matthäus in Browning, *Die Entfesselung der 'Endlösung'*, pp. 411-427. In his work on the order police, Wolfgang Curilla lists executions of women and children which were carried out by police units and *Einsatzgruppen* before 1 August, 1941; see Curilla, *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei und der Holocaust im Baltikum und in Weißrußland 1941 – 1944*, pp. 89-95. Most of these incidents did not result in the destruction of entire Jewish communities, apart from killings perpetrated by Reserve Police Battalion 45 in the Ukraine in July, 1941, and *Einsatzkommando 2* in Latvia, also in July, 1941. In both places, the order was given for one particular town; see *ibid.*, p. 90 and p. 92. In the case of Police Battalion 105, which also operated in Latvia, the exact date for a killing order regarding all Jews in one town could not be ascertained; see *ibid.*, pp. 94-95. Therefore, the SS cavalrymen were the first to receive orders for the indiscriminate killing of all Jews they encountered in their operational area.

<sup>445</sup> Within the 1st Regiment, the leader of the fourth squadron, *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Gadischke passed the order on. He acted as a messenger between the mounted detachment and the other squadrons; see *Abschlußbericht der ZStI vom 20.8. 1963*, p. 366, and *Vernehmung von Georg Vieth vom 13.9. 1962*, in: BArchL, B 162/5541, p. g10. Vieth, who at this time led the second platoon in the regiment's second squadron, also confirmed the issue of the order by the squadron commanders who told their platoon and squad leaders to shoot all Jews they encountered; see *ibid.*, p. g11. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, the order was transmitted per messenger from the commander to the mounted detachment, whose commander informed the subordinate squadrons; see *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen. Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, pp. 46-49. The courier, a non-commissioned officer from the regimental staff, served the document directly to Magill in written form in a closed envelope; see *Zwischenbericht der Sonderkommission Z*, p. 576.

mounted detachment of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, slightly reworded the order by demanding from his men: ‘No male Jew stays alive, no residual family in the villages’.<sup>446</sup> Following his instructions, all Jews encountered by Lombard’s men were killed immediately in mass shootings, a method that was cynically termed *Entjudung* (dejewification) by their commander. Lombard had borrowed this neologism from the Nazi economy, which used it for the exclusion of Jews from business since 1933; according to Martin Cüppers, he was the first person ever to use the word in the context of physical destruction.<sup>447</sup> The principle of *Entjudung* resulted in the murder of the entire Jewish population in an area of more than 4,000 square kilometres within two weeks.<sup>448</sup>

As they failed to actually ‘drive Jewish women into the swamps’, the men under Lombard’s command changed their killing method. A former soldier stated that when the women did not want to move on and held up their children to keep them from drowning, the soldiers ruthlessly machine-gunned those wading in the water.<sup>449</sup> After this incident, women and children were shot at the same killing sites as the men. The troopers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment under the command of *Sturmbannführer* Franz Magill, on the other hand, gave up the idea of killing all Jewish women and children very quickly:

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<sup>446</sup> Abteilungsbefehl Nr. 28, Kommandeur Reitende Abteilung, 1 August, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/441.

<sup>447</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 143-144, and Cüppers, ‘Vorreiter der Shoah’, pp. 90-92.

<sup>448</sup> Cüppers, ‘Vorreiter der Shoah’, p. 96.

<sup>449</sup> Vernehmung von Klaas Kruizenga vom 9.4. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j68. According to the statement of a former SS cavalryman, the fourth squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment shot 800 Jews who refused to be driven into the swamps; the trooper did not give any more details. See Müller-Tupath, *Becher*, p. 82. Another veteran stated that cavalry soldiers tried to drive Jews into a lake, which failed as the victims stopped walking further into the water. Allegedly Hermann Fegelein, who was present at the scene, then cancelled the mission and let the Jews go. See *ibid.*, p. 107. This view is highly doubtful and not backed up by any other statement or evidence. Also, Müller-Tupath did not state the names of the two questioned soldiers or give any other details from their testimony. The first statement was taken from the indictment in the case against Magill and others, whereas the second statement was part of the questioning of a former SS cavalryman in the Lombard trial. See also Birn, ‘Zweierlei Wirklichkeit’, p. 278; Birn has noted that even after the war witnesses of these atrocities were very reluctant to give any details about them.

Jewish looters [Jewish males] were shot. Only a few craftsmen who were working in repair shops of the *Wehrmacht* were left behind. To drive women and children into the swamps did not have the desired effect as the swamps were not deep enough [for them] to sink. In a depth of 1 metre there was solid ground (possibly sand) in most cases so that sinking [bodies] was not possible.<sup>450</sup>

In the following weeks, mostly male Jews were executed by members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment. In some cases, women and children were included in the massacres as well: at Adryšyn, a village that was not close to any waters or swamps, the troopers took their order literally and drowned their victims in a pond.<sup>451</sup> This, however, was an exception. Throughout the first mission in the Pripet Marshes, Magill followed a different strategy than Lombard, which he justified with the unsuccessful attempt of driving people into the swamps. It was not until the second mission that the men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment began to kill Jewish women and children indiscriminately.<sup>452</sup>

The squadrons always proceeded by the same method: individual platoons were deployed to a particular town or village. After arriving, they surrounded the settlement and the leader of the unit ordered the mayor to point out the Jewish inhabitants to his men, a procedure that was open to arbitrariness. Groups of two or three SS soldiers then went from house to house and arrested the Jews regardless of gender or age. They were shot straightaway or on the next day in an open field outside the village. In some cases the bodies were left where they fell; sometimes the cavalrymen let the locals dig graves or trenches before the shootings, in which the victims were buried afterwards. Depending on the size of the Jewish community,

<sup>450</sup> Bericht über den Verlauf der Pripjet-Aktion vom 27.7. – 11.8. 1941, 12 August, 1941, quoted in Baade, *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, pp. 219-220. Jewish saddlers who worked for the SS Cavalry were exempt from the killing for the time being.

<sup>451</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 153.

<sup>452</sup> Cüppers, 'Vorreiter der Shoah', pp. 93-96; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 164-165 and pp. 196-197.

the number of victims in most cases ranged from about 20 to 200.<sup>453</sup> German patrol commanders also enquired about other potentially hostile elements such as communists or partisans, who were sought out, questioned and then either set free again or shot; like the search for Jews, this happened at the discretion of informers and German soldiers. At places where no militia had been set up yet, this was done immediately.<sup>454</sup> Collaborators not only helped to identify Jews. Local militiamen also rounded them up, guarded them on the march to the execution sites, and took part in the killings.<sup>455</sup>

Only a comparatively small number of troopers belonged to the vanguard and tried to track down enemy forces consisting of regular Soviet troops. For the bulk of the manpower of the SS Cavalry Brigade, the nature of their mission was very different. Their perspective was that of a brutal ideological campaign in which the boundary between civilians and combatants was obliterated as virtually everybody they encountered could be an enemy of one kind or another. There were so many killing missions that they became indistinguishable; when questioned about particular incidents after the war, many former soldiers could only state that the scene of the murder had been a village in the swamps.<sup>456</sup> The rank and file clearly understood that they were not actually ‘pacifying’ the marshes but primarily targeted the Jews who lived there. Their superiors, in accordance with the orders they had received from Himmler and Fegelein, instructed them to consider Jews as suspected of supporting the partisans and to treat them accordingly, a fate from which women and children

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<sup>453</sup> Bericht über den Verlauf der Pripjet-Aktion vom 27.7. – 11.8. 1941, 12 August, 1941, quoted in Baade, *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 219; Abschlußbericht der ZStI vom 20.8. 1963, p. 369. The activity reports of the 2<sup>nd</sup> regiment do not contain detailed information on the number of Jews who were shot in the first days of the mission in the swamps; they only state that “pacification was carried out in the way it had been ordered”. See also Birn, ‘Zweierlei Wirklichkeit’, p. 278.

<sup>454</sup> Bericht über den Verlauf der Pripjet-Aktion vom 27.7. – 11.8. 1941, 12 August, 1941, quoted in Baade, *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 219.

<sup>455</sup> Birn, ‘Zweierlei Wirklichkeit’, p. 278; Bericht über den Verlauf der Pripjet-Aktion vom 27.7. – 11.8. 1941, 12 August, 1941, quoted in Baade, *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 220. In his report, Magill did not elaborate on the participation of locals in the shootings, i.e. in how many killings they had assisted or if they had played a leading role in them or not.

<sup>456</sup> Abschlußbericht der ZStI vom 20.8. 1963, p. 368.

were not excluded.<sup>457</sup> It was, however, obvious for officers and soldiers alike that Jews did not pose a danger as they were unarmed and not hostile towards the Germans.<sup>458</sup> A former trooper spoke about this discrepancy in his post-war questioning, which can be viewed as a summary of the entire mission of the SS Cavalry Brigade in the Pripet Marshes in the words of an ‘ordinary man’:

They were shot because they were Jews. There cannot have been any other reason from my point of view. It is out of the question that they supported the partisans or were partisans themselves. I don’t know anything about Jews resisting the German troops at all. According to my observations they always were friendly and loyal. And most of them were women and children down to the smallest baby. With them, too, there were no exceptions made [and they all were killed].<sup>459</sup>

Moreover, the same man also said that not even orders were needed to carry out the killings: wherever the SS riders appeared, Jews were simply rounded up and shot, either straightaway or in the following days.<sup>460</sup> This behaviour points at a very high level of initiative, a characteristic of the subalterns in the SS cavalry.

Executions were not only carried out during village searches and after denunciations. When the mounted detachments reached towns with a large Jewish share of the population, they destroyed entire Jewish communities in massacres which cost thousands of lives. The SS cavalrymen began implementing this radical policy before the *Einsatzgruppen* and police units; it was this behaviour which determined their particular role in the destruction of the Jews in Belorussia in the

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<sup>457</sup> Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., pp. 1747-1749 and pp. 1755-1756.

<sup>458</sup> For the reaction of the men, see Birn, ‘Zweierlei Wirklichkeit’, p. 277. As far as the officers were concerned, it has been proven that they were fully aware of the criminal nature of the orders but nevertheless passed them on and executed them; see *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>459</sup> Vernehmung von Kurt Ziegler vom 8.7. 1964, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, p. c85.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., pp. c77-78.

summer of 1941. As far as the organisation and course of the executions are concerned, it can be stated that they did not differ from the methods used by other killing squads.<sup>461</sup> The first such mission was carried out by members of Lombard's staff and the second squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment in the town of Khomsk on 2 August, 1941. This was a typical *shtetl*: the majority of the inhabitants were Jewish. The SS troopers rounded up about 2,000 Jewish men, women, and children, and detained them in a church over night. Early on the next morning, the prisoners were marched out of town to a field where pits had been prepared. There, they were shot by SS soldiers with machineguns, a massacre that completely wiped out the local Jewish community.<sup>462</sup>

After this first killing, the SS cavalry developed a scheme which facilitated the capture of their victims. When the first squadron reached Motol', a village some twenty miles east of Khomsk, the SS troopers first summoned all male Jews between the ages of fifteen and sixty to the market square. Then they went from house to house and identified the remaining Jews with the help of Belarusian Christians. About 800 Jewish boys and men were arrested and held on the square while some 2200 women and children were driven into a synagogue and a nearby school. The Jewish males were executed and buried outside Motol' in the afternoon of 3 August; the remaining Jews suffered the same fate a day later.<sup>463</sup>

At Telekhany, another *shtetl* to the northeast, the first squadron proceeded in the same way on 5 August: first, Jewish men were ordered to assemble at a community centre; then, the SS cavalrymen sought out women and children by clearing houses.

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<sup>461</sup> Birn, 'Zweierlei Wirklichkeit', p. 277.

<sup>462</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 144; Vernehmung von Otto Krumwiede vom 14.3. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5541, pp. 43-45; see also Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., p. 1765.

<sup>463</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 144-147; see also the 'yizkor book' on Motol' by A.L. Polick, (ed.), *The Destruction of Motele*. Translation of *Hurban Motele* (Jerusalem, 1956), translated by Edward Ehrlich, <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/motol/motol.html> (accessed on 22 March, 2011), ch. 6-9. According to the situation report of the 1st Regiment of 4 August, 1941, 3000 people had been shot until that date by the mounted detachments; see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 31.7. – 3.8. 1941, 4 August, 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 1, in: VUA, KDOS RFSS, box 24, file 1.

All of their victims were shot at prepared graves near Telekhany, which claimed about 2,000 lives.<sup>464</sup> At Svyataya Volya and other places near Telekhany, more than 1,000 Jews were murdered on 6 and 7 August by all four squadrons of the mounted detachment.<sup>465</sup> On their way eastward, the unit soon reached the town of Gantsevichi not far from the regimental headquarters. There, all local Jews were told to gather at on a particular road with hand luggage. After having been deceived thus, men and women were separated and led away. They had to leave their belongings and were kept under guard over night. Throughout the next morning, 2,500 men, women and children were shot. This massacre on 11 August, 1941, marked the end of the unit's first mission in the Pripet Marshes.<sup>466</sup>

For the mounted detachment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, the 'pacification' of the marshland began rather slowly. Although the area traversed by its squadrons was more densely populated, they hardly encountered any Jews in the first four days, a fact that alarmed *SS-Standartenführer* Heimo Hierthes, the commander of the regiment: in a radio message sent on 3 August, 1941, he asked 'why no numbers for figure no. 3 were reported', a camouflaged request for more killings that referred to the reporting scheme of the brigade.<sup>467</sup> At this time, the detachment also received the Himmler order of 1 August. The men proceeded in a similar manner as their comrades of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment further north: when they reached the town of Ivanovo, a *shtetl* some 25 miles west of Pinsk, the SS troopers of the second squadron rounded up Jewish men aged 16 and above with the help of local collaborators. In the afternoon, at least 500 Jewish men were shot outside Ivanovo. Shortly afterwards, at least 100 more Jewish men were executed by the second squadron in

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<sup>464</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 148-149.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>466</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 150.

<sup>467</sup> Radio message from the 2<sup>nd</sup> regiment to the mounted detachment, 3 August, 1941, 10.57 a.m., in: BArchF, RS 3-8/36.

the nearby villages of Borobice and Lahišyn.<sup>468</sup>

On their march eastward, the staff of the mounted detachment as well as the first and fourth squadrons soon approached Pinsk, a regional centre with a Jewish community of about 26,000 people, or about 70% of the population.<sup>469</sup> The town had been occupied by German forces on 4 July, 1941, and an *Ortskommandantur* of the *Wehrmacht* had been established. Beside the military administration, there was also a branch of the Lublin Security Police and the Security Service based in Pinsk, which later became part of *Einsatzgruppe z.b.V.* It comprised a small detail of SD men under the command of Hermann Worthoff and had the task of supporting *Einsatzgruppe B* in coordinating killing operations in the Pinsk area.<sup>470</sup> The German authorities also had a Polish police force at their disposal. This unit had been trained by the occupants immediately after their arrival and assisted them in searching for communists and former Soviet officials. The Poles, like the Germans, also looted Jewish property and humiliated as well as denounced their Jewish neighbours.<sup>471</sup> On 30 July, 1941, the *Ortskommandantur* ordered the establishment of a Jewish agency, the so-called *Judenrat*, which was to be elected by local Jews and ‘to mediate between the commander and the Jewish population; and to carry out the former’s orders’. The instructions given by the *Judenrat*, on the other hand, were to be obeyed by all local Jews.<sup>472</sup>

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<sup>468</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 154.

<sup>469</sup> Tikva Fatal-Knaani, ‘The Jews of Pinsk, 1939-1943, Through the Prism of New Documentation’, *Yad Vashem Studies* 29 (2001), pp. 2-3. The figures given for the Jewish share of the population of Pinsk in July, 1941 vary from 20,000 to more than 30,000 with most authors giving an estimate of circa 30,000; as she has extensively used archival sources from Pinsk, I am going to use Fatal-Knaani’s estimate. For other figures see *ibid.*, p. 3; see also Büchler, ‘Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS’, p. 16, and Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 155.

<sup>470</sup> Fatal-Knaani, ‘The Jews of Pinsk’, p. 11; Büchler, ‘Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS’, p. 13; for the *Einsatzgruppe z.b.V.*, see also Krausnick and Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges*, pp. 180-181.

<sup>471</sup> Fatal-Knaani, ‘The Jews of Pinsk’, pp. 11-12; see also the ‘yizkor book’ on Pinsk by Rabinowitsch, W.Z. (ed.), *Pinsk Historical Volume: History of the Jews of Pinsk, 1506-1941 (Volume 1)*, [http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinsk1/Pine12\\_102.html#P1-Chap1](http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinsk1/Pine12_102.html#P1-Chap1) (accessed on 25 March, 2011), ch. 1.

<sup>472</sup> Fatal-Knaani, ‘The Jews of Pinsk’, p. 12. In her article, Fatal-Knaani also quotes the order from the *Ortskommandantur* to the mayor of Pinsk in full (see *ibid.*, p. 36); the original can be found in the *Yad*

Initiated by Franz Magill, who carried out the direct order of the *Reichsführer*, all of these institutions cooperated with the SS Cavalry in order to exterminate a significant part of the Jews of Pinsk in a concerted action in early August, 1941. First, the mounted detachment liaised with the German authorities: contact with the military administration was established and Magill sent the commander of the first squadron, *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Stefan Charwat, to Pinsk to pass on the Himmler order to the SD branch and to organise the operation with Worthoff. The SD commander expressed his concern that it would not be possible to drive women and children into the swamps.<sup>473</sup> After this meeting, which took place on 5 August, the *Judenrat* was ordered to assemble the Jewish men of Pinsk on the following day. For this purpose, placards were put up all over town reading that all male Jews between the ages of 16 and 60 were to gather at the freight railway station for a work assignment of three days. Also, at least 200 Jewish men were taken hostage during the night and held at the SD headquarters, a former NKVD building, where many of them were abused. The Germans threatened to kill them if the *Judenrat* did not manage to assemble the male Jews of Pinsk as demanded.<sup>474</sup>

Early on 6 August, 1941, the SS cavalrymen marched out to Pinsk from their quarters on a collective farm near the town. In order to provide the necessary manpower to support the SD unit in carrying out the killings, the entire first squadron was to be used, including most members of the baggage trains. Just like at Ivanovo a few days before, the Germans succeeded in deceiving the majority of the

Vashem Archives, M-41/945.

<sup>473</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 31.7. – 3.8. 1941, 4 August, 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 2; Büchler, 'Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS', p. 16; Zwischenbericht der Sonderkommission Z, p. 576.

<sup>474</sup> See [http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinsk1/Pine12\\_102.html#P1-Chap1](http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinsk1/Pine12_102.html#P1-Chap1) (accessed on 25 March, 2011), ch. 1; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 155; Büchler, Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS, p. 16. The beginning of the actual killings is given as 5 August in the verdict against Magill and his officers; this date was also used by the Jewish survivors in the delineation of the events in Pinsk. As Cüppers has dated the beginning of the executions to 6 August, based on the thorough evaluation of preserved radio messages, I am using his age determination. See also *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, pp. 49-50.

Jewish population and many men had come to the assembly point voluntarily. With the help of local militiamen, the SS troopers rounded up more Jews from the town, to which were added the hostages who had been arrested the day before. Thus, several thousand boys and men were assembled at the train station, where they were searched by SD men and had their valuables taken from them. More than 2,000 Jews were then driven out of town in a marching column; along the way, some of them managed to escape. The others carried on until they reached an open field where several mass graves had been prepared by collaborators. A chain of SS guards surrounded them and the Jews were told to kneel down or lie on the ground. In groups, they were led to the pits where they were shot in the neck by the troopers.<sup>475</sup> Upon seeing this, some of those who were waiting panicked, broke through the cordon and ran away across the field, where most of them were shot.<sup>476</sup> Preserved radio messages from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment indicate that 2,461 people were killed by midday. At some point on this day, the HSSPF Centre, Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, paid a visit to the execution site after having landed nearby with his plane. He approved of the progress of the killings and commended Charwat for his conduct and that of his men.<sup>477</sup> Throughout the day, the SS drove Jews to the killing fields and the mounted detachment reported another 2,300 victims at 6 pm.<sup>478</sup> When dusk was falling and there were still Jews waiting for their execution, Charwat ordered his men to shoot them with machineguns.<sup>479</sup> A survivor who had managed to escape from the murder site later stated that by 9 pm the killing had ended; thus, it can be

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<sup>475</sup> [http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinsk1/Pine12\\_102.html#P1-Chap1](http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinsk1/Pine12_102.html#P1-Chap1) (accessed on 29 March, 2011), ch. 1; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 155-158; *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 50.

<sup>476</sup> [http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinsk1/Pine12\\_102.html#P1-Chap1](http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinsk1/Pine12_102.html#P1-Chap1) (accessed on 29 March, 2011), ch. 1; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 157-158.

<sup>477</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 53; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 157-158.

<sup>478</sup> Radio message no. 56 from the mounted detachment to the 2<sup>nd</sup> regiment, 6 August, 1941, 1.21 pm, in: BArchF, RS 4/936. The message itself mentions 2,461 victims but a note on the margin reads, '2300 were reported at 1800'.

<sup>479</sup> Vernehmung Hugo Link, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1643.

assumed that the number of victims on August 6 was far higher than the 4,761 who were officially registered.<sup>480</sup>

The mass murder at Pinsk continued for two more days. During the night after the first execution, about 150 Jewish men were arrested in their houses and taken to the pits as a work detail. After burying some of those who had been shot throughout the day, they were killed, too. Early the next morning, four Jews were brought to the quarters of the first squadron by local militiamen and executed near the farm.<sup>481</sup> At the same time, a massive searching mission which included the entire town was conducted by the first squadron and the fourth squadron, which had arrived in Pinsk the day before. As the town was divided in half by a main street, each squadron was assigned one of the two sectors. Again, the SS troopers were assisted by the Polish militia in searching houses for Jewish men, who were told they were to join a labour detail. This time, children from the age of six and elderly men over sixty were rounded up as well. The Jews were killed at two different execution sites outside Pinsk. At least 2,450 people fell victim to the SS cavalry on the second day.<sup>482</sup>

Court files from the case against Franz Magill and four of his subalterns provide many details of the events at Pinsk. They bear witness to the brutality of the mass shootings, show how the victims met their death and how the perpetrators themselves were affected. At the execution site, which must have resembled the scenes of other mass killings in the summer and autumn of 1941 such as Baby Yar or

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<sup>480</sup> [http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinsk1/Pine12\\_102.html#P1-Chap1](http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinsk1/Pine12_102.html#P1-Chap1) (accessed on 29 March, 2011), ch. 1.

<sup>481</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 51; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 159.

<sup>482</sup> Radio message no. 56 from the mounted detachment to the 2<sup>nd</sup> regiment, 6 August, 1941, 1.21 pm, in: BArchF, RS 4/936. *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, pp. 52-53. It is possible that up to 3,600 people were killed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment on 7 August, 1941, as a radio message from the HSSPF Centre indicates; see situation report of the HSSPF Centre, 7 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4. For the calculation of victims of the SS cavalry, see below; the HSSPF Centre generally assumed numbers of killings that were too low, which was due to the fact that the cavalry officers lost count of their victims themselves. Also, he only spoke of the SS cavalry as a whole in his reports, which makes it harder to distinguish the particular subunits involved in the crimes. Thus, the number of 3,600 victims may or may not refer to killings at Pinsk.

Kamenets-Podolsk, thousands of Jews waited, sometimes for hours, and were forced to watch as others were murdered. Most of them stayed calm, others burst into tears or wailed loudly. A few prayed or sang religious songs. Apart from those who had managed to run away and very few who had fallen into the pits either unhurt or just wounded, no one survived.<sup>483</sup>

Some former SS troopers later testified openly that the bloodshed at Pinsk put a great strain on them and they tried to get away from it or only carried it out with great reluctance. The method they were ordered to apply proved to be very bloody: the Jews, including the children, were either shot in groups with machineguns or individually with carbines.<sup>484</sup> From a distance of only five to six metres, each rifleman had to shoot one victim at a time. As the soldiers were aiming for the neck, some of them were splattered with blood and pieces of brain. A few men were sick and could not continue the executions; at least two troopers were then sent away by an officer who called them cowards.<sup>485</sup> One man asked his platoon leader not to assign him to the firing squad; he was then ordered to hold the officer's horse during the execution.<sup>486</sup> After the returning to their quarters on that day, the soldiers were given alcohol, which in all likelihood was meant to drown out their memories of what they had just done.<sup>487</sup>

But not all of the SS cavalymen at Pinsk resented what they had to do, not least because they were given an opportunity to loot the belongings of the Jews. Erich Mirek, a *Wehrmacht* soldier and communist, witnessed how the soldiers treated their

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<sup>483</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 51; Birn, 'Zweierlei Wirklichkeit', p. 277.

<sup>484</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, pp. 50-51 and p. 53. See also Vernehmung Helmut Fenslaf, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. j1647-1648.

<sup>485</sup> Vernehmung Max Mahn, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1647; Vernehmung Walter Reichert, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1650.

<sup>486</sup> Vernehmung Gerhard Blum, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1648.

<sup>487</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 160. Christopher Browning has noticed the same with Reserve Police Battalion 101; see Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. 69. To the policemen, alcohol was also given out before and during some executions; see *ibid.*, p. 61 and p. 80. Some of the men even turned into alcoholics as they could not carry out executions in a sober state; see *ibid.*, p. 82.

victims before the killings on the second day:

The SS bandits took off their steel helmets, walked through the rows [of Jews] and forced the victims to put their valuables into the helmets. Rings, gold, even dentures had to be handed over. The men were completely helpless. Those who resisted were brutally beaten up immediately. [...] The SS officers sent for some of the best shoemakers and ordered them to make a pair of boots to measure over night. On the next morning, the SS bandits put on the boots and drove the craftsmen to the execution.<sup>488</sup>

Mirek also noticed the general attitude of the cavalry soldiers, an impression which greatly differs from the possibly self-exculpatory view expressed by many veterans after the war. In his opinion, ‘the SS men were all quite young, very arrogant and apparently proud of their atrocities’.<sup>489</sup>

On the third day, the executions proceeded on a more limited scale than before. From the SS radio protocols, it becomes clear that the original intention of Magill and Hierthes, his superior, was to continue the executions, which would have meant certain death for the remaining Jews in Pinsk.<sup>490</sup> But as it was not possible to transport the victims to the killing fields by truck, the regimental commander

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<sup>488</sup> Erich Mirek, Enthüllung faschistischer Grausamkeiten, in *In den Wäldern Belorußlands: Erinnerungen sowjetischer Partisanen u. deutscher Antifaschisten* (Berlin, 1977), p. 175. Mirek had been imprisoned and tortured by the *Gestapo* in Germany in November, 1933. During the war, he served with the 293<sup>rd</sup> infantry division of the *Wehrmacht*, which was based at Pinsk for some time during the summer of 1941. Mirek managed to save about twenty skilled Jewish workers by claiming that they were urgently needed for the *Wehrmacht*; he also passed on photographs and other information on the mass killings at Pinsk to the German military resistance. See *ibid.*, pp. 172-176.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>490</sup> Magill himself had estimated that it would take several days to complete his task at Pinsk; see radio message no. 57 from the mounted detachment to the 2<sup>nd</sup> regiment, 6 August, 1941, 1.21 pm, in: BArchF, RS 4/936. On 8 August, the mounted detachment received the order to continue its task, even if several days were necessary for this; see radio message from the 2<sup>nd</sup> regiment to the mounted detachment, 8 August, 1941, 11.10 am, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/36. See also *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, pp. 53-54.

changed his mind: apparently, Hierthes was afraid of being unable to keep up with the other SS cavalry units and aborted the massacre, a tactical decision which for the moment spared the lives of Jewish women and many children. In the evening, the mounted detachment received the order to resume its advance towards the line it had been given as a target a week earlier.<sup>491</sup> To this day, it remains uncertain how many people were murdered by the SS cavalry and their helpers in Pinsk. It has to be assumed that at least 7-8,000, if not more than 9,000 Jewish men, male youths and children were executed there between 6 and 8 August, 1941.<sup>492</sup> Those who were killed represented a large part of the male Jewish inhabitants; they came from all parts of society and were often well educated. Only a few doctors and some skilled workers, who were employed in workshops of the *Wehrmacht*, had been spared.<sup>493</sup>

Unlike most other acts of mass violence which were committed by the SS Cavalry Brigade in the summer of 1941, the murder of the Jews of Pinsk is comparatively well-documented and provides valuable insights into both the minds of the killers and those of their victims. Here, at least some survivors were left to tell how the SS troopers skilfully exploited the available structures and institutions of German occupation, including the *Judenrat* and willing local collaborators, and how Magill

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<sup>491</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 54; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 160.

<sup>492</sup> Characteristically, the SS tried to put the blame for the mass murder on the Jews themselves: a report of *Einsatzgruppe B* described the operation as retaliation for the murder of a militiaman and gave the number of victims as 4,500; see Ereignismitteilung Nr. 58 vom 20.8. 1941, in BArchB, R 58/216, quoted in Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 161. According to a report of the 3rd company of Police Battalion 322, which conducted a search at Pinsk on 25 and 26 August, 1941, 5,000 Jews had been shot there just before; see Durchsuchungsaktion in Pinsk, 26 August, 1941, in: VUA, N POL.RGT. (2), file 8. The court before which Magill and his officers were sentenced in 1964 assumed that at least 5,254 people had been killed; see Sagel-Grande, I. et al., *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen, Bd. 20*, p. 27. Based on a thorough analysis of available statistics, Tikva Fatal-Knaani estimated that 7-8,000 Jews were murdered; see Fatal-Knaani, T., *The Jews of Pinsk*, p. 15. Cüppers places his estimate at more than 9,000 victims (see Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 161), whereas survivors believed that a figure of about 11,000 was realistic; see *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, pp. 62-63. Büchler, who used works based on the testimony of survivors, even assumes that more than 11,000 Jews were murdered at Pinsk: 8,000 on the first day, an unknown, smaller number on the second day, and 3,000 on the third day; see Büchler, 'Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS', pp. 16-17.

<sup>493</sup> Fatal-Knaani, 'The Jews of Pinsk', p. 15; *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 53.

managed to combine these factors with the murderous efficiency of his own men. As opposed to more localised operations, which often took place in remote hamlets in the marshes, the three days of killing at Pinsk strongly resemble those mass executions carried out by the *Einsatzgruppen*: all details are similar, from central coordination and meticulous planning over the division of labour and deployment of individual killing squads to the steps of the killing (rounding up of victims – robbing of valuables – executions done by different units). Even the reluctance and the effort it sometimes cost the men to carry out their task (which led to the deadening or burn-out of entire units later that year and worried Himmler, who feared that his plan could not be fulfilled) are the same.

There are two major differences, however: the brigade's integration into another chain of command within the SS and the development of orders for annihilation in the field rather than their specification from the SS command in Berlin. Unlike the *Einsatzgruppen*, the SS Cavalry Brigade was subordinate to the HSSPF Centre, not the head of the security police and the security service, Reinhard Heydrich. Also, a very high level of initiative was displayed by the SS cavalry officers, especially Gustav Lombard, who supplemented the sometimes vague orders they received from Himmler. As opposed to this approach, the *Einsatzgruppen* rather stuck to the Heydrich order of 2 July and only slowly added new groups of victims, a process that was triggered by the radical measures of the SS cavalry in August.<sup>494</sup>

Whilst some SS cavalymen found ways to avoid killings at the very beginning of the deployment in the Pripet Marshes, the vast majority of the men did not see a reason to act differently than their comrades or did not dare to do so. This kind of behaviour has been noticed by Christopher Browning with Reserve Police Battalion 101 as well: soldiers tended not to break ranks by showing deviant behaviour, such

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<sup>494</sup> Büchler views the role of the brigade the other way around: in his opinion, the *Einsatzgruppen* operated more flexibly. See Büchler, 'Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS', p. 17.

as refusing to kill, so that they would not lose comradely bonds and support. As a reason for this, Browning has identified a habituation to killings and their conduction as a unit, together with the situation of being stationed on enemy territory.<sup>495</sup>

Despite the fact that many troopers had taken part in executions in Poland before, this was sometimes a difficult and very gruesome process. Superiors in some of the squadrons had to ask for volunteers at the beginning of the mission in order to shoot the Jews who had been rounded up.<sup>496</sup> This principle was sometimes also extended to subunits which did not have to participate normally: a man who had served in the supply unit of a machine-gun squadron said that his sergeant major frequently asked for volunteers during the mission in the swamps and some of his comrades reported for this.<sup>497</sup> It came to particularly appalling scenes in early August, 1941, when the men were not used to killing large groups of people yet. Victims were ‘mowed down’ and often badly wounded rather than killed by well-directed fire.<sup>498</sup> In one situation like this, platoon and squad leaders of a squadron had to ask for volunteers to perform the coup de grâce; shooters were offered a special leave of ten days. As enough people came forward, no one had to be assigned for this task.<sup>499</sup>

When they were questioned in the 1960s, some veterans of the SS cavalry openly stated that they had difficulties in adjusting to what they were asked to do. This was often the case with soldiers who were very young in the summer of 1941: together with older men who had been serving in the units for one or two years already, recruits aged 17 or 18 years became part of the killing squads.<sup>500</sup> Often, they could

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<sup>495</sup> Browning, C., *Ordinary men*, pp. 184-186. Andrej Angrick and his co-authors also observed this with Police Battalion 322, where the policemen – just like their comrades of the Reserve Police Battalion 101 – had developed an internal norm according to which every member of the unit had to take part in executions at least once. See Angrick and others, ‘Das Polizeibataillon 322’, pp. 361-362.

<sup>496</sup> Vernehmung von Otto Mittelstädt vom 22.5. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5538, p. b36.

<sup>497</sup> Vernehmung von Josef Zorn vom 21.5. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, pp. i28-29.

<sup>498</sup> Vernehmung von Bruno Schröder vom 4.10. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j45.

<sup>499</sup> Vernehmung von Otto Krumwiede vom 14.3. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5541, p. g45.

<sup>500</sup> One example for this was Walter Reichert who was part of an execution squad at Pinsk; he was 18 years old at the time; see BArchL, B 162/5539, p. 1650.

not endure the shootings; their leaders dealt with this by assigning them different tasks, for example when the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment was deployed at Pinsk just a few days after the arrival in Belorussia. Others, too, admitted having been in similar situations: one former soldier testified that he found it hard to round up Jews as they knew what was going to happen to them.<sup>501</sup> Several men said they only took part in executions very reluctantly.<sup>502</sup> Many of the SS cavalymen were fully aware of the fact that they were committing crimes; protocols of questionings document a ‘discrepancy between inner rejection and outer conformity’.<sup>503</sup> This ‘inner rejection’ expressed itself by various physical and psychological reactions: men were sick at the execution sites or broke into tears when they reflected what they had done, especially those who had children themselves. Some former soldiers even said that the majority of their comrades had shown intense indignation about being deployed for executions of Jews. They viewed their involvement in the killing of innocent people as abuse: it was not only considered to be brutal and unnecessary but also to be unsoldierly. Amongst each other, the men referred to massacres as ‘*schweineri*’ (mess).<sup>504</sup>

After this initial phase, a pattern emerged that again matches Christopher Browning’s observations, dividing the squadrons in groups of perpetrators who obeyed killing orders, perpetrators who acted excessively and non-conformists.<sup>505</sup> It is hard to quantify these factions as statements from former SS cavalymen are often fragmentary: in many cases, the men did not give full particulars or were only asked

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<sup>501</sup> Vernehmung von Otto Krumwiede vom 14.3. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5541, p. g44.

<sup>502</sup> Vernehmung von Helmut Fenslaf, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp. 1647-1648; Vernehmung August Sündermann, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1642; Vernehmung Bernd Wenzel, in BArchL, B 162/2329, pp. 1644-1645; Vernehmung Hans Saggau, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1646.

<sup>503</sup> Birn, ‘Zweierlei Wirklichkeit’, p. 280; for the awareness of the criminal character of the shootings, see for example Vernehmung von Josef Hagl vom 15.1. 1964, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j87; Vernehmung Kurt Ziegler vom 8.7. 1964, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp. c85.

<sup>504</sup> Vernehmung von Ernst Grützmacher vom 21.8. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j76; Vernehmung von Karl Spiess vom 25.6. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i39; Vernehmung Klaas Kruizenga vom 9.4. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, p. j68; Vernehmung Bernd Wenzel, in BArchL, B 162/2329, pp. 1644-1645.

<sup>505</sup> The same pattern applied to Police Battalion 322; see Angrick and others, ‘Das Polizeibataillon 322’, pp. 359. According to this work, excesses as well as refusal were rare exceptions.

about particular incidents.<sup>506</sup> Evidence suggests, however, that the officers did not have any trouble enforcing discipline as the men, however unwillingly, conformed to the principle of order and obedience. The vast majority of the cavalry soldiers carried out their tasks, however cruel and inhumane. Over the course of several weeks, the men became accustomed to killing and functioned even if morale was low under the impression of terrible atrocities. Often, they numbed themselves by means of alcohol abuse.<sup>507</sup> In many protocols of questionings, statements such as the following can be found: ‘We did not want to do this [the executions] but an order was an order, what could you do as an ordinary man’.<sup>508</sup> Another veteran said: ‘As far as I gathered it from conversations of my comrades after the execution, none of them undertook the task out of enthusiasm or voluntarily; they all appeared to be depressed and it was obvious that they, just as me, only acted under orders’.<sup>509</sup>

Post-war legal proceedings were predominantly directed against former officers of the SS Cavalry Brigade (with one former non-commissioned officer as the only exception), which is why investigators mostly did not enquire about the personal motives or anti-Semitism of the men they heard as witnesses, but rather about their function in the horse units and their role in the killing process.<sup>510</sup> There were, however, other reasons to commit murder apart from carrying out one’s duty and other attitudes towards the killings than resentment. Some of the veterans openly approved of the killings even twenty years after the war; one man even stated that he still regretted that not enough people were killed in Russia and that he would shoot

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<sup>506</sup> The trial against Magill and others, for example, focused on the mass executions carried out by the SS cavalry at Pinsk; other executions, even if they were mentioned by witnesses, were mostly not followed up by the investigators. This information was obtained through an interview with Bernhard D., retired chief inspector of the Landeskriminalamt Niedersachsen, 26 January, 2011.

<sup>507</sup> This has also been noted by Browning for Reserve Police Battalion 101; see Browning, *Ordinary men*, p. 61, pp. 68-69, and pp. 85-87.

<sup>508</sup> Vernehmung August Sündermann, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1642.

<sup>509</sup> Vernehmung von Ferdinand Henschke vom 5.12. 1962, in: StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Nr. 1013, p. 177.

<sup>510</sup> Interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011; interview with Bernhard D., retired chief inspector of the Landeskriminalamt Niedersachsen, 26 January, 2011.

women, children and men ‘without batting an eye’, should he ever come there as a soldier again.<sup>511</sup> Another attitude displayed was indifference: when asked about his opinion and reasons for one particular execution he was involved in, one former SS cavalryman said that he and his comrades did not give reasons much thought and only complained about having to clean their rifles again after the shooting.<sup>512</sup>

After the massacres at Pinsk, the mounted squadrons of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment recommenced the ‘combing’ of the marshes and advanced further eastward until they reached their destination, the David-Gorodok – Luninets – Baranovichi line, two days later.<sup>513</sup> Between 9 and 12 August, 1941, all subunits of the mounted detachment were involved in further acts of mass violence. The first squadron left Pinsk to the northeast and killed about 140 Jews at Pagost Zagorodny, whereas the fourth squadron executed 1,312 Jews at Luninets.<sup>514</sup> Furthest to the south was the third squadron; it moved towards David-Gorodok through the northern Ukraine and passed Pinsk at a distance of about 25 miles. In a small village called Serniki, its soldiers rounded up about between 100 and 120 Jewish men, publicly humiliated them by forcing them to dance in the street, marched them to the local cemetery and shot them.<sup>515</sup> When this squadron reached David-Gorodok a few days later, the

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<sup>511</sup> Birn, ‘Zweierlei Wirklichkeit’, p. 279; Vernehmung von Severin Dörner vom 22.4. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5541, p. h66.

<sup>512</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 122; Vernehmung von Karl Lückel vom 25.7. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5538, p. b67.

<sup>513</sup> Radio message no. 79 from the mounted detachment to the 2<sup>nd</sup> regiment, 9 August, 1941, 6.40 pm, in: BArchF, RS 4/936; radio message no. 83 from the mounted detachment to the 2<sup>nd</sup> regiment, 10 August, 1941, 6.30 am, *ibid.*; radio message no. 84 from the mounted detachment to the 2<sup>nd</sup> regiment, 10 August, 1941, 12.03 pm, *ibid.*

<sup>514</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 161. At Luninets, all Jewish males aged 12 or older were killed immediately, apart from 36 who were able to save themselves; see Philip Friedman (ed.), *Roads to extinction: essays on the Holocaust* (New York, Philadelphia 1980), p. 143.

<sup>515</sup> David Bevan, *A case to answer: the story of Australia's first European war crimes prosecution* (Kent Town, South Australia, 1994), p. xi, pp. 3-5, p. 56, p. 94, p. 163. The exact date of the massacre is unknown; the author assumes it happened in July or August, 1941. The reconstruction of this event is based on testimony of survivors; most of them gave the number of victims as 100 persons, whereas one former inhabitant of the village gave it as 120. The witnesses remembered that the Germans had come to Serniki on horseback; in an expertise for an Australian trial, Konrad Kwiet identified the perpetrators as having belonged to the SS cavalry; see p. 56. From the verdict of the Magill case, it becomes clear that this must have been the third squadron as it was furthest to the south; see *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 58. Martin Dean gives the number of victims as 250,

troopers rounded up about 2,500 Jews together with local collaborators. Just like in Pinsk, the victims were told they were to work for the Germans. A few Jewish doctors and craftsmen, such as saddlers who had to repair the horse-gear of the SS cavalrymen, were spared. The remainder of the apprehended, more than 2,000 people, were shot outside the town. Ukrainians, Belarusians and Poles expelled all Jewish women and children from David-Gorodok on the next day in a spontaneous outbreak of anti-Semitic violence; the victims were left wandering through the vicinity until they had to return to the town, where they were interned in a ghetto and murdered in the following year.<sup>516</sup> The horse squadrons of the 2<sup>nd</sup> regiment also committed massacres in a number of other small towns and villages east of Pinsk. As hardly any sources are available about these incidents, it can only be surmised that Jews were also killed at Lunin, Stolin, Lakhva, and Kozian-Gorodok, and possibly at other, unspecified places as well by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment before 12 August.<sup>517</sup>

The successful completion of the vanguard operation coincided with the arrival of the horse squadrons at the target line of their first mission. Around the middle of August, the SS cavalrymen had a break of a few days during which the units rested and carried out maintenance before they launched their next operation, the ‘combing’ of the eastern Pripet Marshes.<sup>518</sup> Parts of the SS Cavalry Brigade were regrouped for the new task: whereas the brigade staff and some of its support units remained based at Liakhovichi, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment moved its subunits further to the southeast: the regimental staff took up quarters at a school in Lakhva, some 50 miles east of Pinsk, followed by the other squadrons and trains which stayed at other small villages along the road from Liakhovichi to Luninets.<sup>519</sup>

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which is possibly exaggerated; see Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust*, p. 35 and p. 37.

<sup>516</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 161-163.

<sup>517</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 161. For this assumption, Cüppers quotes the following document: Zwischenbericht der Sonderkommission Z, p. 572.

<sup>518</sup> Fernschreiben des HSSPF Mitte an RFSS, 13 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4.

<sup>519</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 14.-17.8. 1941, 18 August, 1941, SS Cavalry Brigade, in: VUA,

The *Reichsführer* closely followed the activity of Fegelein and his men: for the third time in just over a month, Himmler now paid a visit to the SS Cavalry on one of his inspection tours through the occupied Eastern territories. Accompanied by high-ranking SS officers such as the head of his personal staff, *SS-Gruppenführer* Karl Wolff, and the HSSPF North, *SS-Gruppenführer* Hans-Adolf Prützmann, he conferred with leaders of SS and *Wehrmacht* at the headquarters of the HSSPF Centre in Baranovichi on 14 August. Present at this meeting were the HSSPF Centre, *SS-Gruppenführer* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, the commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre, general Max von Schenckendorff, as well as the commanders of the two SS cavalry regiments, the *Standartenführer* Hermann Fegelein and Gustav Lombard. Von dem Bach-Zelewski and Fegelein reported on the first part of the ‘cleansing’ of the Pripet Marshes. When Himmler continued his journey to Minsk on the same day, he also greeted staff officers of the cavalry brigade and the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment on the market square of Liakhovichi. It can be assumed that the head of the SS approved of the cavalry brigade’s modus operandi and urged its commanders to continue their practice.<sup>520</sup>

The further development of the SS cavalry towards a ‘dual role’ now saw a shift in focus from a parallel execution of military and ideological orders to the character of a plain killing unit. Thus far, soldiers of the vanguard had mostly killed regular Soviet soldiers in combat situations, but also ‘partisans’, ‘Russian soldiers in plain clothes’, and ‘Jews who supported the Russians’ as well as three Soviet commissars.<sup>521</sup> The mounted squadrons, on the other hand, had shot thousands of

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Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

<sup>520</sup> Witte, *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers*, p. 193; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 182-183; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 14.-17.8. 1941, 18 August, 1941, SS Cavalry Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3. This document wrongly gives the date of Himmler’s visit as 15 August, 1941.

<sup>521</sup> Bericht über die Tätigkeit der V[oraus].A[bteilung] vom 27.7. – 3.8. 1941, in: Baade, *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 221 and p. 223; Bericht über die Tätigkeit der V[oraus].A[bteilung] vom 3. – 12.8. 1941, *ibid.*, p. 224 and p. 226.

Jewish civilians. These mass executions, together with another operation at Bobruisk at the beginning of September, put the SS Cavalry Brigade on the same level as the *Einsatzgruppen* and police battalions: even if they had only just arrived in Belorussia, they had already become much more than a security detail for the hinterland. The SS cavalrymen were now an instrument of mass violence, which is proven by the enormous death toll they inflicted; a few days after the beginning of the killing missions, the perpetrators started to lose count already. As far as the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment was concerned, three thousand Jews were killed by this unit alone in only two days.<sup>522</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, on the other hand, killed 173 ‘looters, communists and Jews’ in the same time.<sup>523</sup> 3 August, 1941, is the last day with an accurate body count by the SS cavalry officers and their superior, the HSSPF Centre; after this day, it can no longer be defined precisely. The number given for this day is ‘3274 partisans and Jewish Bolsheviks’, which represents the more than 3,000 victims of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment at Khomsk and the male Jews killed at Motol’ as well as the 173 people who were murdered by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment between 31 July and 3 August.<sup>524</sup>

The trend of reporting incorrect numbers of victims continued until the SS Cavalry Brigade left Belorussia. It is also reflected by the reports given by the SS officers after the completion of their first mission. *Sturmbannführer* Lombard of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment informed his superiors that the mounted detachment under his command had shot 6,504 Jews and 411 Red Army soldiers up to and including 11 August.<sup>525</sup> The corresponding document from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment states that 6,450 Jews and 76 Soviet soldiers and communists had been killed.<sup>526</sup> Hermann Fegelein gave two

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<sup>522</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 31.7. – 3.8. 1941, 4 August, 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 1, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 1.

<sup>523</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 31.7. – 3.8. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 2.

<sup>524</sup> Situation report of the HSSPF Centre, 4 August, 1941, in: NAK, HW 16/45, German Police Decodes: 4.8. 41.

<sup>525</sup> Befriedung des Raumes Prypecsümpfe, 11 August, 1941, in: BArchL, Dokumenten-Sammlung, Ordner Verschiedenes 291-17, p. 6.

<sup>526</sup> Übersichtsbericht über den Verlauf der Pripjet-Aktion vom 27.7. – 11.8. 1941, 12 August, 1941,

rather inaccurate numbers within a matter of days: whereas he spoke of 10,844 ‘looters and soldiers in civilian clothes’ in his summary of the vanguard operation on 11 August, the summary of the entire operation from 13 August reported that 13,788 Jews had fallen victim to the brigade.<sup>527</sup> This calculation indicates that the leadership of the SS cavalry found it hard to assess how many people had been killed. The speed and varying nature of their operations and faulty equipment also took their toll: both combat and ‘combing’ missions had to be coordinated at the same time, sometimes with poor means of communication. Both regiments must have murdered far more people than they stated in their reports: whereas the men under Lombard’s command had killed more than six thousand Jews at Khomsk, Motol’ and Telekhany already, at Pinsk alone more people had been executed than Magill had assumed for the two weeks his unit had spent in Belorussia so far.<sup>528</sup> When adding up the figures which can be estimated today, a number of some 10,800 for the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment and at least 11,000 for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment seems more appropriate.<sup>529</sup>

Again, the HSSPF took up these numbers and reported them to Himmler in turn. On 6 August, 1941, he grossly underestimated the number of people who had fallen victim to the SS Cavalry Brigade until this point as he spoke of ‘4,219 looters, Red Army men etc.’<sup>530</sup> A day later, when the two squadrons of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment were still involved in the murder of the Pinsk Jews, von dem Bach-Zelewski gave a total

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SS-Kavallerie-Regiment 2, Reitende Abteilung, in: BArchL, Dokumenten-Sammlung, Ordner Verschiedenes 291-17, p. 8.

<sup>527</sup> Zusammenfassende Meldung über die Kampfhandlungen der Vorausabteilung der SS-Kav.Brigrade, 11 August, 1941, in: Baade, *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 228; Abschlußmeldung, SS Cavalry Brigade to HSSPF Centre, 13 August, 1941, in: Baade, *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 214.

<sup>528</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 4.8. – 6.8. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 2, 7 August, 1941, in: VUA, box 24, file 2. On the first day at Pinsk, Magill assumed a death toll of 2,689 whereas in all likelihood at least more than twice as many Jews had been shot that day.

<sup>529</sup> These figures are the best available estimate based on the reports of the two SS cavalry regiments and testimonies of survivors. As Raul Hilberg has pointed out in his review of *Wegbereiter der Shoah*, Martin Cüppers has assumed a number of about 14,000 victims for both units during the first mission in the Pripet Marshes. This is rather speculative as the reports are not accurate enough about killings in remote areas; see Hilberg, ‘The Kommandostab Revisited’, pp. 363-364. I have arrived at a lower estimate as I only used figures which I could sufficiently back up with evidence.

<sup>530</sup> Situation report of the HSSPF Centre, 6 August, 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4. See also Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., p. 1756.

number of 7,819 executions, 3,600 of which had been committed by midday of 7 August. He did not provide any information on the background of the victims.<sup>531</sup> In the same report, he said that more than 30,000 people had been executed in his area so far, a statement which was interpreted by British secret service analysts who had intercepted this message as indicating ‘that the leaders of the three sectors [the three HSSPF’s] stand somewhat in competition with each other as to their ‘scores’’.<sup>532</sup> Whether or not this is true it perhaps never will be ascertained but the way the numbers of victims were subsumed nonetheless shows the complete disregard for human life, a fact that becomes apparent throughout all reports both of the SS cavalry and their superiors. To the historian who views these sources today it seems as if the perpetrators were not even interested in the nationality or situation of their victims as long as they could report high numbers of suspected enemies who had been destroyed.

Another important aspect for the assessment of the deployment of the unit is the almost complete absence of casualties which speaks for a largely non-military role during the first mission in the Pripet Marshes. This impression is supported by the reports of the two commanders of the mounted detachments. Gustav Lombard only mentions ‘individual encounters’ with Red Army men, whereas Franz Magill openly states that his detachment was not involved in combat.<sup>533</sup> The discrepancy between

<sup>531</sup> Situation report of the HSSPF Centre, 7 August, 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4.

<sup>532</sup> Situation report of the HSSPF Centre, 7 August, 1941, in: NAK, HW 16/45, German Police Decodes: 4.8. 41; for the interpretation by the British secret service, see Summary of German Police Decodes, 21 August, 1941, NAK, HW 16/1, quoted in Mallmann and others, *Deutscher Osten 1939 – 1945*, p. 144. It is possible that this report by von dem Bach-Zelewski helped to prepare an even larger massacre: as the quick advance of Army Group Centre had facilitated the killings of the SS and police in this sector, the HSSPF Centre surpassed his colleague in the South, *SS-Obergruppenführer* Friedrich Jeckeln. The *Reichsführer* was not satisfied with Jeckeln’s progress. When the HSSPF South reported to Himmler on 12 August, 1941, he might have offered the mass killing of Hungarian Jews as a solution, a measure that was implemented at Kamenets-Podolsk from 26-28 August, 1941 and claimed 23,600 victims. See Klaus-Michael Mallmann, ‘Der qualitative Sprung im Vernichtungsprozeß. Das Massaker von Kamenets-Podolsk Ende August 1941’, *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung* 10 (2001), p. 239 and pp. 246-247.

<sup>533</sup> For the 1st Regiment, see *Befriedung des Raumes Prypecsümpfe*, 11 August, 1941, in: BArchL, Dokumenten-Sammlung, Ordner Verschiedenes 291-17, p. 6. Gerlach assumes that the ‘individual encounters’ were just a euphemism for the murder of unarmed prisoners of war; see Gerlach, *Morde*,

the number of SS soldiers who had been killed and the number of military and civilian deaths inflicted by the SS cavalry is striking: as opposed to approximately more than 20,000 Jews and Red Army soldiers, only two SS soldiers had been killed and 15 had been wounded, two of whom were officers. Other than that, both regiments had come out of their first missions unscathed. In this context it appears very bizarre that Hermann Fegelein intended to give the operations more of a military touch in order to gain further prestige. He stressed the extreme conditions and the tough terrain in which his men had fought, a perception that referred mostly to the vanguard. Just like after the 1<sup>st</sup> regiment had seen combat near Bialystok, he now called for his men to be decorated, as he was of the opinion that a medal would lose its value if it was not awarded immediately after a combat operation. Despite the tough missions, he complained, no Iron Crosses had been given to the men so far, which neglected the first batch of medals the SS cavalry had received six weeks earlier.<sup>534</sup> Fegelein's grave worry was soon to be relieved: three days after he had filed his report, twelve soldiers of the Cavalry Brigade were awarded the Iron Cross Second Class.<sup>535</sup> On 17 August, the commander of the 162<sup>nd</sup> infantry division gave further decorations to the men of the vanguard: one bar to the Iron Cross First Class, two Iron Crosses First Class and fifteen Iron Crosses Second Class.<sup>536</sup>

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p. 561; for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, see Bericht über den Verlauf der Pripjet-Aktion vom 27.7. – 11.8. 1941, 12 August, 1941, SS-Kavallerie-Regiment 2, quoted in Baade, *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 217.

<sup>534</sup> Abschlußmeldung, SS Cavalry Brigade to HSSPF Centre, 13 August, 1941, in: Baade, *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 214. Of the two deaths, only one could be verified (the NCO who had been killed in the ambush on the motorcycle platoon of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment); it can be assumed that another SS cavalryman died of wounds he had received during the first mission in the Pripet Marshes.

<sup>535</sup> Situation report of the HSSPF Centre, 16 August, 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4.

<sup>536</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 18.-21.8. 1941, SS Cavalry Brigade, 21 August, 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

The second mission in the Pripet Marshes and deployment in southeastern Belorussia  
(15 August – 22 September, 1941)

The ‘combing’ of the eastern Pripet Marshes began on 15 August, 1941 for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment and two days later for the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment. The vanguard remained based at Starye Dorogy; although under the direct command of the SS Cavalry Brigade, the 252<sup>nd</sup> division of the *Wehrmacht* could still dispose of it if necessary. For Gustav Lombard, the beginning of the second mission brought a promotion: he was now appointed commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, an important step in his SS career.<sup>537</sup> For their second mission, the men were again indoctrinated: according to the order of the day of 13 August, 1941, ‘gangs of partisans were working hand in hand with the Jewish population’, a renewal of the already known justification for mass killings.<sup>538</sup> The advance of the horse squadrons started from the line they had reached a few days earlier. By sending out fast-moving reconnaissance patrols, the SS cavalry officers tried to find out what lay ahead of them.

Soon, the SS cavalrymen had to deal with a new situation: when they reached the small town of Turov, some 22 miles east of David-Gorodok, soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment’s third squadron suddenly confronted an enemy position. After encountering stiff resistance from Red Army troops on the night of 15 August, the squadron took Turov and pushed the enemy out to the east at the break of dawn. During the morning of the next day, the town was shelled by the Soviets; as the SS troopers were lacking ammunition and to avoid further casualties, Magill decided to pull back this unit to nearby Maryampole, where the squadron took up defence

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<sup>537</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 14.-17.8. 1941, 18 August, 1941, SS Cavalry Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

<sup>538</sup> Brigadebefehl Nr. 1, 13 August, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/20.

positions against a possible Soviet counterattack. The Soviets reacted immediately and reoccupied Turov. In the initial fighting, two SS men had been killed and six were wounded, a number that rose to eleven wounded until the end of the day. After this setback, the brigade staff gave orders to send reinforcements and heavy weapons to Turov, which led to the regrouping and concentration of almost the entire 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment in the nearby towns of Lakhva, Mokrots, and Marjampole. The first, second, fourth and sixth squadrons were sent there, along with the mounted batteries of both regiments.<sup>539</sup>

For the first time since their arrival in Belorussia, SS cavalrymen had made contact with a strong contingent of regular enemy forces stubbornly defending a fixed emplacement. This Soviet group threatened the advance of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment and the supply route of the 35<sup>th</sup> corps of the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>540</sup> Therefore, it had to be destroyed before the SS cavalry could continue its mission. Over the next two days, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment further reconnoitred the vicinity of Turov. As its scouts found out, enemy forces in that town and nearby Zapiesocze consisted of about 600 armed civilians and 100 – 200 uniformed Soviet soldiers. They had several artillery pieces and infantry guns as well as light and heavy machineguns, felt absolutely safe and repelled all probing attacks. Apart from these groups, there were also Soviet positions to the rear of Turov and at other places nearby.<sup>541</sup> After the necessary troops had been assembled, the attack on Zapesoch'ye and Turov was ordered for the early

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<sup>539</sup> Lagebericht beim SS-Kav.Regiment 2 vom 15./16.8. 1941, 16 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 14.-17.8. 1941, 18 August, 1941, SS Cavalry Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

<sup>540</sup> Lagebericht beim SS-Kav.Regiment 2, 16 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

<sup>541</sup> Aufklärungsergebnis bei SS-Kav.Rgt. 2, 19 August, 1941, in: VUA, KDO Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3. In this case, too, the next higher authority reported different figures to Berlin: according to the HSSPF, 21 cavalrymen had been wounded and the enemy forces holding Turov and Zapiesocze had a strength of 400 men. See situation report of the HSSPF Centre, 16 August, 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4. A *Wehrmacht* report spoke of 'regular enemy forces of battalion strength including cavalry and partly motorised infantry with many weapons and artillery'; see radio message from SS Cavalry Brigade to *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Friedrich, [SS Cavalry recruit deport] Warschau, 22 August, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/212 (part 2), p. 92.

morning of 21 August. The main assault on the enemy positions was to be carried out by the first and third squadrons of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, which had been reinforced with heavy machineguns of the fourth squadron. Covering fire was to be provided by the two artillery batteries; other subunits of the regiment were to block escape routes to the east. The SS cavalry could also dispose of an engineer unit of the *Wehrmacht* which operated several captured boats and pontoons armed with anti-tank guns; they were to attack targets in Turov from the river Pripet. <sup>542</sup>

The attack on Turov went as planned: artillery fire proved to be effective, and despite the fact that the SS cavalrymen had to resort to close combat in some places as the Soviets had erected fortifications, the town fell within three hours. The Germans kept pushing forward and took four other villages east of Turov during the morning; only a few Red Army soldiers managed to escape. Fegelein was very proud of this quick victory as the enemy had been about battalion strength and consisted of cavalry, motorised infantry, and artillery. The SS cavalry had lost only four men and 20 had been wounded (two of whom died in the following days); enemy losses, on the other hand, amounted to approximately 400 men and only ten prisoners were taken. <sup>543</sup> For the conduct of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment at Turov, the commander of the rear area of Army Group Centre, general von Schenkendorff, expressed his appreciation and gratitude to Hermann Fegelein. He particularly mentioned the gallantry displayed by the third squadron under *Hauptsturmführer* von Zastrow and hoped for further fruitful and comradely cooperation between *Wehrmacht* and SS. <sup>544</sup>

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<sup>542</sup> Regimentsbefehl, 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, 20 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3. For the subordinated Wehrmacht engineers, see also Korpsbefehl Nr. 42 vom 18.8. 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, in: BArchF, RS 22/224, p. 217.

<sup>543</sup> Situation report of the HSSPF Centre, 21 August, 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4; radio message from HSSPF Centre to the Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS, 22 August, 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4; situation report of the HSSPF Centre, 22 August, 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4; Beute- und Verlustmeldung, Unternehmen Turov am 21.8. 1941, 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, 22 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; Gefechtsbericht über die Kampfhandlungen in und um Turov, brigade commander, 29 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

<sup>544</sup> Message from the commander of the rear area of Army Group Centre to the commander of the SS Cavalry Brigade, 24 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

Fegelein's attitude towards two of the officers involved in the fighting at Turov may also help to shed light on his leadership abilities. Von Schenckendorff's message had been based on the report of major Schönwald, his adjutant, who acted as liaison officer with the SS Cavalry during the attack on Turov and had also judged their efforts very favourably.<sup>545</sup> In return, Fegelein recommended him for a decoration and Schönwald received the bar to the Iron Cross First Class. This instance particularly upset the Higher SS and Police Leader Centre, *SS-Gruppenführer* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, who was impatiently waiting for a reward for his services; according to him, the *Wehrmacht* major had been a mere 'spectator' at the attack on Turov and did not play a role in the combat operation.<sup>546</sup> In contrast, Hermann Fegelein later court-martialled the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment for breaching his duty: he accused Hierthes of having failed as a leader during the combat operations at Turov due to hesitant behaviour and a lack of initiative. The highest SS and police court dismissed the process as it found that Hierthes was not guilty of a crime according to military law.<sup>547</sup> Hierthes, who had already been at odds with Fegelein before (when he allegedly had failed to track down a group of Red Army soldiers), was replaced as commander of the regiment by *Sturmbannführer* Hermann Schleifenbaum at the end of August, 1941. As these two cases show, Hermann Fegelein displayed a high degree of unscrupulousness, both in favour of or to the disadvantage of others: Schönwald, who had helped him, was rewarded for this, whereas the career of Hierthes, an older but experienced man who had seen service as a cavalry and police officer as well as in the SS before, was effectively over after

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<sup>545</sup> Radio message from SS Cavalry Brigade to *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Friedrich, [SS Cavalry recruit depot] Warschau, 22 August, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/212 (part 2), p. 92.

<sup>546</sup> Tagebuch des Chefs der Bandenkampfverbände, entries from 5 and 6 September, 1941, pp. 11-12.

<sup>547</sup> Verfügung des Obersten SS- und Polizeigerichts München vom 28.8. 1942, in: BArchB, SSO Heimo Hierthes. Fegelein had also accused Hierthes of another breach of duty: allegedly, he had left his regiment during heavy fighting in the winter of 1941 – 1942 after having reported sick; this charge, too, was dismissed.

his departure from the regiment.<sup>548</sup>

As a follow-up to the capture of Turov, the combat zone was searched and ‘cleansed’ by SS troopers on 22 and 23 August, which claimed another 200 to 300 lives on the Soviet side. As a ‘collective punishment’, Turov and nine other localities were razed to the ground.<sup>549</sup> This search and retaliation was so brutal that it even invoked some sort of pity from Hierthes: when evaluating the combat at Turov, he found that many local Belarusians had been forced to fight on the Soviet side, often at gunpoint. Therefore, many of them had fled the town to avoid recruitment. When the Germans had defeated the Red Army, they were welcomed as liberators and offered food and religious icons, even in the almost completely destroyed town of Turov. They were also asked to give out weapons so that the locals could defend themselves and help the Germans to search for stragglers in the woods. Under the impression of a population that was friendly towards the SS despite all the suffering it had caused, Hierthes ordered to stop reprisals such as executions and the burning of villages.<sup>550</sup>

This comparative leniency did not last. During the combing of the eastern Pripet Marshes, the SS Cavalry Brigade was involved in mass violence of the same kind as in the first two weeks of August and conducted further searches and executions, often with hundreds of victims. Two developments now influenced their approach: as the SS cavalrymen got further to the east, they could find fewer Jews, and their methods became even more brutal. Evidence from other German agencies suggests

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<sup>548</sup> Sturmbannführer Hermann Schleifenbaum succeeded Hierthes in the command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment with effect from 1 September, 1941; see Führerstellenbesetzungsliste, SS-Kavallerieregiment 2, 1 September, 1941, in: BArchL, B 162/21679, p. 330. For the continuation of Hierthes’s service in the SS see Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 181; Cüppers assumes that a lack of initiative in carrying out killings was what turned Fegelein against Hierthes.

<sup>549</sup> Gefechtsbericht über Unternehmen Turov, 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, 22 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; situation report of the HSSPF Centre, 21 August, 1941, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4; Gefechtsbericht über die Kampfhandlungen in und um Turov, brigade commander, 29 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

<sup>550</sup> Erfahrungsbericht zu den Kämpfen bei Turov, commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, 23 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

that the approach of ‘combing’ large areas as thoroughly as possible (including the execution of all possible enemies and the recruitment and installation of willing collaborators) was universally accepted and practiced in the rear areas of Army Group Centre. In doing so, different units pursued different routes: security divisions of the *Wehrmacht* were allocated specific areas, police battalions searched and ‘pacified’ villages and towns along the major thoroughfares, subunits of *Einsatzgruppe B* committed massacres in larger towns, the SS Cavalry Brigade ‘combed’ rural as well as built-up areas, and all of these formations cooperated in huge massacres.<sup>551</sup> Wherever possible, local institutions such as the SD branch or the *Ortskommandantur* at Pinsk were informed and asked to supply additional manpower to carry out killings or logistic duties. A comparison of *Wehrmacht* and SS orders shows that there was no difference between these two institutions: general von Schenkendorff particularly endorsed radical measures and gave out directives which closely resembled those of Himmler, Fegelein, Lombard, and Magill.<sup>552</sup> He also saw that the relationship with the SS was good and sincere. The SS Cavalry Brigade was a prime example for this cooperation of German agencies.

After taking Turov, the SS cavalry units proceeded further eastward: the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment turned to the southeast from Liakhovichi, whereas the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment followed the river Pripet. They were to reach the confluence of the Ptich and Pripet rivers until 31 August.<sup>553</sup> Upon reaching the town of Mozyr’, the SS cavalrymen immediately targeted the Jewish population with a brutality that has been described

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<sup>551</sup> Korpsbefehl Nr. 39 vom 11.8. 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, in: BArchF, RS 22/224, pp. 201-203; Korpsbefehl Nr. 42 vom 18.8. 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, *ibid.*, p. 217; Krausnick and Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges*, pp. 181-183; Befriedung des Raumes Prypecsümpfe, 11 August, 1941, in: BArchL, Dokumenten-Sammlung, Ordner Verschiedenes 291-17, p. 7.

<sup>552</sup> See for example Korpsbefehl Nr. 39 of 11 August, 1941: this order contains a section on ‘cleansing operations’ which calls for exactly the same method as described by Magill in his report on the first mission in the Pripet Marshes. Magill’s report, on the other hand, shows the practical implementation of Himmler’s ‘Kommandosonderbefehl’ of 28 July, which had been specified by Fegelein. See also Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, pp. 351-352 and pp. 357-364.

<sup>553</sup> Brigadebefehl an SS-Kav.Rgt. 1 für Fortsetzung des Auftrages 2 – Pripjet-Sümpfe, 24 August, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/430, p. 2.

in great detail by a survivor, the Jewish engineer Basja Pikman. According to her, atrocities were directed also at Poles and Belarusians, several of whom were murdered. With the help of local collaborators, the soldiers searched houses, beat up and killed people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds, and displayed particular brutality towards the Jews. The Germans stayed in the town for several days. At first, only individual Jews were killed, whereas a group of about 200 Jewish men of all ages was executed outside the town a few days later.<sup>554</sup> Responsible for these outrages was the third squadron of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment under *Hauptsturmführer* von Zastrow, which had already shown great cruelty and viciousness towards the Jews of Serniki. The same was true for their behaviour at Mozyr', where absolute cold-bloodedness was observed as well: after the execution, the cavalymen marched back into town singing, like a group of recruits coming back from a field exercise – perfect military fashion in the face of mass violence.<sup>555</sup>

Radio traffic between the third squadron and regimental headquarters about the assignment at Mozyr' serves as a perfect example for the use of camouflage language by the SS cavalry: first, the town was described as 'occupied by looters'; on the next day, the population was reported to have been 'looting' at first and was then 'pacified'.<sup>556</sup> As in other cases, the true meaning of these messages and the extent of the events can only be gathered by comparing different SS documents and including post-war sources in the analysis. Another characteristic feature is the very broad description of the situation and actions of SS cavalry units. Official documents

<sup>554</sup> Bericht der Ingenieurin Basja Pikman, in: Wassilij Grossman and others, *Das Schwarzbuch: der Genozid an den sowjetischen Juden* (Reinbek, 1995), pp. 332-336. Radio messages from the third squadron indicate that it stayed at Mosyr from 2 – 12 September, 1941, and executed at least 122 people during that time; see Funkspruch Nr. 36, 3. Schwadron an Rgt. 2, 2 September, 1941, 6 pm, in: BArchF, RS 4/936, p. 116, Funkspruch Nr. 3, 3. Schwadron an Rgt. 2, 10 September, 1941, 1.30 pm, in: *ibid.*, p. 54, and Funkspruch Nr. 6, 3. Schwadron an Rgt. 2, 12 September, 1941, 6.15 am, in: *ibid.*, p. 51. Cüppers estimates that several hundred Jews were killed at Mosyr; he has used court files and documents of the SS cavalry for his reconstruction. See Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 197.

<sup>555</sup> Bericht der Ingenieurin Basja Pikman, in Grossman and others, *Das Schwarzbuch*, p. 334.

<sup>556</sup> Funkspruch Nr. 36, 3. Schwadron an Rgt. 2, 2 September, 1941, 6 pm, in: BArchF, RS 4/936, p. 116; Funkspruch Nr. 37, 3. Schwadron an Rgt. 2, 3 September, 1941, 6 am, in: BArchF, RS 4/936, p. 115.

of the brigade often do not contain much information about particular incidents or localities that were touched by its squadrons. Instead, there are more general remarks along the line of, 'The designated area was combed', which serve to subsume whole days or even weeks of deployment in the operational area. What lies beneath this short and mostly inaccurate wording can only be gauged from first-hand accounts in many cases, such as post-war testimony of former SS cavalymen. They indicate a continuous radicalisation, which not only influenced the killing methods but also strongly affected the perpetrators.

In order to accelerate executions, SS cavalymen had begun to use machine-guns immediately after the start of the first mission, when they drove Jews into the swamps; this has also been documented for the mass executions at Pinsk. The mounted units soon combined the use of the available weaponry with a division of labour as different groups of soldiers were deployed for different tasks. As a result, they became more efficient in killing. Throughout the second mission in the Pripet Marshes, even heavy weapons were utilised: a former soldier of the fifth squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment testified that during a killing mission near Liakhovichi in mid-August 1941 he and his comrades had to open fire on a group of 200-300 Jews with an infantry support gun, a light artillery piece. At the execution site, another gun crew and the three machine-gun platoons of the fourth squadron of the regiment had surrounded the victims in a semi-circle. Whereas the two heavy weapons were withdrawn after some time, the machine-gunners kept firing at the victims until all of them had been killed, apart from a few who managed to escape.<sup>557</sup> The platoon that particular soldier belonged to was assigned to the fourth squadron for a period of about three weeks, until the two units reached the town of Rechitsa.<sup>558</sup> During that

<sup>557</sup> Vernehmung Paul Klose vom 2.12. 1968, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j138-139.

<sup>558</sup> Vernehmung Paul Klose vom 2.12. 1968, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j138-139; the exact date for the arrival of the SS cavalry units is not given in the files but the HSSPF Mitte stated that the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment and the bicycle reconnaissance detachment had reached that town on September 9, 1941. See situation report of the HSSPF Mitte, 9 September, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1,

time, the soldiers of the fifth and fourth squadrons carried out executions almost every other day.

The already brutal procedure of village searches and executions often escalated even further, as has been described by another cavalryman of the fifth squadron. He testified that roundups of the Jews were done ‘bestially’: some of the soldiers beat their victims with whips and rifle butts or kicked them. After that, the Jews were led to an open space and shot ‘with all available weapons’. In the case of an execution at Pagost, a small town some 15 miles south of Sluck, more than 1,000 Jewish men, women and children were led to a meadow in the swamp, where SS cavalrymen opened fire at them with machine-guns, carbines, and even mortars. Some threw hand-grenades into the group. The firing continued until there was no more movement in the pile of bodies; this was, however, not observed every time: after some executions, moaning and whining could be heard for hours, and some of the bodies were still moving.<sup>559</sup>

The same man also noticed that, after the shootings had been carried out in this brutal way for some time, the morale of the SS cavalrymen reached a low in some of the units in the second half of August, 1941; it could be considered ‘catastrophic’. Huge quantities of alcohol were given out, including an ‘extra ration’ after killing missions. Without this, the questioned veteran assumed, the officers would not have been able to motivate the men to do their task.<sup>560</sup> Not all of the soldiers, however, were able to numb their feelings: after the executions, many did not want to eat anything, as was later stated by former cooks of the squadrons. One man even said: ‘The events were just horrifying for me. [...] I know of myself that I was so down I

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file 5.

<sup>559</sup> Vernehmung Klaas Kruiuzenga vom 9.4. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, p. j67-68. See also Abschlußbericht der Zentralen Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen vom 20.8. 1963, p. 372.

<sup>560</sup> Vernehmung Klaas Kruiuzenga vom 9.4. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, p. j68-69.

did not eat for three days'.<sup>561</sup> Soldiers lost the respect for their superiors who ordered these actions; some even thought of writing to leaders of the Nazi party they knew or even to Hitler himself and tell them about the outrages they had to commit.<sup>562</sup> Just as during the first mission in the Pripet Marshes, the SS cavalrymen felt that their task was contradictory to the war they were supposed to be fighting as it had a largely non-military character: they stated that 'they had come to the Soviet Union to fight' and that 'this [the executions] could not be the duty of our soldiers'.<sup>563</sup> One former soldier said that he had felt desperation as he had been brought up to respect the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment and all of a sudden had to commit murders.<sup>564</sup> Another former cavalryman stated that he did not have anything against Jews personally as he had grown up with them in his hometown; nevertheless, he had to kill Jews at Pinsk.<sup>565</sup>

Statements of former cavalrymen about the killing process and their personal feelings (shock, depression, and disgust in most cases) are very rare in the court files. A former investigator in the case against Franz Magill and his subalterns of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment said that although some veterans spoke about these issues, most of them preferred not to give any particulars of the gruesome scenes they witnessed. A majority of the people who were questioned only acknowledged matters that could be thoroughly proven by using other testimonies or written sources. If at all, they would have spoken about the war only with former comrades, not even with their families. They often found it very hard to confront their experiences when they were asked about them some twenty years later.<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>561</sup> Birn, 'Zweierlei Wirklichkeit', p. 279.

<sup>562</sup> Vernehmung Klaas Kruizenga vom 9.4. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, p. j68. Interestingly, the sources do not contain any information indicating that the commanders were worried about order breaking down.

<sup>563</sup> Vernehmung August Sündermann, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1642; Birn, 'Zweierlei Wirklichkeit', p. 278.

<sup>564</sup> Vernehmung Hans Saggau, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1646.

<sup>565</sup> Vernehmung von Helmut Fenslaf, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp. 1647-1648.

<sup>566</sup> Interview with Bernhard D., retired chief inspector of the Landeskriminalamt Niedersachsen, 26

Towards the end of the brigade's second mission, new administrative decisions were made. The fusion of the two regiments, which had been ordered in late July but was officially announced only now, left the subunits largely unchanged: the previous staffs of the mounted detachments, for example, now became regimental staffs. In order to improve the tactical efficiency of the support units, the two engineer platoons now formed an engineer squadron. The brigade was also assigned a signals platoon from an SS infantry regiment that had been disbanded, and the veterinary company of the *Kommandostab*. Apart from changes in staff and support formations, other subunits received a new status as well: the squadrons which had operated as a vanguard thus far were merged to form a *Radfahraufklärungsabteilung* (bicycle reconnaissance detachment, often referred to as RAA in the court files), which consisted of two bicycle squadrons, an anti-tank squadron, a staff unit and a signals platoon. Throughout its deployment in the swamplands, the bicycle reconnaissance detachment proved to be far more practical and mobile than the horse squadrons, which were slowed down by their support units. Finally, the new structure of the SS Cavalry Brigade was announced by the *SS-Führungshauptamt* on 6 September.<sup>567</sup>

At the beginning of September, the brigade staff was relocated from Liakhovichi to Bobruisk.<sup>568</sup> There, the SS cavalry participated in a mass execution comparable to the murders at Pinsk which, unlike this other massacre in August or the final liquidation of the Jewish community of Bobruisk in November, 1941, has not been documented at the time and could only recently be reconstructed by historical research. Between 4 and 9 September, 1941, about 7,000 Jewish men, women and children were

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January, 2011; Vernehmung Heinz Frenken vom 24.6. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, p. c9.

<sup>567</sup> Verfügung des SS-Führungshauptamts über die Umgliederung der SS-Kav.Regimenter 1 und 2 vom 6.9. 1941, in: BArchB, NS 19/3487, fiche 19-20; KTB KDOS, entries from 30 August and 4 September, 1941; Abschlußbericht der ZStI vom 20.8. 1963, pp. 359-361; Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., pp. 357-358 and pp. 360-361. For the RAA, see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 30.8. – 5.9. 1941, SS-Kav. Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; according to this document, the merging of the bicycle squadrons was ordered on 31 August, 1941.

<sup>568</sup> Brigadebefehl Nr. 4 vom 31.8. 1941, quoted in: Abschlußbericht der ZStI vom 20.8. 1963, p. 367.

executed at a military airfield by members of various German paramilitary and military units.<sup>569</sup> A subunit of *Einsatzkommando 8*, which in turn was part of *Einsatzgruppe B*, had been based at Bobruisk earlier and was familiar with the surroundings. Its members rounded up Jews and led them to the execution site. Soldiers of a *Wehrmacht* transport unit brought other victims there in lorries. At the airfield, airmen of a *Luftwaffe* ground unit and SS cavalymen drove the Jews to pits which had been dug out, beating and insulting the helpless people. They also cordoned off the killing field and carried out the shootings, which happened in an extremely brutal manner: once a group of Jews had been killed, the next group had to lie down on top of the dead bodies. The murder continued for at least two days; at night, the headlights of trucks illuminated the site. Statements of witnesses to these crimes contain information on the involvement of numerous other German formations, including military police, an anti-aircraft unit, and convalescents of a military hospital. Some of the perpetrators, especially the *Luftwaffe* men and the patients, volunteered for the job because they wanted to ‘try out their pistols’. Of the SS cavalry, the mounted battery and the fifth squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment its took part in the shootings; it is possible that the third squadron was involved as well.<sup>570</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> To this day, reasons and initiators of this execution remain unclear. Christian Gerlach has made the case that the numerous acts of mass killing carried out in Bobruisk and the vicinity in the second half of 1941 were part of a concerted action aimed at Jewish people who did not work for the Germans; thus, a local food crisis was to be solved radically. Other documented incidents in this area include three massacres committed by the security police in September and October, which led to the death of 2205 Jews, the killing of about 4,000 prisoners of war at the Bobruisk citadel on 7 November and the annihilation of the Jewish ghetto on 7-8 November, during which *Einsatzkommando 8* and Police Battalion 316 killed at least 5,281, perhaps even 6,600 Jews. After this series of atrocities, Bobruisk was reported to be ‘judenfrei’ by the German authorities. See Gerlach, *Morde*, pp. 599-600; Curilla, *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei und der Holocaust im Baltikum und in Weißrußland 1941 – 1944*, pp. 540-542.

<sup>570</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 198-199; Gerlach, *Morde*, pp. 599-600 and p. 609; Krausnick and Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges*, pp. 181-182; Vernehmung Otto Prade vom 30.10. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5543, pp. m34-m36; Vernehmung Heinz Büttner vom 19.5. 1961, *ibid.*, pp. m6-m7; Vernehmung Richard Gloth vom 14.8. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, pp. i4-i5; Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., pp. 1788-1802; information on the involvement of Luftwaffe soldiers, who belonged to the Fliegerhorstkommandantur E 26/XI, can be found in the files of the case Ermittlungen gegen Schreiber u.a. wg. Judenerschießungen in Sluzk – Bobruisk, in: BArchL, B 162/1548 – 1549; see especially Anzeige von Alfred Habeck vom 30.3. 1960 betr. Judenerschießungen in Bobruisk in B 162/1548, pp. 1-4, and Vernehmung Alfred Habeck vom 30.3. 1960, *ibid.*, pp. 11-15.

The involvement and presence of the HSSPF Mitte at the execution on the airfield in early September has been proven; in all likelihood he supervised the deployment of forces under his jurisdiction, namely the men of the security police and the security service and the SS cavalrymen. The wide range of other German formations that took part in the massacre on the airfield can be explained by a shortage of manpower on the part of the subunit of *Einsatzkommando 8*: as this was only a small troop, German authorities basically ordered all available soldiers to help with the logistics, security, and implementation of the killings. A *Luftwaffe* soldier stated that the *Wehrmacht* commander of Bobruisk had given his unit the order to take part in the executions; to these killing details added an unknown number of volunteers.<sup>571</sup>

An evaluation of statements of former soldiers provides more details; it emphasises the role of the local *Einsatzkommando* detail, the scope of action of those involved, and the barbaric nature of the events at Bobruisk. The SS cavalrymen seemed to have been incorporated into the execution squads immediately after their arrival: members of an advance party of the mounted battery were used in small groups for sealing off the site and for the shooting itself under the command of an officer of the security service even before the main body of their unit had reached Bobruisk. They were posted to killing squads again in the following days; according to one statement, they killed between 600 and 1200 people.<sup>572</sup> A former soldier of the fifth squadron stated that one of his comrades had to shoot Jews, including women and children, for a whole day. The whole field had been full of corpses; Jews were machine-gunned in the evening as their execution could not be done by riflemen alone before nightfall. When the killing was over, Russians were ordered to bury the

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<sup>571</sup> Tagebuch des Chefs der Bandenkampfverbände, entry from 5 September, 1941, in: BArchB, R 20/45b, p. 11; Gerlach, *Morde*, p. 609.

<sup>572</sup> Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., pp. 1782-1797. See also Vernehmung Otto Prade vom 30.10. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5543, pp. m34-m36; Vernehmung Heinz Büttner vom 19.5. 1961, *ibid.*, pp. m6-m7.

dead and threw them into the pits with pitchforks.<sup>573</sup>

Throughout the missions in the Pripet Marshes and especially in the light of events such as the massacre at the airfield near Bobruisk, a demoralisation of the SS cavalymen became apparent. Behavioural patterns that had been displayed in Poland already reappeared in Belorussia: some of the men went beyond their orders by humiliating their victims before they killed them. This happened very often during the two months in the Pripet Marshes and was observed by witnesses both in small towns and villages as during large missions. On numerous occasions the soldiers robbed the Jews, either collectively as at Pinsk or individually, when victims were rounded up and begged for their lives by offering watches or other valuables.<sup>574</sup> Also, Jews were humiliated publicly: in one village, they had to clean stables with their bare hands so the SS cavalymen could use them for their horses.<sup>575</sup> At other places, victims were forced to dance in the street. They also were sometimes kicked and punched on the march to the killing sites.<sup>576</sup> Some of the men who mistreated Jews even boasted about this later in front of their comrades.<sup>577</sup>

In this atmosphere of brutality, there was also plenty of room for perpetrators who embraced violence openly and relished participation in killings, thus setting themselves apart from the other men. Their comrades were appalled at what they saw: a former soldier described a junior officer as 'bloodthirsty'. The *SS-Untersturmführer* not only murdered arbitrarily but also trampled down wounded people at execution sites until his trousers were full of blood.<sup>578</sup> Another example for

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<sup>573</sup> Vernehmung Richard Gloth vom 14.8. 1962, in BArchL, B 162/5542, pp. i4-i5.

<sup>574</sup> Vernehmung von Otto Krumwiede vom 14.3. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5541, p. g44.

<sup>575</sup> Vernehmung von Horst Winkler vom 17.7. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j4; Vernehmung von Karl Neumann vom 30.7. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j10.

<sup>576</sup> Birn, 'Zweierlei Wirklichkeit', p. 279. At Pinsk, a cook from the first squadron of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment brutally beat up a Jew and continued to kick him when he was lying on the ground. A former soldier who witnessed this scene later assumed that the Jew was kicked to death during this incident. This statement was taken from the indictment in the case against Magill and others; see Müller-Tupath, *Becher*, p. 75.

<sup>577</sup> Vernehmung von Klaas Kruizenga vom 9.4. 1964, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j68.

<sup>578</sup> Vernehmung Klaas Kruizenga vom 9.4. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, p. j69.

this deviant behaviour was *SS-Oberscharführer* Hans-Walter Zech-Nenntwich, the reconnaissance officer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment's second squadron. On the advance through the marshes, he shot eight people who appeared 'suspicious' to him; his former comrades later testified that this claim was highly dubious as some of the victims were women. One person, full of fear of death, asked Zech-Nenntwich to be shot first so he would not have to suffer anymore. The SS man replied cold-bloodedly, 'Wait till it is your turn', pushed the man back and shot him last.<sup>579</sup> At another incident when Jews had been rounded up and were about to be shot, Zech-Nenntwich pushed himself forward although he did not have to do this as a superior. He ordered one of his men to hand over his rifle and shot a Jewish woman himself. The court before which he was tried after the war viewed this as an excessive crime which was committed out of base motives such as lust to kill and racial hatred.<sup>580</sup>

Not all of the SS cavalry soldiers, however, did have to kill or became willing executioners. Examples of soldiers' biographies demonstrate how easily a man could find himself within a killing unit as a shooter or within a staff or supply unit as a non-involved bystander: whether one became a murderer was in most cases determined by pure chance. The soldier's specialism was of key importance in this context as riflemen and machine-gunners bore the brunt of the killings. As the SS Cavalry Brigade needed more support personnel than an infantry unit, many soldiers were employed to take care of the horses and to transport supplies. They did not have to take part in executions normally and often used their function as an excuse in their questionings after the war, both regarding their own participation and knowledge of the crimes.<sup>581</sup> There is evidence, however, that some of them came forward when

<sup>579</sup> Birn, 'Zweierlei Wirklichkeit', p. 279 and p. 288.

<sup>580</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, pp. 56-57 and pp. 90-91; Birn, 'Zweierlei Wirklichkeit', p. 279; interview with Bernhard D., retired chief inspector of the Landeskriminalamt Niedersachsen, 26 January, 2011; interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011.

<sup>581</sup> See for example Vernehmung von August Gerber vom 15.8. 1962, in: BAArchL, B 162/5541, p. h9;

volunteers were wanted; also, support personnel were called upon in cases of manpower shortage during large operations. At Pinsk, for example, even drivers were assigned to guard Jews on the way to a killing site.<sup>582</sup> Apart from their personal function in the squadrons, veterans also gave other reasons for not having been involved in shootings: they claimed to have been on cordon duty or had to guard the horses at execution sites.<sup>583</sup> Whether or not these were exculpatory statements could often not be verified by the investigators.<sup>584</sup>

Several cases of non-conformist behaviour have been documented for the SS cavalry as well; some soldiers tried to come up with possibilities to shirk executions. When he learned of an upcoming mission after a roundup of Jews and was ordered to leave the quarters, one of Zech-Nenntwich's subordinates attempted to stay with the horses of the unit, pretending to groom them. The *SS-Oberscharführer* noticed this and barked at him, 'That concerns you, too!' The private then left with the rest of the troop and killed two Jews during shootings on the same day.<sup>585</sup> Others were more successful in avoiding participation. One man asked his platoon leader not to assign him to a firing squad and was sent away; thus, he did not have to kill anybody at Pinsk.<sup>586</sup> During the second mission in the Pripet Marshes, a cook from the first squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment was ordered by a drunken officer to shoot a woman with a child, thus giving an example of moral degeneracy and the influence of alcohol:

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Vernehmung von Karl Spiess vom 25.6. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i37; Vernehmung von Richard Gloth vom 14.8. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i1 and p. i16; Vernehmung von Josef Zorn vom 21.5. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i28.

<sup>582</sup> At Pinsk, most of the soldiers from the baggage trains of the first squadron of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment were used as guards; see Müller-Tupath, *Becher*, p. 74.

<sup>583</sup> Vernehmung von Johann Salz, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, p. 1653; Vernehmung von Horst Winkler vom 17.7. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j5; Vernehmung von Josef Hagl vom 15.1. 1964, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, pp. j83-j84.

<sup>584</sup> Interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011.

<sup>585</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>586</sup> Vernehmung Gerhard Blum, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1648.

Once the drunken *SS-Untersturmführer* Karl Weeke came to me and told [me] that partisans had been captured. All of a sudden he said to me: ‘For you, cook, I have a fine task. You have never shot anybody. You will shoot a woman with a child, she belongs to the partisans.’ I was then supposed to report the execution of that order. I wanted to avoid this task and could only achieve it because our medic [...] agreed to carry out the shooting for me.<sup>587</sup>

Thus far, historical research regarding the SS Cavalry Brigade has not found examples of open refusal to commit killings.<sup>588</sup> There has, however, been at least one instance: a soldier from the fifth squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment was assigned to a firing squad that was ordered to execute an alleged partisan. The soldier refused to obey the order and told his superior that he could not shoot defenceless people. For this refusal, the man was punished by having to march the next day. Some of his comrades looked down on him but he did not have to face any serious consequences: he was not court-martialled or threatened with execution.<sup>589</sup>

This was absolutely contrary to the statements of most of the other questioned veterans, many of whom pleaded superior orders and said that they could not have refused taking part in killings as they were afraid of being executed for insubordination.<sup>590</sup> Thus, they found themselves in a situation that has been termed ‘putative duress’: ‘Even if the consequences of disobedience would not have been so

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<sup>587</sup> Vernehmung Klaas Kruizenga vom 9.4. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, p. j69.

<sup>588</sup> Birn, ‘Zweierlei Wirklichkeit’, p. 280. Martin Cüppers, who analysed the behaviour of men of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Infantry Brigade as well as the SS Cavalry Brigade, has found examples of refusals with the first few units but does not mention any for the SS cavalry. He assumes that only a ‘vanishingly small’ number of SS men openly refused to participate in killings of Jews for personal reasons; see Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 109-113.

<sup>589</sup> Vernehmung von Daniel Teske vom 4.10. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, pp. j37-38.

<sup>590</sup> Vernehmung von Bruno Schröder vom 4.10. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j46; Vernehmung Hans Saggau, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1646; Vernehmung von Helmut Fenslaf, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp. 1647-1648; Vernehmung von Walter Reichert, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, p. 1650; Vernehmung von Ferdinand Henschke vom 5.12. 1962, in: StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Nr. 1013, p. 177.

dire, the men who complied could not have known that at the time. They sincerely thought that they had had no choice when faced with orders to kill'.<sup>591</sup> Also, they referred to the strict discipline in the horse units and the nature of their superiors: particular squadron commanders like Gadischke or Charwat had a reputation for being brutal and the men declared that these officers would not have tolerated disobedience; one even said it was not possible to fake illness.<sup>592</sup> Some claimed that their entire squadron had to participate so nobody could avoid obeying orders to kill people.<sup>593</sup> The argument of superior orders, however, has been made insubstantial both by examples taken from protocols of questionings and historical research. As the calling for volunteers at the beginning of the mission in Belorussia and the various incidents of shirking and even refusal show, it was possible to avoid the killings. Regarding possible consequences it has been proven that no case of serious punishment for the refusal to carry out an execution is known for the SS and other institutions involved in the Holocaust.<sup>594</sup>

On 5 September, the brigade had received a new task: upon request of the Second Army, it was to 'pacify' the south-easternmost part of Belorussia, continuing its advance from the line it had reached so far. The reason for this mission was a safety issue: with its forces in rear areas spread dangerously thin, supply columns of the army were attacked by enemy groups up to company strength, and bridges were blown up. Thus, the SS cavalry was sent into an area which was more clearly defined by the railway line from Mozyr' to Gomel' in the north, the river Pripet in the west and south and the river Dnieper in the east (until its confluence with the Pripet). The

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<sup>591</sup> Browning, *Ordinary men*, p. 170.

<sup>592</sup> Vernehmung von Karl Spiess vom 25.6. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i35 and i37; Vernehmung Hugo Link, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1643; Vernehmung Bernd Wenzel, in BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1645.

<sup>593</sup> Vernehmung von Karl Spiess vom 25.6. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i35; Vernehmung Klaas Kruizenga vom 9.4. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, p. j67 and p. j69.

<sup>594</sup> Herbert Jäger, *Verbrechen unter totalitärer Herrschaft. Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Gewaltdelinquenz* (Olten, 1967), pp. 81-82, pp. 95-122, and pp. 158-160.

two regiments were assigned Rechitsa and Mozyr' as destinations respectively, which they were to reach as soon as possible. The territory which was to be traversed was not only vast; the HSSPF Mitte even claimed exaggeratedly that this region had not been touched by German soldiers before.<sup>595</sup> When the new order was given, some parts of the brigade had arrived at their targets already, as is proven by the killing missions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment at Mozyr' in early September. Others continued their advance: the commander's squadron, a part of the brigade staff, arrived at Mozyr' on 7 September and relocated to Khoiniki a day later. Supplies for the brigade had to come from Bobruisk at that point, which led to shortages of ammunition, fuel, and food for the horses: transport routes were overstretched and roads in eastern Belorussia were very bad. Nevertheless, the SS cavalry continued to engage in combat with Red Army stragglers and to eliminate Jews, wherever the soldiers could get hold of them. The deployment east of the Bobruisk – Mozyr' line closely resembled that of the previous weeks as it took the form of 'combing' allocated areas.<sup>596</sup>

The 'pacification' of the area between Pripet and Dnieper also saw the first involvement of the bicycle reconnaissance detachment in the destruction of the Jewish population of Belorussia.<sup>597</sup> Post-war testimonies indicate that the two bicycle squadrons and the staff unit conducted a number of executions along the road from Mozyr' to Rechitsa. As most of the settlements touched by the SS cavalymen in this area were little villages, and questionings only took place about twenty years after

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<sup>595</sup> KTB KDOS, entry from 7 September, 1941; Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, p. 686; Tagebuch des Chefs der Bandenkampfverbände, entry from 13 September, 1941, in: BArchB, R 20/45b, p. 13; Lagebericht des HSSPF Mitte, 7 September, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 1, file 5; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 6. – 12.9. 1941, SS-Kav. Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; Vorbefehl für den Einsatz der SS-Kav.Brig. im Dreieck Mosyr – Gomel – Prypec – Mündung, 5 September, 1941, *ibid.*

<sup>596</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 6. – 12.9. 1941, SS-Kav. Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3. Cüppers assumes that Fegelein came to Mosyr himself to supervise the killings and further radicalised them; see Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 197.

<sup>597</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 30.8. – 5.9. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 6. – 12.9. 1941, SS-Kav. Brigade, *ibid.*

the actual events, the men were often not able to specify the killings. From the court files, four different executions with more than ten victims can be reconstructed; their exact time and place is unknown. The scene of the first of these massacres was a camp in the forest near Khoiniki, a former Soviet training institution, where the RAA was based for about two weeks in September, 1941. At this camp, 80 – 100 Jewish men, women, and children were shot by the first squadron, which also had cordoned off the area. From there, the unit conducted further searches and roundups.<sup>598</sup> At one such incident, the first and second squadrons drove about 150 Jewish inhabitants of a small town into a church, from where they were taken in trucks of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment on the next day, presumably to their execution. Shortly afterwards, another group of about 120 – 180 Jews was arrested by the first squadron and taken away.<sup>599</sup> Several former soldiers also described a mission in a village where between 30 and 50 Jews were held at a school over night and shot on the next day.<sup>600</sup> To these four incidents added a number of smaller killings with fewer victims. It can be assumed that the highly mobile cyclists participated in about ten different missions until their relocation to Rechitsa, where they arrived around 27 September. The number of victims can only be estimated but ranges between about 400 and 500; possibly, it was even higher.<sup>601</sup>

The two cavalry regiments continued their search east of the Pripet river and

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<sup>598</sup> Vernehmung Heinz Frenken vom 24.6. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp. c6-c10; zweite Vernehmung von Kurt Hellwig vom 19.5. 1965, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp. b358; Vernehmung Kurt Ziegler vom 8.7. 1964, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp. c74-75. According to Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 6. – 12.9. 1941, SS-Kav. Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3, the RAA was sent to Choiniki on 8 September, 1941. It was still based there on 20 September; see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 13.-19.9. 1941, *ibid.*

<sup>599</sup> Vernehmung Otto Mittelstädt vom 22.5. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp. b34-35; Vernehmung Heinz Frenken, *ibid.*, pp. c8-9.

<sup>600</sup> Vernehmung Kurt Ziegler, *ibid.*, pp. c78-80; Vernehmung Samuel Grieb vom 23.7. 1963, BArchL, B 162/5538, p. b56; Vernehmung Rudolf Delfmann, *ibid.*, pp. b75-76; Vernehmung Kurt Hellwig, *ibid.*, pp. b112-113; Vernehmung Karl Gottschalk, *ibid.*, b246-247.

<sup>601</sup> One incident with 20 victims and another one where five Jews were killed during this time are mentioned in Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., pp. 1814-1815 and p. 1822. As of 27 September, the location of the RAA is given as Retschiza; see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 20. – 26.9. 1941, SS-Kav. Brigade, September 26, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3. The investigators did not find any evidence for an involvement of the anti-tank squadron of the RAA in executions; see Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., p. 1826.

quickly approached their destination: at the end of September, the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment had arrived at Rechitsa, whereas the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment had reached Loev on the Belorussian – Ukrainian border.<sup>602</sup> On the march and from local bases where squadrons stayed overnight, they now followed a slightly modified approach during their ‘combing missions’: instead of scouting and surrounding a village elaborately before searching it, the SS cavalrymen entered it at dawn, crossed it at full speed and occupied its outskirts. Subsequently, the entire population of the settlement was called together and examined by the commanding officer and allocated units of the security police and the secret field police of the *Wehrmacht* with a special focus on local males. The Germans then ‘decided their fate in order to secure and pacify the area’. This method, as described by the commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre, was soon recommended as best practice for guard units in the hinterland.<sup>603</sup> In an order to the SS Cavalry Brigade that was issued two weeks later, Hermann Fegelein again stressed the importance of the cooperation of SS and *Wehrmacht* units deployed in combing missions; he also urged his men to make it plain to the locals during village searches that ‘the commanding officer was master of life and death’.<sup>604</sup> A prime example for this practice was a mission at Starobin in late August, where Gustav Lombard addressed the inhabitants after the Jewish population had been eliminated.<sup>605</sup>

Hermann Fegelein presented the final report on the ‘pacification’ of the Pripet Marshes on 18 September, 1941. This document shows that what seems like the

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<sup>602</sup> Staff and troops of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment had reached Retschiza on 22 September; see Lagebericht des HSSPF Mitte, 22 September, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 1, file 5. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment arrived at Loev on 21 September; see Lagebericht des HSSPF Mitte, 21 September, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 1, file 5. The staff of the cavalry brigade was to arrive at Rechitsa on 19 September; see Brigadebefehl für die Übernahme des Raumes zwischen Prypjjet u. Dnjepr, SS-Kav.-Brigade, 16 September, 1941, in: BArchL, B 162/21679, p. 281.

<sup>603</sup> Korpsbefehl Nr. 52 vom 14.9. 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, in: BArchF, RS 4/930, p. 28.

<sup>604</sup> Brigadebefehl Nr. 8, SS-Kav.Brigade, 28 September, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/20.

<sup>605</sup> For the mission at Starobin, see ch. 5.

indiscriminate killing of hundreds was actually following a detailed plan and deemed a very successful mission. The commander praised his men for fulfilling their tasks and overcoming any obstacle. He also paid respect to the military enemy who fought bravely until the point of complete annihilation; his depiction of other enemies, however, contained strong elements of racism: partisans were described as ‘cold-blooded’, ‘asiatically cruel’, and ‘dastardly’. Jews, he claimed again, were in fact acting as informers for partisans and maintaining communications between different groups of insurgents. Apart from Fegelein’s view of the mission of the SS Cavalry Brigade between late July and early to mid-September, 1941, the report also contains the sum of own and enemy losses, which again presents a staggering discrepancy: 14,178 Jews, 1,001 partisans and 699 Red Army men were shot whereas the SS cavalry had suffered casualties of 17 dead, three missing, and 36 wounded.<sup>606</sup> Fegelein’s judgement regarding the Pripet Marshes, which he now considered ‘pacified’, presumably referred more to the destruction of the Jewish communities. As far as the entire region is concerned, it was premature to say the least as Belorussia became a stronghold of the Soviet partisan movement as was to be the case from the following year.

At this time, the SS Cavalry Brigade had left an unprecedented blood trail across the entire southern half of the Soviet republic. It had changed the course of the Holocaust by including even more groups of victims, a development that was soon taken over by the *Einsatzgruppen* and order police units. This was only possible through the good relationship of the SS cavalry’s command with the *Wehrmacht* and the very effective hierarchy of the SS. Heinrich Himmler triggered a steady escalation of the killings by direct orders, personal visits, and through his representative Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski. The army was generally supportive of

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<sup>606</sup> Abschlussmeldung der SS-Kav.Brigitade über Befriedung der Prypec-Sümpfe, 18 September, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

a very brutal policy of cleansing the occupied territories.

The conduct and deployment of the SS Cavalry Brigade in Belorussia were shaped by a unique combination of characters and circumstances. Hermann Fegelein was able to continue the leadership principle he had developed in Poland, a clear division of labour within the brigade staff and the subunits. The brigade commander was responsible for leading the unit as a whole and for liaising with superior *Wehrmacht* and SS agencies including the *Reichsführer*. Several trusted officers from the middle level of the chain of command, most importantly Kurt Becher and Gustav Lombard, played a crucial role in implementing Himmler's directives: they formulated killing orders and developed killing methods, which were then executed by their subalterns in the field.

Lombard's approach (which included women and children in the killing process) became general practice – first in the mounted detachment of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, then in the brigade, and finally in all German killing squads in the Soviet Union. The trust Fegelein had in this particular officer is also illustrated by the fact that Lombard was appointed commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment at the beginning of the second mission in the Pripet Marshes. His level of initiative even surpassed the brutality of the *Einsatzgruppen*: despite the fact that these units and police formations had executed women and children on some occasions during the summer of 1941, they were following guidelines from Berlin more strictly. In the SS Cavalry Brigade, however, radical initiative was more strongly encouraged as the leadership of the unit was based on trust and the dynamics of 'working towards the *Führer*'. It was this flexibility, in combination with the criminal aims of the SS and the unscrupulousness of those in charge, which set the SS Cavalry Brigade apart as a precursor for the Holocaust.

The soldiers of the brigade fulfilled the task they had been given by the

*Reichsführer* although they had to overcome their personal inhibitions. In the process of getting used to mass murder, different types of perpetrators emerged: most of the men obeyed the killing orders; some acted very brutally and committed excesses; and a very small number of men avoided or refused participation in mass murder. Two other aspects were of importance when the SS Cavalry Brigade became involved in acts of mass violence during the summer of 1941. In Belorussia, the Germans found many willing collaborators who helped them to find and round up the Jews. In a region as ethnically diverse as this one, the Holocaust would not have been possible without the help of the locals. Also, the SS cavalrymen did not have to fight on the frontline and took hardly any casualties. They did, however, also have encounters with enemy troops, which helped them to gain more combat experience. The missions in the Pripet Marshes represent the first phase in the history of the unit during which the 'dual role' became apparent, with the ideological side dominating the character of deployment. This focus, in combination with the institutional brutalisation from above, was the decisive factor that formed the character of the SS Cavalry Brigade during the summer of 1941. Towards the end of 1941, this situation changed as the brigade's operations against Soviet partisans and the Red Army were of a military nature.

5) The SS Cavalry Brigade and its atrocities during the first phase of partisan warfare in the Soviet Union

The fight against insurgents in the theatre of operations is a central aspect in the history of the SS Cavalry Brigade. It went through three different stages between 1939 and 1942: operations against the Polish underground during the first two years of its existence, deployment in Belorussia during the summer of 1941 (where partisan warfare was only a small part of its actual task), and the fight against organised Soviet partisans in the Toropets area in 1941 – 1942. As not all squadrons of the two cavalry regiments were used against guerrillas in Poland and the units were not generally combat-ready during the first two years of the war, this chapter focuses on the missions of the brigade from mid-1941 onwards. After the beginning of the invasion of the Soviet Union, a partisan scare developed on the German side, both in response to the threat from Red Army stragglers behind the frontline and as a justification for the brutal treatment of potential enemies. For the SS Cavalry Brigade, this coincided with the perpetration of acts of mass violence which were directed predominantly against Jews. Towards the end of the year, many non-Jewish civilians fell victim to the unit as well. Using the alleged fight against insurgents in Belorussia and actual counter-insurgency missions from Toropets as examples, the role of the SS Cavalry Brigade in the war of annihilation behind the front will be discussed in relation to the beginning of the partisan movement in the Soviet Union.<sup>607</sup>

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<sup>607</sup> Regarding the historical context of partisan warfare, I have decided to use the chronology given by Jörn Hasenclever as his work represents the actual state of research on German occupation policy in the sector of Army Group Centre and its hinterland. According to his definition, the first phase of partisan warfare in the Soviet Union began with the German invasion and ended with the battle of Moscow. During the second phase, the *Wehrmacht* lost the initiative to Soviet guerrillas in the summer of 1942. Nevertheless, it was only after the battle of Kursk that the partisan movement proved to be a decisive part of Soviet warfare. Thus, the time from the summer of 1943 until the

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In the Pripet Marshes, the frame of reference changed again and even developed an official and an unofficial version this time. The official frame, which was represented by the general orders to the two regiments, was termed ‘pacification’ and aimed at giving the regimental commanders the freedom to carry out their killing tasks. The unofficial version, which was the reality for the men serving in the cavalry units, did not have anything to do with ‘partisan warfare’ but consisted of the murder of the Jewish population, plus that of any other individuals considered potentially hostile. This system still reverberated some twenty years later, when the surviving members of the SS Cavalry Brigade were questioned about the events of the summer of 1941. Defence pleas of former officers in the Magill trial who upheld the version of Jews allegedly supporting partisans as a reason for executions were dismissed by the court as untruthful.<sup>608</sup> By contrast, many witnesses clearly differentiated between the two frames, with most of them supporting the unofficial, actual version. From the protocols of questionings of the rank and file, four different patterns of testimony can be extracted:

- 1) Some former soldiers said that their superiors had claimed a correspondence between Jews and partisans, which had not been true.<sup>609</sup>

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extensive liberation of Soviet territory in 1944 represents the third phase of the war against partisans. See Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, p. 344. As the SS Cavalry Brigade was mostly fighting on the front from late 1941 until its withdrawal from the Soviet Union in mid-1942, its operations against guerrillas fall into the first phase for the most part. The anti-partisan missions of the later 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer* will not be discussed in this dissertation.

<sup>608</sup> *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1966. Bd. 20*, p. 67 and p. 72. Junior officers from both regiments who were heard as witnesses often held the same view: see Vernehmung von Felix Jahn, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp. 1645-1646; Vernehmung von Georg Vieth, in: BArchL, B 162/5541, p. g11.

<sup>609</sup> Vernehmung August Sündermann, in: BArchL, B 162/2329, p. 1642; Vernehmung von Ferdinand Henschke vom 5.12. 1962, in: StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Nr. 1013, p. 176; Vernehmung Heinz Frenken vom 24.6. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, p. c11; Vernehmung von Richard Gloth vom 14.8. 1962, in:

- 2) Some stated that their squadron had killed partisans and Jews alike with Jews having been a much larger group of victims.<sup>610</sup>
- 3) Some testified that they had killed only Jews.<sup>611</sup>
- 4) A few claimed that they had only been deployed against partisans.<sup>612</sup>

It is, however, very difficult to evaluate the actual situation of the SS cavalymen in hindsight as they found themselves in a region with an ethnically diverse population, where anticipated concepts of the enemy often did not prove to be true. It was up to their superiors to declare who was a partisan or a Jew and therefore to be killed; at many occasions, especially before their first executions in the Pripet Marshes, the men only learned just before the actual shooting what they were about to do, a *modus operandi* the officers might have chosen deliberately so that their men would not ask questions about the inclusion of women and children.<sup>613</sup> It becomes evident from the court files that the men did not think that all Jews were partisans; with a large number of different missions within a very short time, however, it was perhaps not always possible for the men to decide whether the people they encountered could be considered hostile or not.<sup>614</sup>

In spite of the all-encompassing German orders, there were no organised partisans in Belorussia and the Pripet Marshes at the time. The advance of the *Wehrmacht* had been too quick for the Soviets to organise the necessary structures for an underground movement and next to nothing had been done in the preceding years.<sup>615</sup>

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BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i2.

<sup>610</sup> Vernehmung Kurt Ziegler vom 8.7. 1964, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp. c76-78 and pp. c85-86; Vernehmung von Josef Zorn vom 21.5. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, pp. i27-28.

<sup>611</sup> Vernehmung von Karl Spiess vom 25.6. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i34 and p. i39; Vernehmung von Josef Hagl vom 15.1. 1964, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j87.

<sup>612</sup> Vernehmung von August Gerber vom 15.8. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5541, p. h9; Birn, 'Zweierlei Wirklichkeit', p. 278.

<sup>613</sup> Interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011; Vernehmung von Richard Gloth vom 14.8. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i2.

<sup>614</sup> Birn, 'Zweierlei Wirklichkeit', pp. 278-279.

<sup>615</sup> Slepyan, *Stalin's guerrillas*, pp. 19-22; Overy, *Russia's War*, p. 143.

What happened after 22 June 1941 was a hasty and unprofessional improvisation of units without central leadership that were completely ineffective in the field: those who were meant to act as insurgents were often not willing to fight as they were under the impression of a general atmosphere of chaos, disintegration of the Soviet system and German military success.<sup>616</sup> The potential reservoir of partisans consisted essentially of *vostochniki* (members of the Soviet administration, for example from the NKVD or the Communist party), *okruzhentsy* (stragglers of the Red Army who had not been captured), and Soviet prisoners of war who had escaped from German captivity. Many of these men had no intention to fight; if at all, they carried out spontaneous actions against the Germans and were not capable of effective partisan activity. Primarily, they were concerned with their own survival: to avoid persecution by the Germans, many took refuge in remote villages where they worked as farmhands, hid in the forests or tried to make their way to the Soviet lines instead of confronting the enemy.<sup>617</sup>

On the German side, different impressions, reactions and general directives can be distinguished. The intelligence section of Army Group Centre did actually capture Soviet instructions for partisan groups in late July.<sup>618</sup> Also, the Red Army made use of saboteurs who parachuted behind the front or tried to infiltrate through the German lines from the first weeks of the war. When viewed in the context of the

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<sup>616</sup> Gerlach, *Morde*, p. 558; Bogdan Musial, *Sowjetische Partisanen in Weißrußland. Innenansichten aus dem Gebiet Baranoviči 1941 – 1944. Eine Dokumentation* (Munich, 2004), pp. 17-20; Bogdan Musial, *Sowjetische Partisanen 1941 – 1944. Mythos und Wirklichkeit* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, Zurich 2009), pp. 71-75.

<sup>617</sup> Musial, *Baranoviči*, pp. 33-34; Musial, *Mythos und Wirklichkeit*, p. 65 and pp. 73-74. According to these works, there were only scattered groups of partisans in the operational area of the SS cavalry. Some uncoordinated groups existed in the Baranovichi, Pinsk, and Mozyr' districts in the summer of 1941; see Musial, *Baranoviči*, p. 36, and Musial, *Mythos und Wirklichkeit*, p. 73. They did not present a serious danger to the Germans.

<sup>618</sup> Auszugsweise Übersetzung der Kampfanweisung für Partisanen-Gruppen, in: BArchF, RH 22/224, pp. 179-182. This captured document was forwarded to all units subordinate to the commander of the rear area of Army Group Centre on 26 July, 1941. It contained information on tasks, tactics, and equipment of the partisans. The focus was on the destruction of enemy transport and supplies as well as attacks on enemy troops by means of surprise attacks and ambushes. Partisans were advised to take cover in the forests and to use captured weapons and Molotov cocktails.

German war against the Soviet Union, these incidents only constituted a small phenomenon and did not influence the outcome of the fighting. But for propaganda use, the German High Command blended them with reports of Soviet attacks on *Wehrmacht* units in the hinterland and atrocities such as mutilations or shootings of prisoners of war and wounded soldiers, which often occurred in the heat of the battle and were committed by the Germans as well.<sup>619</sup>

This amalgamation happened both on an official level as well as in the form of instructions for troops. A typical example is presented by a situation report from Police Battalion 307 after a reconnaissance mission near Sluck, a small town some 70 miles east of Baranovichi. Whereas most of the area was completely free of enemy activity, the commander reported hundreds of armed Soviet soldiers who gathered in the village of Starobin and ‘were presumably supplied by Jewish inhabitants’. Some locals claimed that a *Wehrmacht* officer had been murdered and mutilated near Starobin a few days earlier, an incident which was blamed on Jews as well.<sup>620</sup> It was not proven but deemed credible; it also incited German agencies to even harsher measures. The HSSPF, Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, ordered merciless retribution where cases of mutilations of German prisoners of war became known.<sup>621</sup> This was in accordance with instructions given to the *Wehrmacht* at the same time: in order to secure their designated areas, army formations in the hinterland were to apply ‘draconian measures’. One day later, on 25 July, 1941, the German army High Command issued an order regarding the ‘treatment of enemy civilians and Russian prisoners of war in the army rear areas’. Behind the front, any

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<sup>619</sup> Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, pp. 716-718; Klaus Jochen Arnold, *Die Wehrmacht und die Besatzungspolitik in den besetzten Gebieten der Sowjetunion. Kriegführung und Radikalisierung im ‘Unternehmen Barbarossa’* (Berlin, 2005), pp. 177-180.

<sup>620</sup> Erkundungs- und Aufklärungsergebnis vom 29.7. 1941 südlich Sluzk, 30 July, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/20.

<sup>621</sup> Ergänzender Befehl zu dem Befehl Nr. 42, SS-Kavalleriebrigade an SS-KavRgt. 2, 29 July, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/936.

respect for these two groups was to be given up; German soldiers should rather shoot innocent people than take any security risks.<sup>622</sup>

As these sources show, every kind of brutality could be justified on the German side by claiming it was merely a reaction to the way the Soviets were fighting, especially behind the front line. The enemy, whether he appeared in the form of a Red Army soldier in combat, a prisoner of war, or a civilian, was depicted as being treacherous and cruel, an image which was reinforced with strong elements of racism and propaganda. German agencies used impressions from the intense combat operations of the first four weeks of the campaign in the east to embellish the concept Hitler himself had proclaimed: every person who was actually or even potentially hostile towards the invaders or did not fit their racial ideal was to be killed. In fact the Germans were fully aware that opposing forces in the hinterland consisted of Red Army stragglers or even largely intact military units rather than partisans at this time.<sup>623</sup> Thus, in reality it did not make any sense to accuse civilians or Jews in particular of supporting insurgents, as an underground movement had not been formed in this area yet; it did, however, work on a rhetorical level.

From the perspective of ordinary SS cavalymen, a picture emerges that shows how violence soon spiralled out of control as the ‘combing’ and ‘cleansing’ of the Pripet

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<sup>622</sup> Ergänzung Keitels zur Führerweisung Nr. 33, 24 July, 1941, OKW / WFst / L (IV / Qu), Sicherungskräfte, BArchF, RW 31/97, quoted in Arnold, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, p. 208; Befehl des Generals z.b.V. ObdH beim OKH zur Behandlung feindlicher Zivilpersonen und russischer Kriegsgefangener im rückwärtigen Heeresgebiet, 25 July, 1941, NOKW-182, quoted in Arnold, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, pp. 208-209. The order police had already received radical instructions, presumably in connection with the Heydrich order of 2 July, 1941. In an order for Police Battalion 322 of the same day, it said: ‘Every civilian with a rifle is to be shot’; see Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1 des Polizei-Bataillon 322 (III./Pol.-Regt.-Mitte) vom 10.6. 1941 – 29.5. 1942, in: VUA, N POL.RGT. (1), file 1, p. 27. See also Angrick and others, ‘Das Polizeibataillon 322’, pp. 330-331. This was in line with the orders the SS cavalry received on 27 and 28 July, 1941; see ch. 4, pp. 2-3.

<sup>623</sup> Heeresgruppe Mitte / Ia an OKH / GenStdH / Op., 29 June, 1941, BArchF, RH 20-4/147, p. 178, quoted in Arnold, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, p. 204. The SS Cavalry Brigade received an impression similar to that of the *Wehrmacht*: a report from Gustav Lombard on the first ‘combing mission’ in the Pripet Marshes lists nine encounters during the first two weeks, only one of which did not exclusively involve Red Army soldiers but also partisans (a woman, an adolescent and several other combatants); see [Bericht zur] Durchkämmung der Pripetsümpfe vom 11.8. 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/441, pp. 178-186.

Marshes also contained a strong element of terror which was directed at non-Jewish civilians. This is exemplified by the treatment of suspected guerrillas during village searches according to a former soldier:

If one of the men [who were found during a search] was carrying weapons and obviously was a partisan, [...] the partisan was shot by command of the squadron commander. [...] It was standard practice to tell the partisan that he had been released and could go. Once he turned his back to us, he was shot with a carbine. This happened in the presence of the other assembled villagers, so that they were deterred [from joining or supporting the partisans].<sup>624</sup>

Fegelein's men also used even more radical measures which were meant to act as a deterrent. In some cases, entire villages were cleared: a former member of the RAA witnessed an operation during which SS cavalry squadrons rounded up all inhabitants of a particular area, leaving several settlements completely deserted. After this, *Einsatzgruppe* men carried out killings in another village nearby; the veteran estimated that about 500 people were executed.<sup>625</sup> As with the interpretation of killing orders regarding Jews, differences between the squadrons regarding the treatment of the local population could be observed. Some subunits even went beyond the directive of destroying settlements where the inhabitants 'were suspected of supporting the partisans'.<sup>626</sup> The first squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment generally levelled every village: after the inhabitants had been deported or executed, the

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<sup>624</sup> Testimony of a former soldier of the first squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, in Müller-Tupath, *Becher*, p. 85. This statement was part of the questioning of a former SS cavalryman in the Lombard trial; his name is not given in the work.

<sup>625</sup> Vernehmung Heinz Frenken vom 24.6. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp. c6-c7. For the cooperation of the SS cavalry and subunits of Einsatzgruppe B in the area of Mozyr' and Rechitsa see also Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 199-200.

<sup>626</sup> Kommandosonderbefehl, 28 July, 1941, in Baade, *Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*, p. 212.

houses were burnt down. Even twenty years after the war, the former soldier who spoke about these atrocities claimed that they had been committed out of self-preservation as guerrillas or stragglers of the Red Army might have found refuge in the villages. He also admitted, however, that he had not seen any stragglers and hardly any partisans.<sup>627</sup> According to the statement of a veteran of the fourth squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, his unit had applied the same tactic; altogether, 66 villages had been destroyed by the SS Cavalry Brigade in the Pripet Marshes.<sup>628</sup>

Former SS cavalry soldiers also blended killings of Jews with reprisals or ‘anti-partisan missions’ when they were questioned about them after the war. One man stated that when his squadron took surprise fire from a village near which ‘partisans’ (presumably Soviet soldiers) were hiding in a forest, an NCO ordered the execution of the Jews living in the village. Unlike in other cases, the village was not destroyed and at least some of its inhabitants were left alive as non-Jewish locals looted the corpses after the shooting.<sup>629</sup> Another veteran described how the medical unit of the SS Cavalry Brigade retaliated upon a village for the alleged shooting of three wounded German soldiers. This act of violence included the burning of the village, which claimed the lives of 50 – 60 people, mostly women and children.<sup>630</sup>

A very well-documented example for this radicalisation is the conduct of the SS cavalry at Starobin. The unit, which had already killed thousands of victims until the end of August, continued to merge reports on enemy activity with its murderous task. In south-eastern Belorussia, the SS cavalrymen were to carry out ‘complete

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<sup>627</sup> Testimony of a former soldier of the first squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, in Müller-Tupath, *Becher*, pp. 85-86. This statement was part of the questioning of a former SS cavalryman in the Lombard trial; his name is not given in the work.

<sup>628</sup> Vernehmung Richard Gloth vom 14.8. 1962, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i4. In his questioning, the veteran did not specify how he had come to know about the number of villages that had been destroyed.

<sup>629</sup> Testimony of a former soldier of the first squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, in Müller-Tupath, *Becher*, pp. 64-65. This statement was part of the questioning of a former SS cavalryman in the Lombard trial; his name is not given in the work.

<sup>630</sup> Vernehmung Heinz Frenken vom 24.6. 1963, in: BArchL, B 162/5539, pp. c10-11. This incident has not been mentioned in other questionings or original sources from the SS Cavalry Brigade.

pacification' in the same way as before. The commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre expected scattered groups of enemy soldiers, some of whom were equipped with heavy weapons. Interestingly, this document describes the expected hostile forces in the operational area correctly as consisting of stragglers, not partisans. The real enemy, however, was identified by the order to 'dejewify Starobin and the vicinity'.<sup>631</sup> This district had been spotted by the *Wehrmacht* as a stronghold of resistance against the German occupants and their local helpers, despite the fact that 'pacification' had been attempted twice already. In the words of the SS, 'Jews terrorised the smaller, peaceable part of the population' and 'made Starobin a base for partisans'. A mission which was carried out by five squadrons of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment in the area between Starobin and Morots from 25 to 29 August, 1941, provides one example of how inextricably the fight against small groups of Red Army men, the alleged 'partisan warfare', had become compounded with the actual task of killing Jews. First, local inhabitants had reported the presence of a 'stong partisan unit', consisting of groups of Soviet soldiers and Jews from Starobin, to which the SS cavalry responded with an encirclement operation that left 154 partisans dead, and 117 were taken prisoner. Many farmhouses as well as a collective farm and the village of Domanovichi – allegedly partisan bases – were burned to the ground. From the deployed SS squadrons, only one man got killed and one was wounded. These low figures and the fact that many of the alleged 'partisans' stepped out of the forest and surrendered after their hiding place had been shelled by artillery again indicate that the enemy consisted of stragglers of the Red Army rather than organised guerrillas.<sup>632</sup>

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<sup>631</sup> Brigadebefehl an SS-Kav.Rgt. 1 für Fortsetzung des Auftrages 2 – Pripjet-Sümpfe, in: BArchF, RS 4/430, p. 2.

<sup>632</sup> Zusammengefaßte Meldung über Tätigkeit der SS-Kav. Brigade in der Zeit v. 25.8. bis 3.9. 1941, in: BArchL, Dokumenten-Sammlung, Ordner Verschiedenes 291-17, pp. 17-18; Bericht über die Befriedung des Raumes Starobin, SS-Kavallerie-Regiment 1, 4 September, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/430, pp. 4-9; Bericht über die Säuberung des Raumes um Starobin, SS-Kav.Rgt. 1, 25 August, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/430, p. 3; Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, pp. 36-37.

At the same time, all Jews living in Starobin were shot, an act of violence that claimed the lives of at least 500 men and women.<sup>633</sup> The commander of the regiment also gave a speech to the local population in which he justified this measure by claiming that Himmler had ordered to help the cooperative part of the population and to annihilate those who kept resisting. This triggered another ‘cleansing’ by local militias, who shot 21 people and arrested eight others. In general, the relationship with the (predominantly Polish) inhabitants of Starobin was described as positive. The Germans viewed the initiative of the locals in forming and using a militia as an act of self-defence. Again, a familiar pattern can be recognised: there were many willing collaborators who engaged in roundups and executions; others acted as informers or led the cavalymen to the hideouts of Red Army soldiers, which was greatly welcomed by the SS. German officers made a clear distinction between different ethnic and religious groups: Poles and Belarusians were considered supporters whereas Jews were equated with partisans, as becomes clear by Lombard’s statement on behaviour of the guerrillas: ‘The partisan has an excellent communications system and does not confront a strong [opposing] force. The Jew is his helper, he supplies him and is mainly responsible for communications’.<sup>634</sup>

During their second mission in Belorussia, which was completed on 4 September, the men had met little resistance; apart from the operation near Starobin, there had only been skirmishes. Further village searches had been done as well, some of which had resulted in atrocities. This has been documented for Petrikov, a small town between Turov and Mozyr’, where 12 Jews were shot and 43 prisoners were taken;

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<sup>633</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 194. The shooting of Jewish women was not mentioned in Lombard’s report but is proven by radio message protocols of the cavalry squadrons that were involved.

<sup>634</sup> For the help of the local militia, see Bericht über die Befriedung des Raumes Starobin, SS-Kavallerie-Regiment 1, 4 September, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/430, p. 5 and Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, pp. 36-37. For further collaboration, see Zusammengefaßte Meldung über Tätigkeit der SS-Kav. Brigade in der Zeit v. 25.8. bis 3.9. 1941, in: BArchL, Dokumenten-Sammlung, Ordner Verschiedenes 291-17, p. 17; this document states that a Belarusian forester showed the Germans where Soviet soldiers were hiding. For Lombard’s statement, see Bericht über die Befriedung des Raumes Starobin, p. 8.

at Lenin, about 60 Jewish men, women, and children were killed. In his situation report, Hermann Fegelein announced the ‘pacification’ of the operational area but also stated that small groups of guerrillas would continue to appear there as it was impossible to track them down in the vast swamps and forests. As a result of the combing of the eastern marshes, 189 people had been taken prisoner, 192 Red Army men and persons identified as partisans had been killed, and 363 Jews had been shot.<sup>635</sup> As opposed to the first mission, SS cavalrymen did not come across large Jewish communities in this area, which is why the numbers of executed ‘looters’ are far smaller for the second half of August, 1941. Just like Lombard, Fegelein falsely insinuated the cooperation of partisans and Jews, thus giving a perfect example of his racist views and the function of his unit in the war of annihilation: ‘Connections between partisan detachments are being upheld mainly by Jews. Villages and homesteads which are free of Jews have not been bases for partisans in any case so far but were often raided and looted by gangs [of partisans]’.<sup>636</sup>

As during other missions (such as the killings at Pinsk and Bobruisk), the HSSPF Mitte visited the soldiers in the field on a regular basis and came together with Hermann Fegelein in order to coordinate further measures. In his diary, he vividly described one such mission, which took place between 8 and 12 September, 1941. A corresponding report of the SS cavalry shows that this operation had been triggered after the staff had received hints from locals about a partisan group with a strength of 400 – 500 men operating in the area between Krasny Ostrov and Malodush near Rechitsa. It was decided that the guerrillas were to be encircled and destroyed, for

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<sup>635</sup> KTB KDOS, entries from 29 August and 1 September, 1941; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 30.8. – 5.9. 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; Zusammengefaßte Meldung über Tätigkeit der SS-Kav. Brigade, p. 18. Apparently not all killings had been reported to the brigade staff and included in the final report, as the discrepancy between the numbers of victims given in Lombard’s and Fegelein’s reports shows. For Petrikov, see Fernschreiben des HSSPF Mitte an RFSS, 30 August, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 4. For Lenin, see Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 198.

<sup>636</sup> Zusammengefaßte Meldung über Tätigkeit der SS-Kav. Brigade, pp. 18-21.

which five combat groups with a total strength of about 1,000 men from the first five squadrons of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment and the RAA were formed. Von dem Bach-Zelewski observed the entire operation, beginning with a visit to Fegelein and his staff at Khoiniki, followed by a reconnaissance flight over south-eastern Belorussia during which he also visited the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment. After his return to the headquarters of the SS cavalry, he spent a day there during which further scouting and planning were done. The actual mission took place on the night of September 10, when a forest between Khoiniki and Rechitsa was searched. The HSSPF claimed to have taken part in the operation and to have made 22 prisoners himself in a village. However, he also commented on the treatment of the prisoners: every person bearing arms was shot after a court-martial, whereas the remaining soldiers were transported into POW camps.<sup>637</sup>

A comparison of the documentation of this incident shows how to what extent ‘partisan warfare’ and killing missions were blended by German agencies: according to the report of the SS cavalry for this operation, 38 Red Army soldiers were taken prisoner and 384 partisans were shot; von dem Bach-Zelewski’s daily situation report contains the figure of 430 dead partisans.<sup>638</sup> The fact that the deployed forces did not suffer any casualties, although encounters with a high number of potential enemies had been expected, casts doubt on the nature of the ‘enemies’ who were killed. In a radio message, Fegelein referred to the number of executed as ‘shot partisans including Mozyr’ 384’, which means that many of the victims were in fact

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<sup>637</sup> Tagebuch des Chefs der Bandenkampfverbände, entry from 13 September, 1941. This entry also mentions the presence of a propaganda company which presumably observed the ‘combing’ mission as well. As in other entries, von dem Bach-Zelewski presented himself as a competent military leader who was close to his troops. Details such as his own involvement in the village search cannot be verified by means of other sources but his attendance and reconnaissance flight are also mentioned in the brigade’s report; see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 6. – 12.9. 1941, SS-Kav. Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

<sup>638</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 6. – 12.9. 1941, SS-Kav. Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; Lagebericht des HSSPF Mitte, 12 September, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 1, file 5.

Jews from that town.<sup>639</sup> This formulation resembles that of his subaltern, who spoke of having to ‘pacify’ the ‘looting’ population of Mozyr’. Although official documents of the brigade, the HSSPF Mitte and the *Wehrmacht* speak of ‘strong partisan activity’ in this area, for example at Rechitsa, where ambushes did occur, Soviet collaborators were killed, and roads were mined, it can be assumed that, as in the preceding weeks, most of the sufferers and casualties were completely innocent people who were targeted because they were Jewish. Acts of sabotage were not committed by a hostile population, incited by or consisting of Jews, but by small groups of men who were well-organised and equipped.<sup>640</sup> Hundreds fell victim to the SS cavalymen and two other SS units, *Sonderkommando 7b* and *Einsatzkommando 8*, at Khoyniki, Bragin, Rechitsa, and possibly also at other locations east and southeast of Mozyr’, as a *Wehrmacht* report indicates.<sup>641</sup>

The mission of the SS cavalry in Belorussia did not end after the crossing of the Pripet Marshes. As the rear areas of Army Group Centre were brought forward with effect from 22 September, 1941, the brigade was assigned to ‘cleanse’ the ‘Dnieper – Sosh triangle’. This new operational area lay between the cities of Rechitsa and Gomel’; the Dnieper formed the western boundary, whereas the Sosh bordered it to the east. Loev, at the confluence of the two rivers, marked the tip of the triangle. The SS cavalry only spent about a week in the ‘Dnieper – Sosh triangle’ as it was ordered to assemble in the Gomel’ area by 30 September. Before that town could be reached,

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<sup>639</sup> The HSSPF first estimated enemy strength at 3,000 partisans on 11 September, which was corrected to 300 – 400 later on the same day; see Lagebericht des HSSPF Mitte, 12 September, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 1, file 5, and another Lagebericht from the same day, *ibid.* The SS cavalry assumed a strength of 400-500 men; see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 6. – 12.9. 1941. For Fegelein’s radio message, see Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 201.

<sup>640</sup> For partisan activity at Rechitsa, see Lagebericht des HSSPF Mitte, 10 September, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 1, file 5; see also Korpsbefehl Nr. 52 vom 14.9. 1941, Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte, in: BArchF, RS 4/930, p. 28.

<sup>641</sup> In the town of Rechitsa itself, about 30 Jews were murdered by members of the mounted battery and the RAA; see Einstellungsverfügung gg. Lombard u.a., pp. 1802-1803 and p. 1827. Hundreds more were executed outside the town; see Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 198-200. The commander of the rear areas spoke of 604 ‘partisans’ who had been killed until 14 September, 1941; see Tagesmeldung Berück Mitte / Ia, 14 September, 1941, in: BArchF, RH 22/226, quoted *ibid.*, p. 201.

the two regiments and the bicycle reconnaissance detachment had to cross the river Dnieper, for which makeshift ferries had to be used as all bridges had been blown up by the retreating Soviets.<sup>642</sup> The nature of the brigade's deployment was changed to some extent: in order to cover a wider area, the squadrons were dispersed down to individual platoons that were to stay in a village for several days. This measure and the formation of rapid deployment forces with both regiments and the RAA can be interpreted as a new tactic in the face of what was perceived as a growing threat from partisans.<sup>643</sup> This was also reflected by an even harsher treatment of the local population: on 23 September, the RAA was ordered to publicly hang all Bolsheviks, partisans and Jews in Rechitsa and within a radius of 20 kilometres in the following two days. Also, a curfew from 6 pm until 5 am was introduced which included a threat of execution in case it was violated.<sup>644</sup> The soldiers were ordered to intern Jews in ghettos 'in case they cannot be exterminated straightaway'.<sup>645</sup> In the course of the brigade's deployment between Dnieper and Sosh, 352 partisans, 16 Jews, and 9 communists were shot by the cavalymen according to figures of the HSSPF Mitte.<sup>646</sup>

Whilst his men were still in the field, Gustav Lombard presented the 'findings' of the SS cavalry in partisan warfare at an 'anti-partisan course' which was hosted by Army Group Centre at Mogilev between 24 and 26 September, 1941. His presentation culminated in the words, 'The Jew is the partisan!' - this statement was viewed as the quintessence of the course. High-ranking officers of SS, *Wehrmacht*,

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<sup>642</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 20. – 26.9. 1941, 26 September, 1941, SS-Kav. Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

<sup>643</sup> Brigadebefehl für die Übernahme des Raumes zwischen Prypjat u. Dnjepr, SS-Kav.-Brigade, 16 September, 1941, in: BArchL, B 162/21679, pp. 281-283.

<sup>644</sup> Brigadebefehl Nr. 6, 23 September, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/20.

<sup>645</sup> Brigadebefehl Nr. 8, SS-Kav.Brigade, 28 September, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/20.

<sup>646</sup> According to a document compiled by the HSSPF, 259 partisans and 16 Jews had been executed by the SS Cavalry Brigade between 22 and 24 September, 1941; see List of executions, HSSPF Mitte to RFSS, Kdo. Stab RFSS and Chef O[rdnungs] P[olizei], 24 September, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 1, file 5; in the following four days, 93 partisans and 9 communists were killed; see List of executions, HSSPF Mitte to RFSS, Kdo. Stab RFSS and Chef O[rdnungs] P[olizei], 28 September, 1941, *ibid.* The brigade reported the execution of 280 partisans and 87 Jews between 20 and 26 September; see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 20. – 26.9. 1941, 26 September, 1941, SS-Kav. Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

and police took part in this seminar, during which even an exemplary village search including an execution of about 30 Jews was carried out by Police Battalion 322 and *Einsatzkommando 8*. The equalization of Jews and partisans, as exemplified by Lombard's speech, had already become official doctrine and common practice of the *Wehrmacht* in the fight against insurgents.<sup>647</sup> In September, 1941, the command of the German army also issued orders which extended the definition of partisans to stragglers of the Red Army. These two measures, in combination with the already radical directives, led to another escalation.<sup>648</sup> Also, the Germans encountered stronger resistance of guerrillas east of the river Dnieper, which in turn put the military administration under pressure to pacify their respective areas of responsibility.<sup>649</sup> There was a sharp increase in the number of victims during the second half of 1941. This trend applied to Belorussia in particular as this part of the occupied Soviet Union was to become the centre of the Soviet partisan movement from 1942 and was occupied by the Germans until the summer of 1944.<sup>650</sup>

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<sup>647</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 221-222; Johannes Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer. Die deutschen Befehlshaber im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941/42* (Munich, 2006), pp. 559-560; Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, pp. 725-726. For examples of atrocities committed by *Wehrmacht* and police units under this doctrine before the course, see *ibid*, pp. 678-682. On the participation of Police Battalion 322, see Angrick and others, 'Das Polizeibataillon 322', pp. 345-346. On the course and the equalization of Jews and partisans in the *Wehrmacht* as well as the good cooperation between *Wehrmacht* and SS, see also Förster in Boog, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, pp. 1043-1045.

<sup>648</sup> Dieter Pohl estimates that about 4,000 alleged partisans and Red Army men were killed in the rear areas of Army Group Centre until mid-August, 1941; see Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht. Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941 – 1944* (Munich, 2008), p. 167. Between September and November, "anti-partisan" measures in this sector turned into outright massacres. General von Schenckendorff estimated that during this phase 300 – 400 suspected partisans were shot every day; see Gerlach, *Morde*, p. 876.

<sup>649</sup> Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, p. 354.

<sup>650</sup> For the time between June, 1941 and February, 1942, estimates range from 20,000 to more than 62,000 victims of partisan warfare in the rear areas of Army Group Centre. The *Wehrmacht* agencies in the northern and southern sectors of the eastern front reported over 8,000 and at least 10,000 victims respectively. Dieter Pohl assumes that the German anti-partisan policy claimed a total number of between 40,000 and 85,000 victims in the Soviet Union during the year 1941. See Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht*, p. 168. Throughout the war, in Belorussia alone 345,000 people were killed in operations of 'partisan warfare'. About 90% of them were civilians. See Babette Quinkert, *Propaganda und Terror in Weißrußland 1941 – 1944: die deutsche "geistige" Kriegführung gegen Zivilbevölkerung und Partisanen* (Paderborn, 2009), p. 13.

## Russia

Shortly after the cynical demonstration at Mogilev, the stay of the SS Cavalry Brigade in Belorussia came to an end when its subunits arrived at Gomel'. On September 29, the brigade received a new order: it was to be transported to Toropets, some 120 miles north of Smolensk, where its forces were subordinated to a security division of Army Group Centre. For that purpose, all parts of the brigade were relocated from Gomel' to Rogachev, where soldiers, horses, and equipment were loaded onto trains. Via Mogilev, Orša, and Vitebsk, they travelled north and arrived at their destination around 11 October, 1941.<sup>651</sup> In their new operational area, the SS cavalrymen were confronted with a real threat from partisans. This was in line with a general tendency: behind the front, stragglers, trained saboteurs and local guerrillas began to form an underground movement, which grew stronger and stronger in the second half of 1941. The Germans reacted to this development, which began to seriously jeopardise their thinly-occupied rear areas and overstretched supply lines, by brutal reprisals against the civilian population, whilst the annihilation of the Jews continued. As most of the victims were innocent locals, this only helped to radicalise the inhabitants of the occupied territories and to escalate the war on another front, for which the Germans were ill-prepared. Commanders in the rear did not seem to be aware of how utterly counterproductive and dangerous this approach was.<sup>652</sup> In fact, they acted in accordance with the leadership of the German army in the east: on 10 October and 20 November, 1941, field marshals von Manstein and von Reichenau

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<sup>651</sup>Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 27.9. – 4.10. 1941, 5 October, 1941, SS-Kav. Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; Brigadebefehl Nr. 12 für den Marsch zur Verladung, SS-Kav. Brigade, 30 September, 1941, *ibid.*; Brigadebefehl für den E[isenbahn]-Transport von Rogatschew nach Orscha, 1 October, 1941, SS-Kav. Brigade, *ibid.*; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 5. – 11.10. 1941, 11 October, 1941, SS-Kav. Brigade, *ibid.*

<sup>652</sup>Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, pp. 327-331 and p. 344.

issued orders which dehumanised Soviet soldiers and partisans; these instructions incited German soldiers not to give quarter anymore. They were to fight their enemies ruthlessly and thus to destroy what was referred to as ‘Jewish-Bolshevist system’ in its entirety.<sup>653</sup> This shows how the ambition of fulfilling the aims of National Socialist ideology, which could already be observed with Army Group Centre and its acquiescence and encouragement of harsh measures towards Jews and partisans during the summer of 1941, was now implemented by senior *Wehrmacht* commanders in the Soviet Union on their own initiative.

From September to December, 1941, the ‘pacification’ missions of the brigade continued. They consisted mostly of reconnaissance patrols and localised searches; on some occasions, SS cavalrymen captured camps and depots in the forests and had skirmishes with partisans.<sup>654</sup> They also safeguarded important supply routes such as the railway line from Velikie Luki to Toropets and the road towards Rzhev. Unlike during their mission in Belorussia, where they had been part of the same chain of command for the entire time, subordination was more flexible now: for different tasks, they were either subordinate to the commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre, general von Schenckendorff (who still closely cooperated with *Gruppenführer* von dem Bach-Zelewski, the Higher SS and police leader), or came under the direct command of the Ninth Army. The Soviets had retreated from the region to the north and east of Toropets so that German forces encountered stragglers and some rearguard forces but there was no combat activity. As this coincided with a decrease in acts of sabotage, the brigade reported its sector as ‘pacified’ on 25

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<sup>653</sup> *Armeebefehl des Oberbefehlshabers der 6. Armee, Generalfeldmarschall von Reichenau, vom 10.10. 1941, quoted in Ueberschär and Wette, “Unternehmen Barbarossa“, pp. 285-286; Armeebefehl des Oberbefehlshabers der 6. Armee, Generaloberst von Manstein, vom 20.11. 1941, ibid, pp. 289-290; see also Armeebefehl des Oberbefehlshabers der 17. Armee, Generaloberst Hoth, vom 17.11. 1941, ibid., pp. 287-289. On the rise in partisan activity, the directives given out by von Manstein and von Reichenau, and the often drastic consequences of these orders see also Förster in Boog, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, pp. 1041-1056.*

<sup>654</sup> Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen der Waffen-SS*, pp. 26-27.

October, which soon proved to be a complete misinterpretation of the situation.<sup>655</sup> The army, however, viewed the contribution of the SS Cavalry Brigade in the ‘pacification’ of the hinterland very favourably, as is proven by the acknowledgement the unit received from the commander of the 253<sup>rd</sup> infantry division on 6 November, 1941.<sup>656</sup>

Despite the fact that Hermann Fegelein stated that there had been some ‘heavy gunfights’, the numbers of killed enemies and captured weapons reported by him are disproportionate: between 18 October and 18 November, 1941, 3,018 partisans and ‘suspicious persons’ as well as 141 Red Army men were reported to have been killed and 112 Soviet soldiers were taken prisoner. Over the same period, less than 200 weapons had been captured and the SS Cavalry Brigade only suffered casualties of 7 dead and 9 wounded. This leads to the assumption that most of the Soviet victims were not partisans or soldiers who had offered armed resistance but unarmed civilians and Jews.<sup>657</sup>

There is evidence, however, that some well-organised partisan groups operated between Velikie Luki and Rzhev. They had been formed from July, 1941 onwards, based on detailed guidelines which had been given out by the Political Administration of the North-West Front of the Red Army. From late November

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<sup>655</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 12. – 17.10. 1941, 18 October, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 1; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 18. – 24.10. 1941, 25 October, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, *ibid.*; see also Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen der Waffen-SS*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>656</sup> KTB KDOS, entry from 6 November, 1941. See also Christoph Rass, *‘Menschenmaterial’: deutsche Soldaten an der Ostfront. Innenansichten einer Infanteriedivision 1939 – 1945* (Paderborn, 2003), p. 341.

<sup>657</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 18.10. – 18.11. 1941, 21 November, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 18. – 24.10. 1941, 25 October, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, *ibid.*; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 25. – 31.10. 1941, 1 November, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, *ibid.*; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 1. – 7.11. 1941, 7 November, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, *ibid.*; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 8. – 14.11. 1941, 14 November, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, *ibid.* See also Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 201-203: he states that in one report the brigade even indirectly admitted that there had been no partisan activity during the given period so that the victims must have been civilians. Partisan attacks that led to casualties were often explicitly mentioned in the reports, for example the wounding of two men in a firefight near Vitebsk and the death of a trooper by a landmine near Orša; see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 5. – 11.10. 1941, 11 October, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

onwards, underground activity in this region was on the increase again. The SS tried to counter assaults on supply lines and collaborators not only with searches, but also by erecting checkpoints along important railway lines and roads and by establishing permanent bases throughout the searching areas. Although Fegelein's men only suffered twenty losses before the beginning of December, it became clear at the beginning of winter that 'pacification' had failed: often, the cavalrymen only found empty camps; in other cases, patrols near partisan strongholds led to constant contact with the enemy. Once, an operation even had to be aborted because the soldiers were outgunned by the guerrillas.<sup>658</sup> Casualties on the German side were answered by brutal retaliation against the civilian population: in two cases, entire villages were burned to the ground after their inhabitants had been rounded up and killed by the SS cavalry. This happened after alleged killings of *Wehrmacht* soldiers between Toropets and Rzhev.<sup>659</sup>

In late November, 1941, the entire formation underwent a strict reviewing process as squadron leaders were asked to submit reports on partisan warfare and their general experiences in the Soviet campaign. These accounts give details of the tactics employed by the SS cavalrymen in tracking down and destroying partisans and testify to the brutal nature of the fighting behind the frontline, including war crimes. Soviet guerrillas proved to be a well-informed enemy who was hard to find; the Germans identified the questioning and cooperation of the local population as a key factor. According to them, the best results were achieved when a squadron

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<sup>658</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 15. – 21.11. 1941, 22 November, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigitade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 22. – 28.11. 1941, 29 November, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigitade, *ibid.*; John Erickson, *The road to Stalingrad* (London, 1975), pp. 242-243; Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 224-227; Urteil gegen Heinrich Strähle, in: *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1999. Bd. 29: Die vom 11.05.1968 bis zum 28.06.1968 ergangenen Strafurteile. Lfd. Nr. 677-685*, ed. K. D. Bracher and others (Amsterdam, 2003), pp. 555-609, esp. pp. 561-567. According to Erickson and documents from the SS cavalry quoted in the collection of verdicts, Soviet guerrillas used German uniforms and weapons as well.

<sup>659</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 233. One of these incidents claimed about 30 lives, the number of victims in the other case is unknown.

stayed at a particular place for several days so that the soldiers could gain the confidence of the locals, who were generally scared of the guerrillas in the forests. Denunciation and nightly searches led to many arrests and executions; also, the SS cavalrymen did not hesitate to use violence to gain valuable information from captured partisans.<sup>660</sup>

To the searching of villages and forests was added the elimination of so-called ‘wanderers’. SS cavalrymen were ordered to shoot every Jew and every Soviet citizen fit for military service caught travelling on foot and unable to produce identification from a German agency. Between mid-October and early November alone, dozens of Red Army stragglers and civilians were shot in the Toropets – Rzhev area as a result of this policy. Officially, the soldiers acted in accordance with orders from the commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre.<sup>661</sup> In one case, however, this was done so cruelly that an investigation was launched against an NCO of the SS cavalry who had exceeded his orders by shooting two male civilians, twelve women and a fourteen-year-old boy.<sup>662</sup> Killings as a result of this policy have

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<sup>660</sup> Erfahrungsbericht der 2./SS-Kav.Rgt. 1 über den Einsatz im Osten, 24 November, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/420, pp. 3-5; Erfahrungsbericht [ü]ber Kampf mit Partisanen vom 23.11. 1941 [3<sup>rd</sup> squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment], *ibid.*, pp. 9-10; Erfahrungsbericht vom 24.11. 1941 [5<sup>th</sup> squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment], *ibid.*, pp. 11-13; Erfahrungsbericht im Kampf mit Partisanen vom 17.9. 1941 [1<sup>st</sup> Regiment], *ibid.*, pp. 21-22. Denunciation was rife in the Toropez area; see Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 231. The use of violence during questionings of suspected partisans, which was mentioned in the report of the 3<sup>rd</sup> squadron, was sanctioned by the commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre as well: amongst all subordinate units, general von Schenckendorff circulated a report on reconnaissance missions from a sergeant of the 354<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment (a subunit of the 286<sup>th</sup> security division). Apart from general information on tactics which could be used against guerrillas, this report also recommended the beating of locals, which was viewed as a measure of facilitating questionings. It did not contain any advice on actually winning the trust of the locals. See Berück Mitte / Ia vom 14.10. 1941, btr. Kampf gegen die Partisanen, in: BArchF, RH 22/225, quoted in Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, p. 366. The SS Cavalry Brigade received this report as well; see Erfahrungsbericht des Oberfeldwebels Schrade von der 12./IR 354 vom 13.10. 1941, SS-Kav. Rgt. 1; Partisanenbekämpfung, Erfahrungsberichte vom 19.7. 1941 – 28.11. 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/420, pp. 18-20.

<sup>661</sup> For the general order to shoot wandering Jews and Russians, see Erfahrungsbericht im Kampf mit Partisanen, SS-Kav.Rgt. 1, 17 September, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/420, p. 22. For the documentation of killings, see regimental orders no. 2-4 and 6-7 from 19-21 October and 23-25 October, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/441, pp. 74-76 and pp. 71-72. See also regimental order no. 1 from 3 November, 1941, *ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>662</sup> This precedent was taken up again after the war by West German judicial authorities, who acquitted the man; see *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1999. Bd. 29*, pp. 555-609; see also Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 230.

also been documented for *Wehrmacht* units in this operational area; both in the regular forces and the SS, the tactic soon spiralled out of control: when German soldiers had to face a new level of threat from guerrilla attacks and setbacks in combating the underground movement, this led to a general feeling of insecurity to which the men responded by indiscriminately killing all civilians who did not have identification or were considered hostile in any way.<sup>663</sup> At Olenino, for example, 20 – 40 Soviet citizens were shot by soldiers of the SS cavalry in March, 1942 because they were not from that village and accused of being spies. The Russian village elder helped the Germans to find the suspects.<sup>664</sup> At this time, however, anti-partisan missions were not a prime concern of the SS Cavalry Brigade anymore as the unit now had to stand its ground in combat.

The importance of the development of the unit in the context of partisan warfare lies in a combination of different aspects: first in Belorussia and later in the Toropets region, the SS Cavalry Brigade amalgamated missions against Jews, stragglers of the Red Army, and guerrillas. This approach also included violence against non-Jewish civilians and, to some extent, military operations. In each of the two operational areas, there was a different focus. ‘Partisan warfare’ served as a welcome cover-up for the brigade’s actual task, the destruction of the Jews, in the Pripet Marshes. Between Toropets and Rzhev, on the other hand, the brigade went through a transitional period of about three months during which it saw actual encounters with insurgents.

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<sup>663</sup> In the operational area of the SS Cavalry Brigade, the 206<sup>th</sup> infantry division committed atrocities against prisoners, civilians, and suspected partisans as well and included this in official reports. According to an undated list, 99 prisoners of war, 169 civilians, 4 partisans, and 27 Red Army men in civilian clothes were shot by this unit between 3 November and 13 November, 1941; see Gefechts- und Tätigkeitsberichte, Einsatzberichte, Wochenmeldungen der unterstellten Einheiten. Bd. 2: 2.10. 41 – 22.5. 42, 206<sup>th</sup> infantry division, BArchF, RH 26-206/17, p. 276. The policy of the Wehrmacht (with the examples of the Ninth Army and *Koriück 580*) is also described in Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, p. 726, and Gerlach, *Morde*, pp. 877-882. Omer Bartov has noticed this with the *Wehrmacht* units from his sample as well; see Bartov, *German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, pp. 121-122.

<sup>664</sup> Vernehmung Daniel Teske vom 4.10. 1962 in BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j40.

There are two key elements which determined the institutional-level conduct of the unit during the first phase of partisan warfare in the Soviet Union. The first factor is the close collaboration with the army and the commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre in particular. Especially in Belorussia, there was a strong interdependence between the aims of the *Wehrmacht* and the SS. The military administration, which from the beginning was responsible for the implementation of radical orders for safeguarding the hinterland, came to view the destruction of the Jews and the killing of Red Army men as a necessary part of this and actively supported the actions of Himmler's men. The SS, with the SS Cavalry Brigade as one of its main killing units in the central sector of the eastern front, greatly profited from this cooperation. The participation of Gustav Lombard in the 'anti-partisan course' at Mogilev shows that the SS cavalrymen helped to trigger an escalation of the German occupation policy.

The second factor is the habituation to violence the soldiers experienced during their killing missions. Operating as an instrument of ideological terror rather than a disciplined combat unit, the SS Cavalry Brigade soon no longer differentiated between potential enemies and peaceful civilians. Even towards some friendly villagers in the Toropets region, they displayed the same behaviour as towards their Jewish victims in Belorussia a few months earlier. Despite Fegelein's boastful claims, however, the brigade failed in combating insurgents when based in Russia in late 1941. It can safely be assumed that the brutal approach followed by the unit gained it even more enemies and did not solve any problems. When they got drawn into a fight for survival against a Soviet counteroffensive, the SS cavalrymen were still ill-prepared for real combat, despite the fact that they had proven their brutality in every possible way thus far.

6) Participation in the winter battle west of Moscow, 1941 – 1942

Baptism of fire: the SS Cavalry Brigade in combat at Toropets and Rzhev

In late 1941, the frame of reference changed a final time, this time to a military character, which the SS Cavalry Brigade was to retain until the summer of 1942. During the nine months spent in the Toropets – Rzhev area, the unit experienced both fighting against partisans and deployment at the front. This time was also a transition between both extremes of its ‘dual role’: whereas the unit had been a killing squad in Belorussia for the most part, it was to become a military unit from the last month of the year onwards. The SS Cavalry Brigade was also expanded in size whilst being based at Toropets. What Heinrich Himmler and Hermann Fegelein had in mind was to build up a strong combat unit they termed a ‘reinforced cavalry brigade’ but it was never intended that it should be used for combat missions before this process was completed. The SS cavalry nevertheless got drawn into the fighting as the *Reichsführer*’s grip loosened: the influence of the army on this unit became stronger when the situation at the front turned against the Germans. The order for the first real combat mission caught the men off guard: despite the fact that many of them had originally volunteered for the *Waffen-SS* to fight, they were in no state to confront the Red Army. First behind the lines, then at the focal point of battle SS soldiers had to be deployed as no other troops were available in many cases. Although they lacked training they fought bravely almost until their total annihilation. At the same time they fell back into old patterns of behaviour: outnumbered and outgunned, the cavalry soldiers displayed extreme violence towards civilians, partisans and Red Army men (both active soldiers and prisoners of war). Thus, they fulfilled the ‘dual

role' of the unit even when there were no Jews in their current operational area. The two main lines of argument in this chapter are how the brigade developed into a combat unit despite being far from operational readiness, and how the unit served two different masters, namely the *Wehrmacht* and the SS.



Map 2: Operational area of the SS Cavalry Brigade west of Moscow, 1941 – 1942

Whilst the SS cavalry had traversed the Pripet Marshes, the German advance eastward continued. It was, however, slowed down by Soviet resistance, bad roads and a conflict on strategy between Hitler and the army leadership: whereas the chief of the general staff, colonel general Franz Halder, advocated the thrust on Moscow led by Army Group Centre, Adolf Hitler intended to take all three main objectives before the end of the year. His generals followed this approach, which meant that strong forces had to be diverted from the most powerful spearhead in the central

sector to Army Group North and Army Group South respectively in August, 1941. Operation 'Typhoon', the assault on the Soviet capital, began in late September, although the opportunity to seize Moscow at an early stage was now lost. On other fronts, the *Wehrmacht* was able to achieve triumphant successes: when the battle for Kiev ended on 26 September, 1941, 665,000 Soviet soldiers were taken prisoner after a giant encirclement operation. Two weeks later, about 650,000 more went into captivity at Vyazma and Bryansk after operations that marked the end of the first phase of 'Typhoon'. Although the Red Army did not collapse even after having suffered these terrible blows, and despite the fact that of the three targets Leningrad, Moscow, and Kiev only one had been reached so far, the German high command and its agencies in the field were still very enthusiastic about defeating the enemy and reaching Moscow soon. Setbacks like an almost complete standstill during the autumn rain period in October, which turned roads into impassable mud trails, were viewed as temporary in the face of the most recent enormous victories.<sup>665</sup>

The SS and police formations had now gone over to a policy of eliminating entire Jewish communities. What had begun with the massacres carried out by the SS Cavalry Brigade at places like Pinsk and Bobruisk was now common practice: mobile execution squads from the *Einsatzgruppen* and battalions of the order police claimed more and more victims. This led to killings on an unprecedented scale: at Kamenets-Podolsk and Babi Yar alone, 23,600 and 33,771 Jews were murdered in late August and late September, 1941, respectively within just a few days. Often, executions were organised in close collaboration with the *Wehrmacht*: army units provided logistic support and sometimes even participated in the killings.<sup>666</sup>

<sup>665</sup> John Keegan, *The Second World War* (London, 1989), pp. 157-161 and p. 164; Gerd R. Ueberschär, 'Das Scheitern des 'Unternehmens Barbarossa'. Der deutsch-sowjetische Krieg vom Überfall bis zur Wende vor Moskau im Winter 1941/42', in: G. R. Ueberschär, and W. Wette (eds.), *Der deutsche Überfall auf die Sowjetunion. 'Unternehmen Barbarossa' 1941* (Frankfurt, 1991), pp. 98-99; Erickson, *The road to Stalingrad*, pp. 213-222.

<sup>666</sup> Matthäus in Browning, *Die Entfesselung der 'Endlösung'*, p. 424; Mallmann, 'Kamenez-Podolsk', pp. 239-264; Lozowick, 'Rollbahn Mord', p. 223 and p. 227; Krausnick and Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des*

Violence took a toll on the killers as well. The problems which could already be observed in the SS cavalry in August escalated and affected many other German killing units as they went over to the murder of women and children during the autumn of 1941. Continuous executions led to callousness, alcoholism, and nervous breakdowns. In order to encourage them and boost their morale, Himmler travelled along the eastern front and spoke to the men.<sup>667</sup> These phenomena, however, did not disturb the overall continuation of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. The annihilation policy of the occupants now had reached a new stage: the inclusion of women and children was to result ultimately in the murder of all Jews in the occupied territories. This was only made possible by the interaction of very vague orders (which gave the killing units a wide scope of action), the initiative of commanders in the field, and constant adjustment by the higher levels in the chain of command. Thus, a complex process of radicalisation had been completed in the second half of 1941.<sup>668</sup>

The SS Cavalry Brigade played an important role in this development. It was not, however, confined to being a highly mobile killing squad alone: in the course of its deployment in Belorussia, it had also been involved in military operations and fought against stragglers of the Red Army, although the unit's function in the Holocaust had dominated its mission throughout the summer of 1941. When analysing the unit, it is striking how it had become a 'hybrid': although the participation in large massacres resembles the role of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the SS cavalrymen had undergone more military training than the personnel of these formations. They also had heavy weapons at their disposal and cooperated more with the *Wehrmacht*, be it in scouting

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*Weltanschauungskrieges*, pp. 232-243; Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, pp. 341-342.

<sup>667</sup> For his visit to *Einsatzgruppe D* on 4 October, 1941, see Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord*, pp. 253-254. The general situation of the members of killing squads is accurately described in Ronald Headland, *Messages of Murder: A Study of the Einsatzgruppen of the Security Police and the Security Service, 1941 – 1943* (Rutherford, N.J., London 1992), pp. 211-212. For the situation in *Einsatzgruppe D*, see also Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord*, pp. 247-250.

<sup>668</sup> Longerich, *Politik der Vernichtung*, p. 372.

or plain military missions such as the capture of Turov. Its 'dual role' also makes the unit comparable to similar 'hybrids' in the *Wehrmacht*, the security divisions and *Korücks*, which also were to 'pacify' the hinterland.<sup>669</sup> But these were predominantly occupation troops with many different tasks, including logistics. They lacked the mobility and ideological determination of the SS Cavalry Brigade, which was intensified by the fact that it was under Heinrich Himmler's direct command and received its instructions in the field from Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, one of the *Reichsführer's* most loyal and brutal lieutenants. Despite having fought in minor engagements in Belorussia, the brigade was not ready for frontline duty yet. It seems more appropriate to state that the SS cavalrymen were still rather slowly getting accustomed to fighting, as opposed to soldiers in other units of the *Waffen-SS* or the *Wehrmacht*, who received more training, were better prepared, and thus played a full combat role.

A prime example for this contrast was the Ninth Army, with whom the SS cavalry had already cooperated at Bialystok. Together with *Panzergruppe 3*, this formation had first formed the northern part of the pincer movement at Vyazma and then moved forward towards the east and northeast. In the course of this advance, the towns of Bely, Sychevka and Rzhev had been taken and *Panzergruppe 3* had reached Kalinin (today Tver). Near Rzhev a new frontline was built up which was to form the 'cornerstone of the eastern front' for more than a year.<sup>670</sup> The difference between the soldiers of the Ninth Army and those of the SS Cavalry Brigade could hardly have

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<sup>669</sup> For these formations, see Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, pp. 61-69 and pp. 70-76. Security divisions were second-rate infantry divisions of the *Wehrmacht* which were deployed against stragglers and partisans in rear areas, whereas a *Korück* (short for *Kommandantur im rückwärtigen Heeresgebiet*) had mainly administrative duties and supervised a network of *Feldkommandanturen* and *Ortskommandanturen* in a given district. *Korücks* could also be allocated police or army forces for security purposes as well. See also Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, pp. 148-149: this work demonstrates the inadequate equipment and the low combat value of the security formations, which consisted of soldiers and officers who were considerably older than their comrades in the frontline divisions.

<sup>670</sup> Wjasmachlacht und Weiterstoß nach Osten, in: BArchF, RH 20-9/635, p. 1; Oleg A. Kondratjew, *Die Schlacht von Rshew. Ein halbes Jahrhundert Schweigen* (Munich, 2001), pp. 10-16.

been greater: despite the fact that Hermann Fegelein did his best to make the unit look like an elite formation, his cavalymen with their comparatively very limited time spent at the frontline could hardly measure up to combat veterans of a spearhead formation of the *Wehrmacht*, who had been fighting constantly since 22 June and come within 130 miles of Moscow until mid-October of the same year.<sup>671</sup> Not only was there a difference as far as combat experience was concerned but also with regard to their new task in general: instead of joining their army comrades for the second part of operation ‘Typhoon’, the assault on the Soviet capital, the SS Cavalry Brigade played a subordinate role as a security formation in the hinterland. Commanders of the Ninth Army welcomed this as some of their own forces could thereby be relieved from guard duty and sent to the front.<sup>672</sup>

Parallel to the task of securing rear areas, the SS Cavalry Brigade was to be enlarged to form a so-called ‘reinforced cavalry brigade’. This was a continuation of the growth of the unit that had begun after the merger of the two regiments in September. For this purpose, new subunits were integrated at Toropets: in October, a signals company was formed and replacements from Warsaw arrived. Towards the end of the year, the brigade also received a medical company and an anti-aircraft battery.<sup>673</sup> As the unit was undergoing a constant change, the staff sometimes found it hard to report its strength.<sup>674</sup> Not only was there a continuous personnel flow and regrouping of existing subunits; in November, Heinrich Himmler even ordered the withdrawal of troops from the front and their transport back to Warsaw. This process concerned the entire 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, the two mounted batteries, and the engineer

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<sup>671</sup> Klink in Boog, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, pp. 568-579.

<sup>672</sup> AOK 9, Kriegstagebuch Ia Nr. 3, 7.2. 1941 – 31.12. 1941, Bd. 4: 30.9. 1941 – 31.10. 1941 (Copy), entries from 1 October and 10 October, 1941, in: BArchF, RH 20-9/13a, p. 11 and pp. 70-71.

<sup>673</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 12. – 17.10. 1941, 18 October, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 27.9. – 4.10. 1941, 5 October, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, *ibid.*; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 29.11. – 5.12. 1941, 6 December, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, *ibid.*

<sup>674</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 27.9. – 4.10. 1941, 5 October, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3.

squadron. With cadres from the existing units, a third cavalry regiment and an artillery battalion were to be formed in the General Government.<sup>675</sup> As during the previous steps in the development of the SS cavalry, the creation of a 'reinforced cavalry brigade' was modelled on the *Wehrmacht* equivalent with its battalion-strength artillery.<sup>676</sup>

Moreover, according to the memoirs of a former officer of the army's 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division this unit was approached as well, presumably by Fegelein. After the division had been pulled out of the front in order to be restructured as an armoured division in late 1941, the SS offered to take it over as a whole, which was rejected. An attempt to entice individual officers away from the unit was unsuccessful as well. Hans von Herwarth wrote about this episode: 'We are proud of the fact that none of us was willing to change his army uniform for the SS uniform'.<sup>677</sup> He saw the reasons for this attitude in the conservative tradition of the *Wehrmacht* cavalry: many of the officers came from the former Prussian Guards Cavalry Division and 'had no sympathy for National Socialism'.<sup>678</sup>

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<sup>675</sup> Radio message from Kommandostab RFSS to SS Cavalry Brigade, 14 November, 1941, 10 am, in: BArchB, NS 33/309, fiche 1, no. 57. The message contains no information on planned changes in the engineer squadron. It was also intended to withdraw the veterinary company and to divide it into two companies; see radio message from SS-Kav[allerie]-Ers[atz]-Abt[eilung] Warschau to SS Cavalry Brigade, 29 November, 1941, 4.55 pm, in: BArchB, NS 33/309, fiche 2, no. 128. At the beginning of December, the signals company was to be withdrawn as well; see radio message from Kommandostab RFSS to SS Cavalry Brigade, 1 December, 1941, 5.20 pm, in: BArchB, NS 33/310, fiche 1, no. 6; Beurteilung der Lage am 25. November 1941, in: StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Nr. 1310, Bl. 43.

<sup>676</sup> Whereas the brigade in its form of summer, 1941, had strongly resembled the army's 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Brigade, the 'reinforced' version was to become stronger than that as some of its subcomponents, such as the engineer and signalling units, were to be increased to battalion strength. For the structure of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Brigade of the *Wehrmacht*, see Friedrich Stahl (ed.), *Heereseinteilung 1939: Gliederung, Standorte und Kommandeure sämtlicher Einheiten und Dienststellen des Friedensheeres am 3.1. 1939 und die Kriegsgliederung vom 1.9. 1939* (Friedberg, 1980), pp. 23-24.

<sup>677</sup> Hans von Herwarth, *Zwischen Hitler und Stalin: erlebte Zeitgeschichte 1931 bis 1945* (Frankfurt, 1985), p. 236. Von Herwarth, who had served as a diplomat before the war, had a Jewish grandmother and joined the military in order to obtain a secure position and to escape persecution in the Nazi state. He resented National Socialism, but despite his ancestry he made a career both in the diplomatic service and the *Wehrmacht*. Von Herwarth even received the status of an 'honorary Aryan' from Adolf Hitler. See *ibid.*, p. 111; for von Herwarth's biography, see also Steffen R. Kathe, *Kulturpolitik um jeden Preis. Die Geschichte des Goethe-Instituts von 1951 bis 1990* (Munich, 2005), pp. 125-126. For the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division of the *Wehrmacht*, see the introduction to the finding aid for the file RH 29-1 (Kavalleriedivisionen), BArchF: this index contains the information that the division was renamed as 24<sup>th</sup> armoured division on 28 November, 1941, and restructured accordingly in East Prussia.

<sup>678</sup> Herwarth, *Zwischen Hitler und Stalin*, p. 111 and p. 236. The attitude of the cavalry officers described in these memoirs resembles that of the officer corps of the prestigious 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment

The restructuring of the brigade was not a mere administrative measure. It shows that the growth of the SS cavalry was a declared objective of Himmler and Fegelein. Also, the circumstances of this development highlight a conflict of interests between *Wehrmacht* and SS, which was carried out at a critical point in time: as the planned pull-out of several subunits coincided with the preparation for the second phase of operation 'Typhoon', General von Schenkendorff refused to let them go as he was in need of guard troops. Some of his own forces had been sent to the front and the staff of the SS Cavalry Brigade feared that the unit was being sacrificed in order to close gaps behind the lines. To avoid an overstretching of its forces and to continue the reorganisation, the brigade appealed to the Higher SS and police leader Centre; Heinrich Himmler had already approved of the plan. But this did not solve the problem: the question of releasing parts of the unit hung in the balance from mid-November until mid-December, despite repeated efforts of the *Reichsführer* and the *Kommandostab*. In this case, though, their plans were thwarted: first, the transfer of the troops was delayed due to intense patrolling activity of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment; at the beginning of December, the Soviet counteroffensive began which necessitated the effort of all available forces in this sector to hold the frontline.<sup>679</sup>

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from Potsdam. Richard von Weizsäcker, who later became president of the Federal Republic of Germany, served in this regiment during the Second World War. He noticed that, despite a nationalist and conservative Prussian tradition which welcomed the German rearmament, atrocities of the Nazi regime were strongly resented, such as the Blood Purge in 1934. Many of the officers tried to keep their distance from the new regime but had to live with a contradiction as they were also loyal to their country, a situation which led some of them into the military resistance against Hitler. See Richard von Weizsäcker, *Vier Zeiten. Erinnerungen* (Berlin, 1997), pp. 74-76 and pp. 87-91.

<sup>679</sup> Beurteilung der Lage am 25. November 1941, in: StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Nr. 1310, pp. 43-44; for the delay, see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 15. – 21.11. 1941, 22 November, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3, and Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 22. – 28.11. 1941, 29 November, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, *ibid.* Both reports mention ongoing searches were conducted by the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, which at the same time prepared for the transfer to Warsaw. The *Kommandostab* impatiently asked when this was to be implemented; see for example radio message from Kommandostab RFSS to SS Cavalry Brigade, 18 November, 1941, 4.30 pm, in: BArchB, NS 33/309, fiche 2, no. 82, and radio message from Kommandostab RFSS to SS Cavalry Brigade, 24 November, 1941, 9.15 am, in: BArchB, NS 33/309, fiche 2, no. 105. On 11 December, 1941, it was decided that the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment was to remain at the front; see radio message from SS-Kav[allerie]-Ers[atze]-Abt[eilung] Warschau to SS Cavalry Brigade, 11 December, 1941, 8.10 am, in: BArchB, NS 33/310, fiche 1, no. 29. For von dem Bach-Zelewski's support of this decision, see Tagebuch des Chefs der Bandenkampfverbände, entry from 12 December, 1941, p. 20.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this: first, the brigade leadership could not operate relatively independently anymore, as had been the case in Belorussia. There, the position of the SS and the ideological role of the unit had been stronger, which was accepted and actively supported by the *Wehrmacht*. Now, the SS cavalry was just a part of the executive force in a complex military power structure and was deployed according to military exigency. Himmler had not been able to assert himself; instead, the commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre got his way and von dem Bach-Zelewski took his side. Second, neither a lengthy disposition of the entire brigade in Russia, nor a frontline deployment, was ever intended and impossible as the unit was still undergoing a process of build-up and training and had a rather low level of combat readiness. Even in the current situation, it had reached its limits as its units were spread out over a wide area and were not even always superior to guerrillas in their sector. The brigade, however, did remain a coherent formation as its squadrons took hardly any losses until it was transferred to the front at the end of the year.

In the course of the evaluation process the squadrons went through in late November, 1941, SS cavalry officers also commented on the quality of the horses, vehicles, and weapons as well as the performance of their men since the beginning of the campaign against the Soviet Union. The equipment had withstood the sometimes extreme conditions even when covering enormous distances. But although the SS Cavalry Brigade had mastered most problems (often with inadequate supplies and communication), some of the cavalymen, especially members of the supply columns, still showed deficiencies in training. Squadron commanders complained about a lack of riding and driving abilities and stated that some of their men 'were just not appreciative enough of their horses' and should ideally be transferred to an infantry unit. This shows that the SS Cavalry Brigade had entered the Soviet Union

with a lack of proficiency in some key areas, a problem that apparently had not been resolved by the training period in East Prussia in July.<sup>680</sup> Disciplinary problems that had already occurred in Belorussia flared up again: deep in enemy territory, the soldiers were often not watchful and alert enough during rest periods as well as on the march, even in areas where partisan attacks had taken place.<sup>681</sup> These deficiencies continued to occur; in the course of the brigade's mission in Russia, commanders also noted shortcomings in basic essentials of infantry tactics, such as a lack of coordination between different subunits, advancing without covering fire, missing camouflage and defilade, and difficulties in adjusting to various combat situations.<sup>682</sup>

The main reason for these problems went back even further: in many cases, the men had been drafted and were put to immediate use as auxiliary policemen in Poland. Unlike their comrades from the *Wehrmacht*, they had not received very thorough military training; basically, they remained 'civilians who had been given a uniform'.<sup>683</sup> They were now paying the price for this as they had to confront a determined enemy who avoided an open confrontation. Their superiors, however, did not expect major operations for the final months of 1941. The priority was to prepare for the coming winter and to improve the training of the men in the winter quarters, for example by a course in horse-grooming. Towards the end of the year, a general tendency towards greater qualification and professionalism could be observed: the brigade command sought to create a pool of new leaders by organising training courses for prospective non-commissioned officers, junior officers, and reserve officers who had been recruited from the ranks. These courses were to be held in

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<sup>680</sup> Erfahrungsbericht der 2./SS-Kav.Rgt. 1 über den Einsatz im Osten, p. 7; Erfahrungsbericht vom 24.11. 1941 [5<sup>th</sup> squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment], p. 13; *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 – 1999. Bd. 29*, p. 559.

<sup>681</sup> Tagesbefehl Nr. 14 vom 16.10. 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/441, pp. 79-80; Tagesbefehl Nr. 20 vom 11.11. 1941, *ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>682</sup> Merkblatt vom 30.12. 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/441, p. 35.

<sup>683</sup> Interview with Bernhard D., retired chief inspector of the Landeskriminalamt Niedersachsen, 26 January, 2011.

Warsaw during the winter months and aimed at ending the dependency on allocations of reservists from the *Allgemeine SS*.<sup>684</sup> The brigade also received new officer cadets who had undergone training at the *SS-Junkerschulen* and some SS cavalrymen who had proven themselves in combat received battlefield promotions.<sup>685</sup>

After the abatement of the autumnal mud period, Army Group Centre launched its final push on Moscow on 19 November, 1941. The German high command completely misjudged the exhaustion of its troops and the precarious supply situation; it also ignored the unbroken will of the Red Army as well as intelligence reports of Soviet reinforcements from Siberia. Instead, the enemy was to be defeated in a decisive battle which was to gain the *Wehrmacht*, if not possession of the capital itself, a better position along its western fringe. Soon afterwards, the assault ground to a halt: despite initial successes, which had brought German troops within some twenty miles of the Kremlin, high losses and a lack of preparation for the Russian winter took their toll and the offensive ended on 5 December.<sup>686</sup> The Red Army immediately began a massive counterattack that soon threatened huge parts of the entire eastern front. In the sector of the Ninth Army, which had been tasked with an advance towards the Volga reservoir and the Moscow canal but failed to reach its objectives, the Soviets broke through and retook Kalinin on 16 December. In this critical situation, Army Group Centre decided to bolster the overstretched forces at the front by sending in troops from the SS cavalry. That the unit was not combat-

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<sup>684</sup> Erfahrungsbericht der 2./SS-Kav.Rgt. 1 über den Einsatz im Osten, p. 3; Erfahrungsbericht vom 24.11. 1941 [5<sup>th</sup> squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment], p. 11; Merkblatt Nr. 1 zur Winterausbildung 1941/42 vom 19.12. 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/441, p. 42; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 13. – 19.9. 1941, 19 September, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3. See also Brigadebefehl Nr. 5 für die Durchführung von Lehrgängen während des Winters 1941/42, 17 September, 1941, *ibid.*

<sup>685</sup> For the arrival of new officer cadets, see Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 20. – 26.9. 1941, 26 September, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3, and Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 5. – 11.10. 1941, 11 October, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, *ibid.* Battlefield promotions were mentioned in Tagesbefehl Nr. 17, 5 November, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 4/441, p. 61.

<sup>686</sup> Ueberschär and Wette, *‘Unternehmen Barbarossa’*, pp. 105-108; Klink in Boog, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, pp. 585-600.

ready was not even taken into account by the *Wehrmacht*. The army command nevertheless reacted very positively to this and noted that it was ‘grateful for every man’.<sup>687</sup> The entire brigade came under the command of the Ninth Army on 28 December. Leaving only the most necessary guard troops along a section of the Velikie Luki– Rzhev railway, its regiments and the RAA were ordered to support the frontline at Selizharovo northwest of Rzhev.<sup>688</sup>

Hermann Fegelein was well aware of the difficult situation at the front. His men were going into a sector without a coherent frontline; the *Wehrmacht* units they were about to support had already suffered great losses, especially from frostbite due to a lack of winter clothing, and had lost much of their artillery and armour. They struggled to hold their position against enemy forces, who threatened to overwhelm them by sheer numerical superiority. In a report for his superiors at the *Kommandostab*, Fegelein compared the forces under his command with the battered formations on the front. He viewed the morale of his own soldiers as ‘excellent’ and stated: ‘[The] brigade with its current equipment and armament and in its actual strength has the value of 1-2 front-line divisions’. This claim was rather presumptuous and overestimated the ability of the unit, given that the brigade numbered 4,428 men in total at this time, but only around 1,800 soldiers were available for fighting. They were, however, somewhat better prepared for winter conditions than troops of the *Wehrmacht*: in order to ensure their mobility, the men of the reconnaissance battalion and the cavalrymen dismounted and used sleighs instead; some of them were even given skis. They also received some winter clothing and reinforcements.<sup>689</sup>

<sup>687</sup> Erickson, *The road to Stalingrad*, p. 269 and p. 277; AOK 9, Kriegstagebuch Ia Nr. 3, entries from 11 December, 20 December, and 24 December, 1941, p. 132, p. 157 and pp. 165-167.

<sup>688</sup> AOK 9, Kriegstagebuch Ia Nr. 3, entries from 15 December and 20 December, 1941, pp. 145-146 and pp. 155-156; Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 13. – 19.12. 1941, 23 December, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; Bericht über den Einsatz der SS-Kav.Brigade im Winter 1941/42, 11 February 1942, in: BArchB, NS 19/3487, p. 2.

<sup>689</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 20. – 26.12. 1941, 29 December, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, in: VUA,

The optimism of the brigade commander can only be explained by the desire to impress his superiors. Not only did he misjudge the strength of the unit; he also explicitly mentions several factors that complicated the situation in the Toropets – Rzhev sector, especially the extreme weather conditions and the numerical inferiority of German troops against their Soviet opponents. The continuing threat from partisans, some of whom seemed to be in direct contact with the Red Army, appears in the document as well: SS cavalymen had to face groups of up to several hundred men who had artillery at their disposal. Nevertheless, the commander thought that his troops would be able to negotiate all these problems. In view of these facts, Fegelein's report stands in stark contrast to the one that was written four weeks earlier by *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Karl Gesele, his deputy, in order to effect the withdrawal of the unit. Gesele's account, which was based on the assumption of a continued deployment in anti-partisan operations, clearly illustrated supply and weather problems as well as the assignment of an operational area that was far too large for the SS Cavalry Brigade. Gesele anticipated a significant diminution of the unit's fighting strength by the spring of 1942 without even considering combat missions against regular Soviet troops.<sup>690</sup> Thus, Fegelein's bravado stood against the realistic analysis of his closest aide. His assessment of the brigade's abilities was yet another outrageous claim in a long series of reports which grossly overestimated what his men were able to achieve. The SS Cavalry Brigade was already struggling with its current objectives and not ready for the role it had been given. But the army's decision overrode Himmler's intentions and Fegelein's word was more

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Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; AOK 9, Kriegstagebuch Ia Nr. 3, entry from 24 December, 1941, p. 168. The commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment noted that the supply of winter clothes had not been sufficient as the men could only be given one item each (like fur caps or trousers). The quality, however, was good and the SS cavalymen were still better off than their army comrades, who had not received anything. See Bericht über den Einsatz der SS-Kav.Brigade im Winter 1941/42, p. 19.

<sup>690</sup> Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit v. 20. – 26.12. 1941, 29 December, 1941, SS-Kav.Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; Beurteilung der Lage am 25. November 1941, in: StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Nr. 1310, pp. 43-45.

important for the brigade than Gesele's. As a result, the unit had to take on a task that was doomed to failure and the *Wehrmacht's* decision to continue the attack on Moscow, combined with Fegelein's need for recognition, became a death warrant for many SS cavalymen.

When the new mission of the SS cavalry began on 28 December, the situation was critical: the Ninth Army desperately tried to hold its ground as the subordinate corps continued to face strong attacks and took heavy casualties. In its war diary, the army command nevertheless glorified the struggle of its soldiers as a 'heroic epic' and expressed its hopes of holding out with reinforcements being on the way. The SS Cavalry Brigade was viewed as a 'strong, cohesive and disciplined combat unit' in this context, which shows how desperate the army was for support: it even overlooked the fact that the brigade was still lacking combat experience and about to be deployed in a new role – as an infantry unit.<sup>691</sup> Just like at Bialystok, it now acted as a stopgap in the defensive front of the Ninth Army, but this time the Germans found themselves in a completely different situation. Instead of pushing forward, they were fighting for survival in a battle that was so fierce that Adolf Hitler himself forbade the Ninth Army to take a step backwards.<sup>692</sup> The Soviets, on the other hand, launched another major offensive on 4 January, 1942, and attempted to encircle Army Group Centre by taking Rzhev in the north, advancing towards the Minsk – Moscow road, and combining this with another pincer that was penetrating the German lines from the south.<sup>693</sup> The Red Army managed to almost completely cut off the German Ninth and Third Army as well as the Fourth Tank Army; the most important positions and supply routes could only be defended by means of counterattacks led by armoured forces and hastily assembled troops from other

<sup>691</sup> AOK 9, Kriegstagebuch Ia Nr. 3, entries from 25 December, 27 December and 28 December, 1941, pp. 170-171, pp. 175-178, and pp. 179-181.

<sup>692</sup> AOK 9, Kriegstagebuch Ia Nr. 4, 1.1. 1942 – 31.3. 1942, entry from 2 January, 1942, in: BArchF, RH 20-9/47, p. 7.

<sup>693</sup> Die Winterschlacht von Rshew, AOK 9, in: BArchF, RH 20-9/66, p. 1.

sectors of the front.<sup>694</sup>

In the attempt to close off the breaches in the German front, the forces of the SS cavalry were split up: instead of integrating the entire unit into the frontline near Selizharovo, the two horse regiments were sent to the east in forced marches to attack Red Army forces that were to encircle Rzhev, whereas the reconnaissance battalion was sent to Penno northwest of Rzhev. There, it was to defend against a Soviet thrust from the north which had driven a wedge between the left wing of the Ninth Army and its northern neighbour. In the course of the following three weeks, heavy fighting ensued with Rzhev as the focal point: two Soviet armies continued their advance into the rear of the 6<sup>th</sup> corps, which held the town and the surrounding area. Soon, the German occupants of this sector were surrounded on three sides, with only a narrow corridor being open to the south. The two SS cavalry regiments attempted to close the gap west of Rzhev by means of a relief attack but encountered a strong enemy who was well dug in. As individual cavalry squadrons took losses of 60%, the attack was aborted and the Germans took up defensive positions, in which one squadron was partly annihilated in the days that followed.<sup>695</sup>

In order to ease the dangerous situation, a simultaneous German attack from the east and west was carried out on 21 January, as a result of which large Red Army forces were cut off from their supply lines two days later. Soldiers on both sides were forced to fight under the conditions of exceptionally grim winter weather with snow flurries and temperatures at 45 degrees below zero. On the German side, a lack of supplies and heavy weapons made counterattacks extremely costly and difficult, a situation that applied to both *Wehrmacht* soldiers and SS cavalrymen. Together with

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<sup>694</sup> Kondratjew, *Die Schlacht von Rshew*, p. 11.

<sup>695</sup> Die Winterschlacht von Rshew, AOK 9, pp. 1-2; Kriegstagebuch Ia Nr. 4, entries from 5 – 8 January, 1942, pp. 16-25; Bericht über den Einsatz der SS-Kav.Brigade im Winter 1941/42, pp. 2-4 and p. 9-14; Tagesmeldung vom 9.1. 1942, SS Cavalry Brigade, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 3, file 2.

the 206<sup>th</sup> infantry division of the 23<sup>rd</sup> corps, the SS cavalrymen had fought their way through the rear of the Soviet 29<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> armies west of Rzhev and joined other German forces advancing from there so that the enemy was caught in a pocket.<sup>696</sup>

The crisis, however, was not over yet: the enemy tried to re-establish his connection with the rear, from where other Soviet forces also attempted to get through to their comrades. From 4 February, the Germans closed in on the Soviet 29<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> armies west of Rzhev, having to defend themselves against enemy relief attempts. These were carried out by waves of infantry and supported by tanks, artillery, and aeroplanes. As the Red Army threw forward its men in an almost suicidal manner, the success of the German operation remained uncertain until the middle of the month. Step by step, the counteroffensive of *Wehrmacht* and SS gained ground and enemy groups west of Rzhev were destroyed. The SS Cavalry Brigade retook several strategic positions; for his personal bravery and leadership skills displayed in this operation, Hermann Fegelein was later awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, the highest German military decoration of the Second World War. The fighting on both sides of the pocket ended with the almost complete annihilation of the Soviet forces in this sector on 20 February; on their side alone, 26,647 men lost their lives and 4,833 were taken prisoner.<sup>697</sup>

This episode is just one example for the intensity of the fighting in the Rzhev region, which escalated over the course of several months. This also becomes evident from the image of the Soviets in the German sources: before the beginning of the counteroffensive which ended operation Typhoon, the *Wehrmacht* had tended

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<sup>696</sup> Die Winterschlacht von Rshew, AOK 9, p. 4; AOK 9, Kriegstagebuch Ia Nr. 4, entry from 20 January, 1942, p. 59; Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen*, p. 27; Bericht über den Einsatz der SS-Kav.Brigitade im Winter 1941/42, p. 16.

<sup>697</sup> Die Winterschlacht von Rshew, AOK 9, pp. 5-11; AOK 9, Kriegstagebuch Ia Nr. 4, entries from 5 – 20 February, pp. 96-133; Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen*, pp. 27-28. Hermann Fegelein was awarded the Knight's Cross on 2 March, 1942; see Vorschlag für die Verleihung des Ritterkreuzes des Eisernen Kreuzes (undated), in BArchB, SSO Hermann Fegelein, and Dienstlaufbahn Hermann Fegelein, Abschrift einer Auflistung von Auszeichnungen und Teilnahmen an Kampfhandlungen Fegeleins (undated), *ibid.*, fiche 713.

to underestimate the enemy, who was viewed as being badly led and having severe problems in coordinating his forces. The morale of Red Army men, according to the intelligence section of the German 23<sup>rd</sup> corps, was low and discipline could only be upheld by terror. Despite acknowledging the achievements of individual soldiers, who were well-trained and skilled, the judgement was rather negative.<sup>698</sup> During the ensuing operations, this attitude changed as the Soviets regained ground. This was often achieved by sending in masses of soldiers, a strategy which brought many of their own units to the verge of collapse. According to a report from the 253<sup>rd</sup> division of the *Wehrmacht* (to which the bicycle battalion of the SS cavalry was subordinate), a Soviet division attacking the German lines in its sector suffered such a high death toll that one of its three infantry regiments had to be disbanded after one day of fighting.<sup>699</sup> Also, second-rate units had to carry out frontal assaults on fortified German positions as well, which proves that the Red Army used all available personnel to force the enemy back.<sup>700</sup> On the whole, however, the Soviets fought very determinedly and made good use of their tanks, artillery, and air force, a fact that was even admitted by Gustav Lombard.<sup>701</sup> Despite the fact that anti-Bolshevist ideology underpinned statements from *Wehrmacht* and SS units, the combat value of Soviet soldiers was now regarded more favourably, especially in defence situations.<sup>702</sup> The men of the Red Army continued to withstand their enemy in further

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<sup>698</sup> Feindnachrichtenblatt vom 3.11. 1941, Generalkommando XXIII. A.K. Abt. Ic, in: BArchF, RH 24-23/61, pp. 9-10.

<sup>699</sup> The number of casualties of the Soviet division was given as 1,280 dead in one day; see Bericht über den Verlauf der Kampfhandlungen der 253. I.D. vom 9. - 22.1. 1942 und die Ursachen des dabei entstandenen Verlusts an Waffen und Gerät, in: BArchF, RH 24-23/68, p. 10. According to Erickson, *The road to Stalingrad*, p. 501, a Soviet rifle division had an average strength of 11,907 men in December, 1941, and consisted of three rifle regiments with an average strength of 2,957 men each. Losses of 1,280 dead would mean a casualty rate of 43% for one regiment, or almost 11% for the entire division. To this percentage added possibly a great number of wounded, about whom the German document contains no information.

<sup>700</sup> One division in the Rzhev area reported that badly trained older men from construction battalions had to attack German bunkers, which was unsuccessful and led to extremely high casualties; see Gefechtsbericht über den russischen Angriff am 29.11. 1941 vom 29.11. 1941, 206<sup>th</sup> infantry division, in: BArchF, RH 26-206/17, pp. 338-340.

<sup>701</sup> Bericht über den Einsatz der SS-Kav.Brigade im Winter 1941/42, p. 10.

<sup>702</sup> Erfahrungsbericht [des XXIII. AK] im Winterfeldzug 1941/42 vom 18.6. 1942, in: BArchF, RH 24-

costly battles in this region, which they named ‘the mincer of Rzhev’. To this day, their total number of casualties is not known; a more recent Russian source, however, admits that Soviet soldiers were driven forward regardless of the consequences, which is the main reason for their extremely high losses.<sup>703</sup>

The SS cavalry experienced both success and failure during the winter battle: whilst the two horse regiments were involved in a successful counterattack, Fegelein’s soldiers were defeated on another front at the same time. A Soviet thrust from the north led to the collapse of the German front in the sector between Toropets and Rzhev, where the bicycle reconnaissance detachment was based. Strong enemy reinforcements and a likely direction of attack had been identified earlier but the left flank of the Ninth Army was too weak to withstand, despite the efforts to patch up the frontline with SS forces. From 9 January, the positions of the battalion at Peno came under attack from three sides. Despite carrying out daring counterattacks, the RAA was encircled; parts of the unit managed to escape but were almost completely wiped out during the breakout and retreat that followed. The battalion had basically ceased to exist after just three days of heavy fighting; the remainder of its squadrons reached Toropets on 17 January. Three days later, the town and its important supply depots fell into the hands of the Red Army after German forces desperately trying to hold it had suffered devastating losses.<sup>704</sup> On 21 January, the SS Cavalry Brigade also lost the village of Basary near Toropets after heavy fighting, during which all inmates of a camp for Soviet prisoners of war were killed as the SS soldiers used

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23/77, p. 17.

<sup>703</sup> Kondratjew, *Die Schlacht von Rshew*, pp. 19-37. Kondratjew estimates that between late 1941 and early 1943 1,109,143 Soviet soldiers died in operations in the Rzhev – Vyazma region; see *ibid.*, p. 32. German losses for the same time are placed at 300,000 – 450,000 soldiers, a number which is also still open to debate; *ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>704</sup> Bericht über den Einsatz der SS-Kav.Brigade im Winter 1941/42, pp. 3-7; Bericht über die R.A.A. der SS-Kav.Brig. während der Unterstellungszeit unter 253. I.D., 253<sup>rd</sup> infantry division, 24 January, 1942, in: BArchF, RH 24-23/68, pp. 22-25; Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen*, p. 28; radio message from SS Cavalry Brigade to Kommandostab RF-SS, 12 January, VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 3, file 2; Tagesmeldung, SS Cavalry Brigade, 12 January, 1942, *ibid.* The Germans lost 723 lorries and forty food dumps at Toropez, along with huge amounts of weapons and ammunition; see Erickson, *The road to Stalingrad*, pp. 304-305.

them as human shields.<sup>705</sup>

From the records of the SS cavalry and the diary of Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski it becomes clear that staff and logistics of the unit had been destroyed or dispersed almost completely as they had been forced to a chaotic retreat and were left in disarray. At Toropets, the commander's squadron lost contact with the subunits in the field during the Soviet attack which ultimately led the brigade staff and the supply sections to evacuate the town. A scattered group of officers finally reported to von dem Bach-Zelewski, who noted on 24 January: 'Staff incapacitated as all is lost'.<sup>706</sup> The situation at the front was so unstable that the survivors from Toropets had to be pulled back all the way to Vitebsk, where they were reassembled under Fegelein's command. Communications for the brigade were handled by the staff of the HSSPF Mitte for the time being whereas supplies for the units still fighting at the front were provided by the 23<sup>rd</sup> corps.<sup>707</sup> In addition to the organisational chaos, almost half of the horses, all motor and horse-drawn vehicles as well as a great deal of valuable equipment had become irrecoverably lost when the Soviets overran the brigade's rear positions. As the horse and reconnaissance squadrons were fighting at the front, these were manned by stablehands, soldiers of the baggage trains and some guard troops. For them, it had proved impossible to organise the defence of the supply bases against Soviet infantry and tanks.<sup>708</sup>

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<sup>705</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 234; Bericht über den Einsatz der SS-Kav.Brigade im Winter 1941/42, pp. 7-8.

<sup>706</sup> Tagebuch des Chefs der Bandenkampfverbände, entry from 24 January, 1942, p. 33.

<sup>707</sup> Tagebuch des Chefs der Bandenkampfverbände, entries from 24 and 25 January, 1942, pp. 33-34; radio message from HSSUPF Russland Mitte to Kdo.-Stab RF-SS, 23 January, 1942, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 3, file 2; Lagebericht, SS Cavalry Brigade, 24 January, 1942, *ibid.*; Lagemeldung, SS Cavalry Brigade, 31 January, 1942, *ibid.*; Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen*, p. 28. The survivors of the anti-tank squadron of the RAA had been pulled back to Vitebsk, too; they came under the command of the 1<sup>st</sup> mountain division at Dobrina near Vitebsk; *ibid.* Two weeks after the loss of the town, Fegelein stated in a report that the events regarding the quartermaster squadron (a staff unit responsible for logistics that had defended Toropez until the last moment) were 'irrelevant for the deployment of the brigade at the moment'; see radio message from SS Cavalry Brigade to Kdo.-Stab RF-SS, 2 February, 1942, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 3, file 3. Apparently, the SS cavalry could rely on other units for supplies after losing some of its own staff units.

<sup>708</sup> Bericht über den Einsatz der SS-Kav.Brigade im Winter 1941/42, pp. 2-3 and pp. 7-8.

At the end of February, 1942, the situation of the SS Cavalry Brigade was similar to that of many other German formations on the eastern front. The attackers were confronted with a generally well-prepared enemy who not only outnumbered them but was also more able to adapt to the winter conditions. The Soviets dominated the timing and location of combat operations, whereas the Germans often struggled to react. In the sector of the Ninth Army alone, there had been no coherent frontline between Velikie Luki and Rzhev for some time during the months of January and February, 1942. The divisions of this formation had had to retreat some 70 miles and were badly damaged as many vehicles, tanks and other heavy weapons had been lost. What outweighed losses of equipment, though, were the casualties, especially in the infantry divisions. This was also true for SS and police units in this sector, such as the infantry regiment *Der Führer* of the division *Das Reich* (which was almost completely annihilated) and Reserve Police Battalion 11, which had been fighting at Toropets as well.<sup>709</sup>

As far as the SS cavalry was concerned, losses had been tremendous: of the soldiers of the bicycle reconnaissance detachment, 75% had been killed, wounded or been affected by frostbite only two weeks after the beginning of their assignment; when the rest of the battalion arrived in the rear after the evacuation of Toropets a month later, it only numbered 11 men. By that time, the entire brigade had lost 870 of the about 1,800 combat troops who had been dispatched to the front in late December, and at least 50 men of the depot personnel at Toropets and Basary.<sup>710</sup> Nevertheless,

<sup>709</sup> AOK 9, Kriegstagebuch Ia Nr. 4, entry from 1 February, pp. 84-88; Die Winterschlacht von Rshew, AOK 9, p. 11. For Soviet winter equipment, see Tagesmeldung, 11 January, 1942, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 3, file 2; according to this report, Soviet prisoners were equipped with furs and padded jackets as well as snowshirts for camouflage. Casualties in some German units were extremely high: The regiment *Der Führer* had only 35 out of formerly 2,000 men left after a month of heavy fighting near Rzhev; see Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, p. 466. Reserve Police Battalion 11 took casualties at Toropez, lost most of its equipment and vehicles and was no longer operational as the majority of the men were sick; see Tagebuch des Chefs der Bandenkampfverbände, entry from 24 January, 1942, p. 33.

<sup>710</sup> Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen*, p. 28; Bericht über den Einsatz der SS-Kav.Brigade im Winter 1941/42, pp. 6-7; radio message from SS Cavalry Brigade to *Kommandostab RF-SS*, 12 January, VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 3, file 2. The RAA had lost more than 500 men since late December but

the SS cavalry soldiers stood their ground: their superiors, von dem Bach-Zelewski and Fegelein, closely followed the continuing combat and noted successes as well as a seemingly unbroken spirit, especially in the attacks on encircled Soviet troops southwest of Rzhev.<sup>711</sup> The grave defeat at Toropets was referred to as having caused losses of men and material but not seriously affected the morale of the soldiers: in a message to the *Kommandostab*, Fegelein even claimed that they were fighting ‘in high spirits’.<sup>712</sup> This was another rather flamboyant statement given that the soldiers under his command still had to put up with very grim conditions. Moreover, the SS Cavalry Brigade as such was only able to remain operational after Toropets because other agencies and units took over important tasks for them, especially in the field of logistics.

Four main reasons for the high number of casualties can be identified: firstly, the intensity of the fighting – the SS Cavalry Brigade was deployed at the focus of the battle in which the Red Army intended to destroy Army Group Centre. Secondly, the extremely cold winter weather, for which the SS cavalymen were inadequately prepared. The third reason is the lack of troops on the German side which necessitated the participation of all available forces in heavy fighting for a time of several months, even if they – like the SS cavalry – were only meant to support particular units at the front for a limited time.<sup>713</sup> Moreover, for several weeks in January, 1942, the *Wehrmacht* was not allowed to withdraw troops in the Rzhev

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some 160 – 180 non-commissioned officers and men, who had been only lightly wounded or were suffering from frostbite, were viewed as being able to return to the unit soon; see *ibid.*, p. 18. For the losses of the entire brigade, see Bericht über den Einsatz der SS-Kav.Brigade im Winter 1941/42, p. 17. The numbers given here for the brigade represent men who were killed, wounded, or missing in action.

<sup>711</sup> In his daily report, the HSSPF Mitte noted on 30 January, 1942: ‘SS Cavalry Brigade continues to fight successfully on two fronts west of Rshew’; see radio message from HSSPF Mitte to Kdo.-Stab RF-SS, 30 January, 1942, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 3, file 2. Six days later, he attributed the taking of an important village to the ‘outstanding fighting spirit of the men’; see radio message from HSSPF Mitte to RF-SS and Kdo.-Stab RF-SS, 6 February, 1942, *ibid.*

<sup>712</sup> Lagemeldung, SS Cavalry Brigade, 31 January, 1942, in VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 3, file 2.

<sup>713</sup> For the original intention of the mission, see Bericht über den Einsatz der SS-Kav.Brigade im Winter 1941/42, p. 3.

sector without Hitler's permission; when he finally consented to a straightening of the frontline, the soldiers of army and *Waffen-SS* had already paid a high price.<sup>714</sup> Another cause for concern, which was viewed as having flawed the performance of the unit and caused further casualties, was the fragmentation of the mounted subunits and the bicycle reconnaissance detachment in different sectors together with various *Wehrmacht* units. According to the leadership of the brigade, this greatly complicated the supply situation and made a concerted deployment impossible.<sup>715</sup>

A characteristic both of the ferocity of combat and of the fighting spirit of the brigade is the high number of officer casualties. Subalterns in the SS cavalry tended to fight from the front and often exposed themselves in dangerous positions, which led to injuries and death. This is illustrated by a report Gustav Lombard compiled for the chief of staff of the *SS-Führungshauptamt*, *SS-Gruppenführer* Hans Jüttner. The document contains the example of a counterattack that was carried out at Penno by a squadron of the RAA on 9 January, 1942:

SS-O[ber]stu[r]mf[ührer] Koppenwallner attacks the enemy, leading an outnumbered, random troop with a 'Sieg Heil' on the *Führer*. After one hour of fighting, the enemy yields. At 9.15 pm, the breach is in the hands of the RAA again. SS-O[ber]stu[r]mf[ührer] Koppenwallner died during this [incident]. All other officers were badly wounded. In a call to the commander of the RAA, the divisional commander expressed his appreciation for the defence against a far greater enemy force.<sup>716</sup>

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<sup>714</sup> For the strict order to hold out, see AOK 9, Kriegstagebuch Ia Nr. 4, 1.1. 1942 – 31.3. 1942, entry from 2 January, 1942, in: BArchF, RH 20-9/47, p. 7, and Tagebuch des Chefs der Bandenkampfverbände, entry from 22 January, 1942, p. 31. For the cancellation of that order, see *ibid.*

<sup>715</sup> Bericht über den Einsatz der SS-Kav.Brigade im Winter 1941/42, pp. 19-20.

<sup>716</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Although this account is written in typical Nazi terms and aims at glorifying what was viewed to be an example of heroic fighting against a vicious enemy, it can be assumed that it typifies a development that was very dangerous for the SS cavalry, as officer losses continued to be high throughout the entire combat mission on the eastern front. The unit could always fall back on its system of recruit depots and training facilities and also profited from official recruitment drives of the *Waffen-SS* in order to replace non-commissioned officers and men, but it was hard to replace experienced leaders, especially on platoon and squadron level.<sup>717</sup>

In the winter of 1941 – 1942, the SS Cavalry Brigade found itself in a situation that predominantly required military skills of the soldiers. But instead of focusing on the military situation, the SS cavalymen still very often directed their violence against those who could not or no longer defend themselves. There were no large Jewish communities in the operational area, but both regular and irregular enemy fighters had to be dealt with. The degree of brutality that was displayed now cannot be compared to earlier events in Belorussia as in this new phase different groups were treated with excessive brutality both during periods of occupational duty and in combat, which the unit only had experienced on a very limited scale before. Apart from partisans, who generally could not expect mercy, two groups are of particular importance: the local population who got caught up in the conflict and had to suffer the consequences, and enemy soldiers. Whereas killings of civilians had been largely limited to Jews in Belorussia (with the exception of the unit's excesses after suffering the first casualties at Turov), even friendly and helpful local inhabitants now became targets.

As far as their attitude towards the civilian population is concerned, it is remarkable

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<sup>717</sup> Tagebuch des Chefs der Bandenkampfverbände, entry from 12 January, 1942, p. 28; according to this source, all squadrons of the brigade had lost platoon leaders already after about two weeks of fighting. According to the records of the SS-Führungshauptamt, 7 officers had been killed and 9 were wounded until the beginning of February; see Zusammenfassender Bericht der Tagesmeldungen der SS-Divisionen vom 9.2. 1942, in: BArchB, NS 19/1520, fiche 30-34.

that members of the SS Cavalry Brigade seemed to be under the impression that they could do whatever they pleased with the locals, who at first were generally viewed as potentially hostile. Unlike in Belorussia, where the ethnic origin of the inhabitants facilitated collaboration in many cases, the SS cavalry was now based on Russian soil, where ethnic tensions or revenge for Stalin's ruthless policies was of less importance. Nevertheless, many citizens of the Rzhev area tended to cooperate with the Germans and gave them information on the underground movement.<sup>718</sup> This, however, did not lead to a more humane treatment: the locals, who were to be deterred from joining the partisan movement, became victims of reprisals and were used as forced labourers to erect bases and fortifications for the Germans.<sup>719</sup> SS cavalrymen even committed crimes against them in situations when they should have been preparing to defend themselves against Soviet attacks: with little resources or reinforcements available to them, they were fighting with their backs to the wall. From a Soviet source, one such act of violence has been reconstructed. At Ksty, a small village, the inhabitants (only old people, women, and children) were assembled in a field, where many children were killed before the eyes of their mothers. One soldier killed a two-year-old boy by smashing his head against a post; after this, he shot his two sisters who were six and seven years old. About 70 women

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<sup>718</sup> The commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre had expected resistance from a population that had lived in a Communist society for decades. He was surprised to find that the locals were actually 'pro-German' for the most part. See Bericht des ehemaligen Berück / Ic (1954), Reise mit General Wlassow zum Heeresgebiet Mitte, in: Institut für Zeitgeschichte Munich, ZS 417, quoted in Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, pp. 208. However, traditional stereotypes of 'primitive' Russians who had to be treated in a way that was 'hard but fair' prevailed and contained to shape his policy. See Kom. Gen. d. S. Tr. u. Bef. i. H. G. Mitte v. 25.12. 42, Erfahrungen in der Verwaltung des Landes und politische Zielsetzung, in: BArchF, RH 22/235, quoted *ibid.*

<sup>719</sup> Tagesbefehl Nr. 4/42 vom 28.1. 1942, in: BArchF, RS 4/441, p. 21. According to this source, the population of occupied villages was to be used 'ruthlessly' for the construction of defensive positions. This behaviour, like the use of violence against suspects during questionings and the shootings of villagers, was absolutely contradictory to the aims which had been formulated by general von Schenckendorff after the 'anti-partisan course' of Army Group Centre in September. In a memorandum he wrote after the seminar, the general focused on the treatment of the civilian population and identified three central aspects: finding and destroying partisan helpers, winning the trust of the local population, and gaining their support in partisan warfare. See 'Der Partisan, seine Organisation und seine Bekämpfung', Berück Mitte / Ia Nr. 1001/41 g.v. 12.10. 41, in: BArchF, RH 22/225, quoted in Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik*, pp. 364-365.

and elderly people were locked in barns which were then set on fire. This incident happened just before the Soviet offensive which aimed at Peno.<sup>720</sup>

In combat, too, soldiers of the SS Cavalry Brigade often displayed great brutality, which sometimes was a mutual reaction. Like their comrades in the *Wehrmacht*, they perceived the Soviet way of fighting as treacherous as it included extensive use of snipers, partisans, surprise fire, and raids. Although this was in accordance with the Hague Convention, it was considered illegitimate. The Germans viewed such methods as ‘underhand fighting’ because they were not used to an enemy who often fought to the last and employed all available means including self-sacrifice. Also, *Wehrmacht* and SS units were often forced to fight in difficult terrain such as dense forests, which was new to them.<sup>721</sup> In addition to unusual combat situations, the Soviets used stratagems which violated international law: the *Wehrmacht* observed Red Army men who continued to fight after feigning wounds, death, or pretending to surrender. In some cases, the rights of negotiators were abused for the preparation of attacks.<sup>722</sup> During intense combat operations, German soldiers sometimes reacted to these Soviet tactics by not taking prisoners.<sup>723</sup>

Both in the army and the SS cavalry, losses had incurred as Red Army men had

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<sup>720</sup> *Soviet Government Statements on Nazi Atrocities* (London, 1946), p. 45. Ksty is situated next to Peno; in this source no information is given about the nature of the killing, i.e. if it was a reprisal or not. The German unit responsible for this crime cannot be clearly identified as the source only mentions that it was an SS formation; from the time and location of the crime, it can be assumed that it was the bicycle battalion of the SS Cavalry Brigade.

<sup>721</sup> Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, pp. 534-540; Abschlussmeldung der SS-Kav.Brigitade über Befriedung der Prypec-Sümpfe, 18 September, 1941, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 24, file 3; Tagesbefehl vom 24.1. 1942. An die Führer, Unterführer und Männer / SS-Kav.Rgt. 1, Reit. Battr., Flak-Battr., 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, in: BArchF, RS 4/441, p. 24.

<sup>722</sup> Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, pp. 540-542.

<sup>723</sup> Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, pp. 517-519; see also Hannes Heer, *Vom Verschwinden der Täter: der Vernichtungskrieg fand statt, aber keiner war dabei* (Berlin 2004), pp. 116-118. Extreme brutality in combat was experienced by many German soldiers from the first days of the campaign against the Soviet Union. Heer cites the example of Siegfried Knappe, a young officer of the 87<sup>th</sup> infantry division, alongside which the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment was deployed in the Bialystok region. In his memoirs, Knappe described how his unit was suddenly attacked from behind after capturing Soviet positions near the German-Soviet line of demarcation. As a result, no prisoners were taken anymore during this encounter. See Siegfried Knappe and Ted Brushaw, *Soldat. Reflections of a German soldier, 1936 – 1949* (New York, 1992), p. 193, quoted in Heer, *Vom Verschwinden der Täter*, p. 117.

opened fire from a very short distance, literally at the very last moment before the Germans could break into their positions. The SS cavalry adapted to this by using the same method and even going further: Gustav Lombard swore his soldiers to be constantly on guard and to let Soviet soldiers come within twenty to thirty metres of their positions. SS men then were to 'harvest', that is, to annihilate the enemy; Lombard even promised a special leave of three days to soldiers who reported having killed Red Army men 'the Russian way'.<sup>724</sup>

Even when Soviet soldiers had been taken captive, they were not safe from atrocities. After a combat operation in March, 1942, Hermann Fegelein suggested one of his soldiers to shoot a prisoner and take his felt boots. When questioned after the war, the man said that he did not take this advice but many of his comrades obtained boots that way.<sup>725</sup> Apart from individual incidents, SS cavalymen committed excesses beyond the already brutal conduct of the army as well. A prime example for this was the use of prisoners of war as 'human shields' at a camp near Basary, which demonstrated a complete disregard for human life. Whereas outright killings of captured Red Army soldiers and their inhumane treatment in camps were sanctioned by the leadership of the German army, their abuse during the defence of a camp against enemy troops was a situation which was not covered by the orders given out to occupation troops.<sup>726</sup>

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<sup>724</sup> Tagesbefehl vom 24.1. 1942. An die Führer, Unterführer und Männer / SS-Kav.Rgt. 1, Reit. Battr., Flak-Battr., 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, in: BArchF, RS 4/441, p. 24.

<sup>725</sup> Vernehmung Daniel Teske vom 4.10. 1962 in BArchL, B 162/5542, p. j41. In the extremely grim winter of 1941 – 1942, this was common practice in the *Wehrmacht* as well. The army high command issued an order that was based on a directive from Hitler, who had ordered to 'ruthlessly strip prisoners and locals of [their] winter clothing'. See See OKW / WFSt / Abt. L/I, Fernschreiben an OKH / Op.Abt. vom 21.12. 1941, quoted in Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, p. 520. Hartmann has proven the implementation of this order by the 4<sup>th</sup> armoured division and the 45<sup>th</sup> infantry division of the *Wehrmacht*; see *ibid.* For the 253<sup>rd</sup> infantry division of the *Wehrmacht*, similar cases have been documented, including the killing of Soviet prisoners who had just before been robbed of all their winter clothing. See Rass, *Menschenmaterial*, pp. 337-338.

<sup>726</sup> See for example Bestimmungen über das Kriegsgefangenenwesen im Fall Barbarossa vom 16.6. 1941, quoted in Ueberschär and Wette, *Unternehmen Barbarossa*, p. 261, and Verschärfte Anordnung des OKW zur Behandlung sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener in allen Kriegsgefangenenlagern vom 8.9. 1941 mit dem Merkblatt für die Bewachung sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener als Anlage, *ibid.*, pp. 297-300.

To a certain extent, the behaviour of the SS cavalry in combat resembled the brutality displayed by the *Wehrmacht* as similar atrocities have been documented for army divisions as well. Omer Bartov has argued that these crimes were committed for reasons such as the issuing of criminal orders, the brutality of the fighting itself, the susceptibility of younger officers and many men for Nazi ideology, and the indoctrination of the troops.<sup>727</sup> Unlike in the regular forces, however, in the SS Cavalry Brigade a process of radicalisation and acts of violence did not predominantly occur on a local level in the course of an escalation of combat, as the result of orders from fanatical junior officers. The officer corps of the SS cavalry was driven by Nazi ideology on all levels, as was indicated by the leadership of Hermann Fegelein, Gustav Lombard, and squadron as well as platoon leaders. Under their command, the unit committed numerous atrocities, a development which began several months before the brigade was sent to the front for the first time. It can be stated that this constituted a habituation to mass violence in the form of an institutional brutalisation. The level of brutality the unit had reached before even entering combat is reflected by the extremely high numbers of people who fell victim to the SS Cavalry Brigade in Belorussia and Russia during the summer and autumn of 1941: the destruction of Jews and the terror against the non-Jewish majority of the civilian population, cynically termed ‘partisan warfare’, claimed tens of thousands of civilian victims. This was followed by a mutual escalation of behaviour in combat from late December onwards, with some aspects (such as the offer of special leave for the shooting of Soviet soldiers at close range) resembling earlier conduct in Belorussia. Although the SS cavalrymen showed extreme violence both in combat as well as behind the front, their ideologically motivated missions are of greater importance for their conditioning. Thus, an increase in brutality was

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<sup>727</sup> Bartov, *German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, p. 106.

brought about in a different way than has been described by Bartov.

Even though it had taken heavy blows during the winter, the SS Cavalry Brigade remained operational and continued to fight in the Rzhev sector during the following months. Its readiness for combat, however, continued to decline as casualties mounted and battle fatigue set in after the end of the Soviet winter offensive. The exhausted men had to fight against enemy stragglers and to withstand further heavy Soviet attacks. Fegelein saw his forces dwindle: after the fall of Toropets (at which point the brigade had lost more than 900 men or almost one fourth of its strength already), he began to recommend a pull-out and replenishment of the brigade from mid-February onwards, but to no avail. In late March and early April, 1942, staff officers of the SS cavalry had several consultations with the commander of the 23<sup>rd</sup> corps and the supreme commander of Army Group Centre. As the *Wehrmacht* approved of the brigade commander's plan, he again asked Heinrich Himmler for the unit to be relieved. At this point, the SS Cavalry Brigade had sustained losses of 2,220 men, or half its strength. On 1 April, 1942, its 'trench strength' amounted to only 421 soldiers, a number which could only be maintained by 'combing' the supply units of the brigade and by leaving candidates for NCO and officer training courses in the frontline.<sup>728</sup> Casualty rates of the SS cavalry had been nearly twice as high as in the 23<sup>rd</sup> corps in terms of soldiers who had been wounded or killed: of its average strength of 58,000 soldiers (or three infantry divisions), the army unit lost

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<sup>728</sup> For Fegelein's requests in February, 1942, see radio message from the SS Cavalry Brigade to the *SS-Führungshauptamt* of 17 February, 1942, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 3, file 3. For the consultations, see radio message from Gustav Lombard to Reichsführer-SS, 31 March, 1942, in: BArchB, NS 19/3487, fiche 35-36; radio message from Gustav Lombard to Hermann Fegelein, 27 March, 1942, *ibid.*, fiche 40; radio message from SS Cavalry Brigade to SS-O[ber]stu[rm]f[ührer] Becher, 3 April, 1942, *ibid.*, fiche 41; Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen*, p. 28. For the 'combing' of the supply units and the 'trench strength' of 21 March, 1942 (369 men), see radio message from SS Cavalry Brigade to Kav[allerie]Ers[atz]Abt[eilung], 21 March, 1942, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS 3, file 3; for the deployment of NCO and officer candidates, see radio message from SS-Sturmbannführer Lombard to Sta[ndarten]f[ührer] Fegelein, Warschau, 3 April, 1942, in: BArchB, NS 19/3487, fiche 40. The *SS-Führungshauptamt* gave the strength of the SS Cavalry Brigade as 1,816 men in total as of 20 March, 1942. Until then, 1,358 men had been killed, wounded or gone missing, 1,648 were sick and 786 replacements had arrived; see BArchB, NS 19/1520, *Aufstellung der Stärken und Verluste der SS-Divisionen vom 24.3. 1942*, pp. 46-47.

9,931 men, or about 17% of its strength, whereas the losses of the SS Cavalry Brigade amounted to 1,267 men or almost 29% of its former force of 4,428 soldiers.<sup>729</sup>

Whereas Gustav Lombard had summed up the situation in a short and precise manner, Hermann Fegelein's assessment was more detailed and even less favourable. In a letter to the chief of staff of the *SS-Führungshauptamt*, *SS-Gruppenführer* Jüttner, he expressed his fear of a complete breakdown of his weary men, who thought that they were being sacrificed in order to hold the front. Most of their heavy weapons had been lost and many of the horses were in a very bad state as well. A withdrawal of the entire brigade or at least of those subunits that were no longer combat-ready was now seen as the only feasible option. Fegelein also noted: 'Squadron commanders need pills and drugs on a daily basis just to encourage the lethargic men to get up in the morning'.<sup>730</sup> Presumably, the SS cavalrymen were administered Pervitin, a methamphetamine which was used in the German military to push exhausted soldiers beyond their normal limits and to eliminate their need for sleep, especially in critical situations.<sup>731</sup>

Fegelein's report was the complete opposite of the rather positive assessment of December, 1941, before the SS cavalrymen were sent to the frontline. By now, he had fully understood the grim reality of combat against the Red Army. He did not have to face it anymore himself though: after winning the Knight's Cross in March, 1942, he went on a furlough and from 1 May, he began his new job as inspector for

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<sup>729</sup> Verluste, Ausfälle und Beute im 7. bis 10. Vierwochenabschnitt des Osteinsatzes vom 21.12. 41 – 20.4. 42, XXIII. AK, in: BArchF, RS 24-23/68, pp. 69-70; Aufstellung der Stärken und Verluste der SS-Divisionen vom 24.3. 1942, BArchB, NS 19/1520, pp. 46-47.

<sup>730</sup> Letter to the chief of staff [of the *SS-Führungshauptamt*], *SS-Gruppenführer* Jüttner, 2 April, 1942, in: BArchB, NS 19/1520, fiche 37-39.

<sup>731</sup> In the German armed forces, this drug was given out to revive exhausted soldiers; in one case, a group of 500 German soldiers who had been encircled by the Red Army in January, 1942, was administered Pervitin. The men, thus stimulated, managed to break out of the encirclement; see Jonathan Lewy, 'The Drug Policy of the Third Reich', *Social History of Alcohol and Drugs* 22 (Spring 2008), pp. 147-149.

mounted troops in the *SS-Führungshauptamt* at Berlin.<sup>732</sup> In his place, *SS-Sturmbannführer* August Zehender took command of the remaining men of the SS Cavalry Brigade, who now formed a battalion-strength unit named '*Kampfgruppe Zehender*'. It comprised four squadrons and the remnants of the brigade's anti-aircraft, artillery, and signals subunits and fought near Rzhev until June, 1942.<sup>733</sup> The calls to fully withdraw the SS cavalrymen from the eastern front had not been heard, presumably because they were simply indispensable. The cooperation with army units continued, but in April the SS forces were so weakened that they could no longer remain at the front the entire time: they were relieved for short periods of guard duty and then returned to their old positions again.<sup>734</sup> Heinrich Himmler finally seemed to have taken up a suggestion made by Gustav Lombard two months earlier: he now forbade the fragmentation of SS units under *Wehrmacht* command; they were only to be allocated to corps, not to divisions.<sup>735</sup> In the case of the SS Cavalry Brigade, this did not make a difference anymore as so few soldiers were left that they could hardly be subordinated to different army units anyway.

Throughout the fighting in the Toropets – Rzhev area, the SS Cavalry Brigade was praised for bravery and momentum in combat operations, both from the Ninth Army and some of its subordinate formations. One divisional commander also expressed his gratitude for helping out at a critical point; another *Wehrmacht* general recognised the 'heroic conduct' of the RAA which had just been overrun by Soviet troops.<sup>736</sup> As these citations refer to particular incidents which match the records of

<sup>732</sup> Riess, 'Fegelein', p. 167.

<sup>733</sup> Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen*, pp. 28-29. Zehender's exact appointment date could not be obtained from the *Kommandostab* files but according to a radio message from the SS Cavalry Brigade to the *SS-Führungshauptamt* of 17 February, 1942, the adjustment of Zehender to his new job was requested; see *Kommandostab RFSS 3*, file 3.

<sup>734</sup> For the mutual relief of *Wehrmacht* and SS units at the front, see the *Tagesmeldung* of the SS Cavalry Brigade from 23, 25, and 26 March, 1942, in: VUA, *Kommandostab RFSS 3*, file 4.

<sup>735</sup> Message of Reichsführer-SS to Oberstgruppenführer Daluege [and] Gruppenführer Jüttner, 27 April, 1942, in: BArchB, NS 19/3514, fiche 90-96; see fiche 91-92 for this passage.

<sup>736</sup> The SS Cavalry Brigade was included in the commendation for the Ninth Army and subordinate troops awarded by the army commander on 5 February; the war diary entry of that day mentions its 'dashing advance' and subsequent taking of the village of Tchertolino; see AOK 9, *Kriegstagebuch Ia*

the brigade, it can safely be assumed that they were based on true appreciation and did not just spring from the fantasy of their officers. Also, the SS cavalry repeatedly attacked or held out against the enemy even despite hopeless odds and played an important role in the successful counterattack which led to the destruction of two Soviet armies west of Rzhev. Hermann Fegelein, always keen on acknowledgement from higher agencies and boastful about the success of his unit, did not hesitate to publicise these statements: in the letter to Jüttner from 2 April, 1942 he wrote, ‘both the commanding general of the 23<sup>rd</sup> army corps, general Schubert, and the supreme commander of the Ninth Army, colonel general Model, are well aware of the value of the remaining parts [of the SS Cavalry Brigade] in combat today’. He even quoted Model as having called the brigade ‘the bomb of the Ninth Army’.<sup>737</sup> In doing so, he intended to capitalise on these commendations in order to improve the standing of his unit and to convince his superiors to save what was left of it. It is also notable that Fegelein wrote directly to Jüttner and asked him to show the letter to Himmler as well, if necessary. Thus, he made sure of reaching his two greatest benefactors in the SS.

Fighting skills and bravery of the SS cavalymen were also reflected in the medals that were awarded to them. The records of the unit contain information on two cases of high decorations which required either one particular act of bravery or even repeated outstanding valour: the recommendation of Hermann Fegelein for the

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Nr. 4, entry from 5 February, pp. 96-97. This operation helped to close in on enemy troops southwest of Rshew; see *Die Winterschlacht von Rshew*, AOK 9, p. 7. Eight days later, the army commander specifically commended the SS cavalry for the capture of Ersovo, a hard-fought Soviet base; see AOK 9, *Kriegstagebuch Ia Nr. 4*, entry from 13 February, pp. 120. On 26 January, the commander of the 206<sup>th</sup> infantry division expressed his gratitude for providing cover for the divisional supply base at Olenino and flank cover for the division at the front; see Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen*, p. 27. The RAA was first commended for its ‘bold work’ in reconnaissance missions from Peno by the commander of the 253<sup>rd</sup> infantry division; see *Tagesmeldung*, SS Cavalry Brigade, 2 January, 1942, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 3, file 2. Ten days later, he expressed ‘highest appreciation and praise for heroic conduct’; see radio message from SS Cavalry Brigade to Kdo.-Stab RF-SS, 12 January, 1942, *ibid.*

<sup>737</sup> Letter to the chief of staff [of the *SS-Führungshauptamt*], SS-Gruppenführer Jüttner, 2 April, 1942, in: BArchB, NS 19/1520, fiche 37-38.

Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross and that of *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Hermann Gadischke, commander of the fourth squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, for the German Cross in Gold. The brigade commander was attributed with a high level of decisiveness and credited with having led his men personally at the focal point of the battle. According to the commander of the 23<sup>rd</sup> army corps, general Schubert, who filed the official suggestion, Fegelein's initiative played a key role in the destruction of enemy forces southwest of Rzhev.<sup>738</sup> Gadischke's recommendation, which had been made by Fegelein, lists seven different combat operations between January and April, 1942, in which the squadron commander displayed bravery, toughness, and skill in assaults as well as in defending fixed positions.<sup>739</sup> But not only officers of the SS cavalry received medals: the rank and file were also rewarded for their conduct in the winter battle. As in previous missions, the brigade commander and his direct superior, the Higher SS and police leader Centre, attentively noted this in their reports. During the months of January and February, 17 Iron Crosses First Class and 159 Iron Cross Second Class as well as 60 War Merit Crosses Second Class with Swords were awarded. The high number indicates the intensity of the fighting as the bulk of them were given to the men just after combat operations west of Rzhev had ceased.<sup>740</sup>

Decorations, however, were not only a sign of brave conduct for the SS cavalry; they could also become a matter of politics within the military leadership. In a letter

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<sup>738</sup> Vorschlag für die Verleihung des Ritterkreuzes des Eisernen Kreuzes (undated), in: BArchB, SSO Hermann Fegelein.

<sup>739</sup> Vorschlag für die Verleihung des Deutschen Kreuzes in Gold an Hermann Gadischke vom 19.4. 1942, in: BArchB, SSO Hermann Gadischke. This recommendation is one of the few documents in Gadischke's file, which does not state whether he received the decoration or not. It is possible that the application got rejected because military agencies did not believe Fegelein's colourful depictions of Gadischke's valour: this happened when Hermann Fegelein recommended his brother Waldemar (who commanded the first squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment) for the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. See Personalakte von Fegelein, Waldemar 9.1. 12, in: BArchB, SSO Hermann Fegelein.

<sup>740</sup> Tagesmeldung, HSSUPF Russ[land] Mitte, 30 January, 1942, in: VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 3, file 2; radio message, SS Cavalry Brigade to Kommandostab RF-SS, 25 February, 1942, VUA, Kommandostab RFSS, box 3, file 3; radio message, SS Cavalry Brigade to Kommandostab RF-SS, 28 February, 1942, *ibid.*

to Lombard and Gesele, his deputy commanders in the field, Hermann Fegelein wrote on 7 April, 1942 that ‘the *Reichsführer* had complained that we did not file for enough high decorations’, such as Knight’s Crosses or German Crosses in Gold.<sup>741</sup> The context of the document was a negotiation about the future status of the brigade, which Fegelein had carried out with Himmler and Jüttner. There was a conflict of interests between the SS and the army about the recognition of the SS cavalry as a fully-fledged military force with the possibility of its enlargement to a division. Apparently the head of the SS believed that more medals for his men would improve his standing with Hitler and convince the *Wehrmacht* of the quality of his soldiers, an intention which was to be supported in particular by awarding a Knight’s Cross to a private or an NCO.<sup>742</sup> Fegelein made no secret of the fact that this idea suited him, another proof of his well-known eagerness for more prestige.

When their comrades were still braving the Red Army, the rebuilding of the SS cavalry began in the General Government. From April, 1942, the reconnaissance detachment was recreated.<sup>743</sup> What Himmler had in mind now was an even greater project: the forming of an SS cavalry division, a large new formation that was modelled on the 1<sup>st</sup> cavalry division of the *Wehrmacht*. To the existing two horse regiments, a third one was added; the artillery component was to be extended not only to battalion but to regimental strength. The implementation of these far-reaching plans, however, was delayed by the situation on the front. ‘*Kampfgruppe Zehender*’ had to face new enemy offensives and was also deployed in anti-partisan operations so that the rest of the former brigade did not arrive at its designated location, the SS training area at Debica near Tarnow, before 21 June, 1942. Only some 500 men had come back from Rzhev; their new commander, who was

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<sup>741</sup> Letter from Hermann Fegelein to [Gustav] Lombard and [Karl] Gesele, 7 April, 1942, in: StAW, 62 Nds. Fb.2, Nr. 1310, p. 79.

<sup>742</sup> Ibid., pp. 79-80.

<sup>743</sup> Michaelis, *Kavallerie-Divisionen*, p. 28.

responsible for the replenishment of the unit, was a highly decorated soldier and skilled organiser, *SS-Brigadeführer* Wilhelm Bittrich.<sup>744</sup>

When assessing the overall performance of the SS Cavalry Brigade in the winter battle of 1941 – 1942, it can be stated that the unit had now become a combat formation, even if this development had not been intended. The cavalry soldiers had shown both skilful use of military tactics through fast mobile operations and bravery that was bordering on self-sacrifice, in offensive as well as defensive situations; nevertheless, the unit only narrowly escaped total annihilation. This was made possible by close cooperation with the *Wehrmacht*, ruthlessness and perseverance in combat, personal bravery and sometimes very skilled leadership as well as sheer luck. But analysing the institutional-level conduct of the brigade as a combat unit has to go beyond external circumstances and the view propagated in official documents. How did this particular frame of reference influence them and how did they fulfil their combat mission despite a lack of experience, the extremely grim conditions of the Russian winter, and grave defeats at Peno and Toropets? Jean-Luc Leleu has identified five factors which made up the combat value of *Waffen-SS* units: loyalty to Hitler, loyalty to the fatherland, the personality of the commander, recompense such as decorations, and fear of captivity.<sup>745</sup> These reasons can help to explain the motivation of the SS Cavalry Brigade as well: in numerous orders and speeches, the men were sworn to loyalty by their superiors, who invoked the importance of their mission; Hermann Fegelein had the reputation of being an inspiring personality and exceptional leader; and as the commendations from the *Wehrmacht* and the high

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<sup>744</sup> Message of Reichsführer-SS to Oberstgruppenführer Daluge [and] Gruppenführer Jüttner, 27 April, 1942, in: BArchB, NS 19/3514, fiche 94; Horst Mühleisen, 'Wilhelm Bittrich. Ritterlicher Gegner und Rebell', in R. Smelser, and E. Syring (eds.), *Die SS – Elite unter dem Totenkopf. 30 Lebensläufe* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, Zurich 2000), p. 79; Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1 der 8. SS-KavDiv *Florian Geyer*, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/56, p. 4. The new SS cavalry division would not reach the strength of an army cavalry division as it was missing the fourth cavalry regiment; for the structure of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, see Gliederung der 1. KavDiv vom 1.4. 1941, in: BArchF, RH 29-1/4.

<sup>745</sup> Leleu, *La Waffen-SS*, pp. 504-505.

number of decorations show, the soldiers must have proven themselves in the fighting. A fear of falling into the hands of the enemy is indicated by statements from veterans: in some cases, captured SS cavalymen were mutilated by partisans.<sup>746</sup>

From this combination of factors and the acknowledgement he received from his army colleagues, Hermann Fegelein managed to create a myth. The SS Cavalry Brigade's previous lack of military ability and his own deficiencies as a leader were soon forgotten, and he continued to become one of the most celebrated war heroes of the *Waffen-SS*. Having survived the fighting at Toropets, it was this and not the inception of the Holocaust in Belorussia a few months earlier that defined the unit's new role: it was now viewed as one of the best German formations for '*Bandenbekämpfung*', a euphemism for the fight against partisans. In a new shape and under a new name, *SS – Kavallerie-Division*, it was soon to enter combat again.<sup>747</sup>

### The SS Cavalry Brigade in the operational history of the *Waffen-SS*

During the period under observation in this work, the military branch of Himmler's organisation was still a comparatively small force of about 110,000 men, whilst in the later stages of the war between 900,000 and 1,000,000 men served in it (of whom some 400,000 had been recruited all over Europe, including ethnic Germans).<sup>748</sup> In

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<sup>746</sup> See for example the 'founding document' of the SS Cavalry Brigade, *Brigadebefehl vom 1.8. 1941*, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/20; see also *Tagesbefehl Nr. 15 vom 29.10. 1941*, 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, in: BArchF, RS 4/441, p. 69. For the fear of partisans, see *Vernehmung von Richard Gloth vom 14.8. 1962*, in: BArchL, B 162/5542, p. i4.

<sup>747</sup> The unit was renamed again twice later in the war: when the divisions of the *Waffen-SS* received numbers in October, 1943, it became the 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division; on 12 March, 1944, it was also given the title *Florian Geyer*. See Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 306.

<sup>748</sup> This number refers to field units only as of 22 June, 1941. See Stein, *The Waffen SS*, p. 120; *Aufstellung der Stärken und Verluste der SS-Divisionen vom 24.3. 1942*, in: BArchB, NS 19/1520; *Rohrkamp, 'Weltanschaulich gefestigte Kämpfer'*, p. 14.

1941 and 1942, however, it only consisted of a core of five full infantry divisions, with two others being in the process of formation. Units of the *Waffen-SS* took part in most German campaigns of the first phase of the Second World War; they did not, however, operate as independent forces but fought under the operational command of the OKH. It was not until later in the war that the SS divisions were given more freedom, for example in the attack on Kharkov in early 1943 and Operation Citadel later that year: in both cases, an entire SS armoured corps led the German attack in a particular sector of the front.<sup>749</sup> In order to assess the role of the SS Cavalry Brigade, the earlier approach is of greater importance: in many different operations between 1939 and 1942, SS regiments, combat groups of up to brigade size, or individual divisions were deployed alongside the *Wehrmacht*.

Only two of the first five divisions of the *Waffen-SS* originated from the prewar *Verfügungstruppe* and had thus undergone military training before 1939: the 1<sup>st</sup> division *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler* (LSSAH) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> division *Das Reich*.<sup>750</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> SS division *Totenkopf* had been recruited from the concentration camp guard units; before its first military mission in the spring of 1940, the unit had gone through a process of overcoming difficulties regarding equipment and training which was further complicated by the fact that combat-readiness had to be achieved within six months.<sup>751</sup> The fourth and fifth divisions had different unit histories as they had their roots in other organisations and ethnicities: the *Polizei-Division* consisted of men from the order police, whereas the *Wiking* division was made up of ethnic Germans and volunteers from other European countries such as Holland, Belgium or the Scandinavian countries. From campaign to campaign, the *Waffen-SS* played a

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<sup>749</sup> Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, p. 277-291. On the role of the SS armoured corps at Kharkov and Kursk, see also Enrico Syring, 'Paul Hausser. 'Türöffner' und Kommandeur 'seiner' Waffen-SS', in R. Smelser and E. Syring (eds.), *Die SS – Elite unter dem Totenkopf. 30 Lebensläufe* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, Zurich 2000), pp. 198-199.

<sup>750</sup> Rohrkamp, *Weltanschaulich gefestigte Kämpfer*, pp. 233-244 and p. 290.

<sup>751</sup> Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, pp. 43-46 and pp. 64-85.

more important part: in Poland, only formations of up to regimental size had fought, whereas against France two divisions and a reinforced regiment could be sent into battle. After the beginning of operation *Barbarossa*, all SS divisions and two combat groups were sent to the front against the Red Army (the last of them being the SS Cavalry Brigade in late 1941).<sup>752</sup> It is notable that the first divisions of the *Waffen-SS* and the SS Cavalry Brigade were either predominantly or even exclusively deployed in the eastern theatre of war and fighting against the Red Army during the period under observation. Despite the fact that some of the units had already taken part in the campaigns against Poland and France, the fighting for most of their soldiers was characterised by an ideological concept of the enemy that focused on annihilation of any opposition (or groups declared hostile) rather than a restriction of violence to combat situations.

In some cases, the involvement of SS troops in combat was premature: *Kampfgruppe Nord*, a unit newly compiled from SS regiments in Norway and the predecessor of the later 6<sup>th</sup> SS mountain division *Nord*, took heavy losses on the Finnish front. What happened to the *Kampfgruppe* foreshadowed the fate of the SS Cavalry Brigade; even Himmler admitted that the unit had entered its mission lacking appropriate training and equipment.<sup>753</sup> But even the units which already had acquired some combat experience still had to learn how to fight against the Red Army, such as the 2<sup>nd</sup> division *Das Reich*: although its men had received better training than the SS cavalrymen they, too, took very high losses.<sup>754</sup> The high casualty rate during the first winter in the Soviet Union necessitated a thorough reorganisation, which applied to the *Totenkopf* division and the SS Cavalry Brigade

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<sup>752</sup> Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, p. 456 and p. 459; Stein, *The Waffen SS*, pp. 33-34, p. 56 and pp. 120-121.

<sup>753</sup> Der Reichsführer-SS zu den Führern der Ersatzmannschaften für die Kampfgruppe Nord am Sonntag, dem 13. Juli 1941, in Stettin, in: BArchB, NS 19/4008, pp. 36-38.

<sup>754</sup> See for example the above mentioned casualties of the regiment *Der Führer*, which was almost completely wiped out. See also Rohrkamp, *Weltanschaulich gefestigte Kämpfer*, pp. 450-451.

in particular: of the 17,265 men with which *Totenkopf* had started the Russian campaign, only about 6,700 were left after heavy fighting during the German advance through the Baltic states in the summer of 1941 and in the Demyansk pocket during the following winter.<sup>755</sup> Fegelein's unit only had 50% of its original strength left in the spring of 1942. Other units like *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler* and *Das Reich* had paid a high price as well but received preferential treatment regarding the allocation of recruits and new equipment. From late 1941 onwards, the original divisions of the *Waffen-SS* were considered elite by the *Wehrmacht* as well as the enemy and had the status of 'fire brigades' of the eastern front, which were sent into particularly dangerous missions.<sup>756</sup>

Unlike the core divisions of the *Waffen-SS*, which clearly were destined for frontline service, the cavalrymen were part of the forces of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS*, Himmler's private army. Thus, they had not received sufficient military training and were supposed to carry out ideological tasks, first and foremost mass killings of Jews, which were to 'harden' them for later combat. As the conflict with the *Wehrmacht* over the subordination of *Kommandostab* troops in the first days of Barbarossa shows, Himmler was anxious not to lose control over his men, a position he was forced to give up due to the circumstances only a few months later. This was only temporary though; like their comrades in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Infantry Brigade, Fegelein's soldiers retained a special role and were mainly used for the fight against partisans and further killings of Jews after the end of their combat mission.<sup>757</sup> Of the five core divisions of the *Waffen-SS*, the *Totenkopf* division in particular offers possibilities of comparison with the SS Cavalry Brigade: it, too, was

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<sup>755</sup> Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, p. 222 and 229.

<sup>756</sup> Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, p. 466-467.

<sup>757</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 351-352. The two infantry brigades were incorporated into other *Waffen-SS* divisions in 1943 and began to form the core of several new units. At the end of the war, their former personnel served in the 16<sup>th</sup> SS *Panzergranadierdivision Reichsführer-SS*, the 18<sup>th</sup> SS *Panzergranadierdivision Horst Wessel*, and several other infantry divisions which for the most part consisted of Latvian, Estonian, and Dutch SS volunteers; *ibid.*, pp. 305-309.

a 'hybrid' as it assumed a military character after having served in a different role; it was involved in mass violence as its soldiers had guarded the concentration camps at Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen and committed massacres when deployed as occupation troops in Poland; also, it was headed by a charismatic leader who did not possess comprehensive military experience.<sup>758</sup> The SS Cavalry Brigade, however, differed from the *Totenkopf* division as it spent far less time at the front: it was not thrown into combat straight after its formation and only deployed against the Red Army later because no other German forces were available in the Rzhev – Toropets sector.

The *Totenkopf* division did experience ambivalence between an ideological and a military role, but not to the same extent as the SS cavalry: from the beginning of *Barbarossa*, the sole purpose of this formation was combat. Although they had taken part in mass shootings of Jews in Poland as well, the men under Theodor Eicke's command did not become involved in the Holocaust in the Soviet Union on a scale comparable to the key role played by their comrades in the SS cavalry. However, there were some important intersections with the Nazi extermination policy: men from a special *Waffen-SS* battalion which had been part of *Einsatzgruppe A* were later transferred to the *Totenkopf* division; many high-ranking SS officials who had committed terrible atrocities served in the unit for some time, such as Friedrich Jeckeln (responsible for the massacre of Babi Yar as Higher SS and Police Leader South); and throughout the war, there was a constant flow of personnel between the concentration camps and *Totenkopf's* frontline units.<sup>759</sup>

Three characteristics were shared by the original armed SS formations and the SS Cavalry Brigade: initiative and boldness which sometimes led to great success in

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<sup>758</sup> On Theodor Eicke, the commander of the *Totenkopf* division, see also Charles W. Sydnor, 'Theodor Eicke – Organisator der Konzentrationslager', in R. Smelser and E. Syring (eds.), *Die SS – Elite unter dem Totenkopf. 30 Lebensläufe* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, Zurich 2000), pp. 147-159.

<sup>759</sup> Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, pp. 321-331.

combat, fanaticism and readiness to make sacrifices which were often combined with deficiencies in training (at least at the beginning of the war), thus resulting in high casualties, and the perpetration of war crimes. An example of the first feature was the strategy of the *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler* during the campaign against the Low Countries: the commander, Josef Dietrich, interrupted the advance on Dunkirk and went against his orders to take the Wattenberg heights, a ridge occupied by the French army. This act was later viewed as ‘intelligent insubordination’ and earned him the Knight’s Cross.<sup>760</sup> The SS Cavalry Brigade, despite being outnumbered and outgunned, played an important role in encircling Soviet troops near Rzhev, for which Hermann Fegelein received the same decoration.

The second trait was very common in the *Waffen-SS* as well. In his speech to the replacement officers for *Kampfgruppe Nord*, Heinrich Himmler demanded that they should prevent their soldiers from panicking and fleeing from the enemy, at gunpoint if necessary. Casualties, even if they reduced a unit to a fourth or a fifth of its original strength, were no reason to lose the fighting spirit; the speech of the *Reichsführer* culminated in the words: ‘Gentlemen, as long as there are 500 men in a division these 500 men are capable of attacking’.<sup>761</sup> An example of this policy of driving men into battle whilst relying more on fanaticism than military skills has been given by a captured general of the *Wehrmacht* who witnessed a reckless attack SS soldiers carried out against a village occupied by the Soviets in the winter of 1941 – 1942. The SS commander even rejected the offer from an army unit to provide supporting fire, a tactic which resulted in unnecessary casualties. This not only showed the negative consequences of the toughness ideal of the SS, but it also indicates that SS officers lacked training on cooperation with other branches of the

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<sup>760</sup> Clark, ‘Josef ‘Sepp’ Dietrich’, p. 125.

<sup>761</sup> Der Reichsführer-SS zu den Führern der Ersatzmannschaften für die Kampfgruppe Nord am Sonntag, dem 13. Juli 1941, in Stettin, in: BArchB, NS 19/4008, pp. 36-38; see also Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, pp. 370-371.

German forces like the artillery which impeded the participation of their units in the battle of combined weapons.<sup>762</sup>

In the SS cavalry, many shortcomings in infantry tactics were noticed even before the combat operations near Rzhev where the men had to attack strong enemy positions; this led to entire squadrons being wiped out. Only together with more experienced army formations and as part of a larger offensive, the SS Cavalry Brigade was ultimately successful. Instances of unbroken spirit even in hopeless situations have been documented for the brigade as well, such as the above mentioned counterattack of a squadron of the bicycle battalion which led to the death of the commanding officer and only momentary relief of the unit. In a letter to Himmler, Hermann Fegelein also described how a corporal of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, who had received a headshot in battle near Rzhev, ‘first reported his being wounded, then his death’, which the commander viewed as the ultimate proof of obedience.<sup>763</sup> It is at least doubtful if this incident ever happened but it can be assumed that Fegelein knew very well that anecdotes like this one would have the desired effect on somebody who valued personal sacrifice as much as Himmler did.

When compared with the *Wehrmacht*, *Waffen-SS* units also stood out in another field: from a very early stage, they committed war crimes. In the case of the *Leibstandarte* and *Totenkopf* divisions, this already happened in France in 1940: both Dietrich’s and Eicke’s men brutally massacred British and French prisoners of war. *Totenkopf* soldiers often did not even take prisoners when their opponents were

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<sup>762</sup> Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, pp. 368-369. The tapping protocol quoted here does not specify the SS unit involved in this attack but from the context (the general stated that the SS men had been part of a ‘security division’ in the hinterland before they were sent to the front) it appears possible that they belonged to the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Infantry Brigade or the SS Cavalry Brigade. The recklessness of *Waffen-SS* officers in battle has also been described for the division *Das Reich*: as Enrico Syring has stated, ‘even a general as experienced as Hausser was not always able to control the overeagerness of the subordinate, less well-qualified younger commanders, so that his division also suffered disproportionate casualties’. See Syring, ‘Hausser’, p. 195.

<sup>763</sup> Birthday greeting from Hermann Fegelein to Heinrich Himmler, 5 October, 1943, in: BArchB, SSO Hermann Fegelein.

Africans from the French colonies, who were viewed as being racially inferior. Eicke's division committed the highest number of war crimes of all German units during this campaign.<sup>764</sup> Regarding the SS Cavalry Brigade, Martin Cüppers has already pointed out that Soviet prisoners of war were presumably shot straightaway in many cases.<sup>765</sup> Combat missions in which hundreds of enemy troops were involved, such as Turov, often brought hardly any prisoners, which supports Cüppers's theory. Also, Fegelein's men committed an absolutely heinous war crime by using captured Red Army soldiers as human shields at Basary.

Another key issue of the operational history of the *Waffen-SS* is the often exceptional role of the unit commanders. The new armed forces created by Heinrich Himmler only had very few high-ranking officers who had undergone a traditional military education, such as Paul Hausser and Felix Steiner.<sup>766</sup> Thus, the initiative and energy of commanding officers often had to compensate for their lack of experience. In the case of the SS Cavalry Brigade, the commander's personality was of prime importance, a trait the unit had in common with *Totenkopf* and *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*: Hermann Fegelein was the founder of the mounted forces in the SS, whereas Theodor Eicke first formed guard units and then an infantry division according to his own ideas; Josef Dietrich on the other hand can be considered one of the founding fathers of the *Waffen-SS*.<sup>767</sup> All three men made a meteoric career in the Nazi state and received the highest military decorations; also, they had enjoyed considerable freedom in combination with backing from Hitler and Himmler when

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<sup>764</sup> Clark, 'Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich', p. 127; Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, pp. 106-108 and pp. 116-117; Stein, *The Waffen SS*, pp. 76-78; Raffael Scheck, "They Are Just Savages": German Massacres of Black Soldiers from the French Army in 1940', *Journal of Modern History* 77 (2005), pp. 325-344; Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, p. 377.

<sup>765</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 215-219.

<sup>766</sup> Mark P. Gingerich, 'Felix Steiner. Himmlers 'ausgesprochenes Lieblingskind'', in R. Smelser and E. Syring (eds.), *Die SS – Elite unter dem Totenkopf. 30 Lebensläufe* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, Zurich 2000), p. 431; see also Syring, 'Hausser', pp. 190-193.

<sup>767</sup> On Josef Dietrich, see also Weingartner, 'Sepp Dietrich, Heinrich Himmler, and the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler', pp. 264-284. See also Westemeier, *Peiper*, p. 11.

they formed their units, a situation other SS commanders could only dream of, let alone their counterparts in the *Wehrmacht*. Eicke and Dietrich, however, were significantly older than Fegelein and belonged to the generation that had fought in the First World War. Thus, the commander of the SS cavalry can be better compared to younger SS officers such as Joachim Peiper. Both men were personal favourites of Heinrich Himmler and became ideal heroes of wartime propaganda (with Fegelein already having achieved huge success as a sportsman before 1939). Like Eicke and Dietrich, they were missing a formal military education and staff training and were put in charge of large armed formations, which was beyond their capacities. As a result, both the SS Cavalry Brigade and subunits of the *Leibstandarte* under Peiper's command suffered high casualties.<sup>768</sup>

Despite their different unit history, the first divisions of the *Waffen-SS* and the SS Cavalry Brigade became more professional in the course of their deployment in combat; this applied to the formations as a whole as well as to their various components and different hierarchy levels. The main difference between units like *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*, *Das Reich*, or *Totenkopf* on the one hand and the SS Cavalry Brigade on the other was the clear definition of a military role for the former (in the case of *Totenkopf* from mid-1941 onwards), and the assumption of 'dual role' for the latter due to the circumstances. As far as the adaption to combat was concerned, this process proceeded much faster for Fegelein's soldiers: they were not part of a carefully drawn-up battle order but were thrown forward as a stopgap in an emergency. Thus, success and failure went hand in hand, as is shown by the participation in the encirclement operations near Rzhev and the annihilation of the bicycle battalion at Penno. Its special role in the Holocaust separated the SS Cavalry Brigade from other *Waffen-SS* units; in combat, however, the behaviour of the

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<sup>768</sup> Westemeier, *Peiper*, pp. 236-237; see also personnel file of Joachim Peiper, BA Berlin, SSO Joachim Peiper.

cavalrymen was not different: both the fanaticism and the exceptional brutality, features that were more distinct in the SS than in the *Wehrmacht*, characterised all SS military formations in 1941 – 1942. None of these units, however, could be classified as elite at this time: their sometimes very impressive merits in combat did not outweigh the fact that most of them had to be replenished and restructured to a great extent after their first war winter in the Soviet Union, as many of their original primary groups (which had made success possible) had been lost.

## Conclusion

The story of the SS Cavalry Brigade in 1941 – 1942 is not only part of the operational history of the *Waffen-SS* or the criminal history of the SS as a whole. It is also an attempt to look at the unit from the perspective of the participants. With its ‘dual role’, it became the link between the prewar SS and the *Waffen-SS* of the second half of the Second World War, which not only encompassed highly skilled military formations but also the personnel of the concentration camps. As it was involved in the destruction of the Soviet Jews and the fight against the Red Army on the eastern front, the brigade combined the characteristics of institutions as different from each other as the *Totenkopf* infantry division and the *Einsatzgruppen* of the security police and the security service. Even more than other paramilitary and military forces of the Third Reich, the mounted SS and later the SS Cavalry Brigade underwent not only a rapid but also a very complex development. In the time between 1939 and 1942, the composition and the tasks of the units under the command of Hermann Fegelein changed drastically, a process which has only been partially analysed so far.

The prewar period shows two aspects which were very important for the later development of the unit: its foundation on the basis of personal connections, namely the relationship between Hermann Fegelein and Heinrich Himmler, and the dominance of equestrianism over political functions. The *Reiter-SS* formed by Fegelein, an organisation with unprecedented sporting success, was a product of *Gleichschaltung* before 1939; its later role was essentially a product of the war. Despite the fact that ideological aspects such as indoctrination and selection of candidates were important during the period from 1933 to 1939, the mounted SS was

essentially a parade formation. It nevertheless had multiple conjunctions with organs of repression of the Nazi state such as the concentration camps, and at least some of its members became entangled in the radical anti-Jewish policy of the regime at an early stage by participating in the riots during the *Reichspogromnacht*. The ‘dual role’, which was to develop later on, was not yet recognisable: despite the paramilitary character of the *Reiterstandarten* and isolated attempts of going beyond basic infantry drills, they could not be compared to the armed forces the SS was building up at the same time for guarding concentration camps or plain military tasks. In the *Reiter-SS*, military training was neglected until the *Totenkopf-Reiterstandarten* were formed in Poland.

Once in Poland, the men went beyond just donning a black uniform with lightning runes and became ‘ideological soldiers’ by taking a huge step into a new frame of reference. In the previous years, individual equestrians rather than the *Reiter-SS* as a whole had participated in the implementation of radical aims of the Nazi state. After the beginning of the Second World War, the mounted SS, now in the form of horse squadrons and later cavalry regiments, committed acts of mass violence. The cavalymen, like the members of other German paramilitary units, quickly adapted to their new tasks as an executive organ and participated in every step of the escalation of radical racial policy in occupied Poland. With only a small fraction of members of the prewar units remaining after a turnover of personnel in 1940, a new SS cavalry force was formed. Those who were not able or not willing to fit into this process had left voluntarily or had been discharged. The ranks were now filled with young recruits and volunteers from other countries, who were better suited for the new tasks and had often been politically radicalised already. Although the military training of the SS horsemen was stepped up, it could not be fully completed before the beginning of the German campaign against the Soviet Union; as a result, its

shortcomings continued to impede the unit for a long time. For the preparation of the brigade's role in mass killings of Jews in the Soviet Union, the two years in the General Government proved to be essential: in an environment where practical experience seemed to align with the racial stereotyping of the Nazi regime, the men began to implement a brutal occupation policy.

Between their time in Poland and the deployment in Belorussia, some of the SS horsemen took part in a combat operation following the German attack on the Soviet Union. Although this was only a brief mission where the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment realised its limitations (especially in mobile warfare) rather than achieving great merits in battle, it was nonetheless pivotal as it marked the starting point of the SS cavalry's 'dual role'. The time between late June and late July, 1941 not only changed the history of the SS cavalry regiments, but was also crucial in preparing them for the role they were to assume in Belorussia. The new character was established by two factors: Hermann Fegelein's misconception of the unit being combat-ready (which mostly stemmed from his strong desire to prove himself as a leader in battle), and the need for military and paramilitary units that could fill the 'security vacuum' in the vast, newly-occupied territories behind the front, where they would execute Himmler's tasks of annihilation. These two aspects continued to define the missions of the SS Cavalry Brigade until mid-1942. After the combat mission near Bialystok, Heinrich Himmler assessed the combat value of the SS cavalrymen less favourably than Fegelein and sent them to East Prussia for further training, which only could be partially completed in the three weeks the units were given for this task. The *Reichsführer* thought the brigades of the *Kommandostab* ready only to carry out operations on a smaller scale, which largely thwarted Fegelein's efforts to continue fighting alongside the army. The mobility, proven ruthlessness and not least their availability for further tasks, however, led to the

inclusion of the SS soldiers in the annihilation of Soviet Jewry; their designated operational area became the Pripet Marshes in Belorussia, where they also had encounters with regular troops of the Red Army. Their leadership at this time consisted of officers who were often not fully qualified as military leaders, but strongly motivated by National Socialism and willing to be proactive regardless of the nature of their orders.

During its mission in Belorussia between late July and mid-September, 1941, the SS Cavalry Brigade played a leading role in the destruction of the Jews who lived in the Pripet Marshes, an area which had been by-passed by the *Einsatzgruppen* and police units for the most part due to its inaccessibility. The SS cavalrymen were not only the first Germans who were involved in such killings in this part of the occupied Soviet Union, but they were also radicalised during this time: within a few days, they went from shooting only male Jews to becoming the first to annihilate entire Jewish communities, including women and children. In so doing, they took an important step which ultimately sealed the fate of the Jews in Eastern Europe in early August 1941. It is important to note that this escalation also happened much faster in the SS cavalry than in the *Einsatzgruppen* and formations of the order police which only executed male Jews during the first weeks of their deployment in the Soviet Union. The reason for this is the institutional brutalisation of the SS Cavalry Brigade, which was based on a level of initiative amongst the officers that was higher than in other killing units: Gustav Lombard was the first SS commander in the field who ordered his men to target all Jews they encountered. Moreover, the SS cavalrymen also worked hand in glove with other German institutions such as the Higher SS and Police Leader 'Centre' and the *Wehrmacht* commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre. It has to be noted that although they were operating far away from the frontline in an area without many roads or German garrisons,

supervision was always possible. What began with the initiative of SS cavalry commanders and officers, who adjusted their orders to the actual situation, was finalised by frequent visits of Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, Himmler's representative, who relayed to them that every single step of the escalation of violence was approved by their authorities, including the army. Thus, Fegelein's men not only became pacemakers of the Holocaust in Belorussia but found their killing methods accepted as a means of 'cleansing' an operational area of possible enemies. The cooperation with the military, which had already been proven during the vanguard operation against Red Army divisions on the Brest – Bobruisk highway, was again practised during the first real combat operation of the SS cavalry at Turov. By the end of August, 1941, the newly-formed SS Cavalry Brigade had become exactly the instrument the *Reichsführer* intended it to be: a force of ideological soldiers capable of carrying out military tasks on a limited scale. At this point, the SS cavalymen had become used to the process of killing innocents, despite an initial phase of low morale. Although most of them fully understood the criminal nature of their task, they did not question it openly and only isolated cases of shirking or even refusal have come to light. The majority of the men obeyed their orders and a few even showed an inclination to excessive violence, a result that is very similar to that which Christopher Browning has observed with the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101. It can be stated that the SS cavalymen not only led the way in the murder of the Soviet Jews, they also perfected their own killing methods up to the point of putting thousands to death in just a few days, and, ultimately, tens of thousands within several weeks.

Officially, the SS cavalymen had been tasked with the fight against partisans and stragglers of the Red Army in the Pripet Marshes. This, however, soon became secondary even though the regiments were involved in minor anti-Partisan

operations and had several encounters with Soviet troops. The actual situation was very different from the one the soldiers had been told to expect. Instead of a population that could easily be divided into potentially hostile and friendly groups (a distinction that was to be made along ethnic lines), with the danger of an underground movement being ever present, they found themselves in a largely peaceful environment. There were no organised partisans; the locals openly collaborated with the soldiers and turned in Jews and communists; and the threat from the Red Army was reduced to occasional skirmishes. Despite this, a generally very harsh occupation policy was carried out both by the *Wehrmacht* and the SS from 22 June, 1941. By the end of the year, this was sanctioned by the leadership of the German army: in October and November, field marshals von Manstein and von Reichenau gave out infamous orders on fighting against the ‘Jewish-Bolshevist system’, which were reflecting back on what was happening in the field. In an atmosphere where it was perfectly legitimate to kill Soviet civilians for any reason however vague, and where Red Army soldiers behind the frontline often could not expect mercy, the soldiers under Fegelein’s command represented the most extreme interpretation of radical orders, even by the standards of the eastern front. The intensity of the fighting led army agencies to blend information from captured Soviet documents with actual incidents in the hinterland, which served as perfect atrocity propaganda for German soldiers. In the SS cavalry and the order police, this strategy was combined with their tasks of annihilating sections of the population: by singling out Jews as ‘helpers of the partisans’ or actual guerrillas, they had found the ideal justification for acts of mass violence, including the killing of thousands of innocent people. This, rather than partisan warfare, was clearly the main task and real frame of reference for the SS cavalrymen. Propaganda falsehoods not only found their way into the documentation of the SS Cavalry Brigade: by the end of September, the

*Wehrmacht* had begun to pass off innocent civilians as partisans as well, as is shown by the ‘anti-partisan course’ which was hosted by Army Group Centre. It was not until October, 1941, that Fegelein’s soldiers had to confront a threat from real partisans in the Toropets area, a task which often overstrained the men and their means. As a result, the cavalrymen showed even more violence towards civilians, both within and outside the context of partisan warfare.

At the end of the year, the development of the ‘dual role’ of the SS Cavalry Brigade was completed as the unit went into its first major combat mission. An enlargement of the brigade by additions of special units, which was meant to improve its abilities in the field, was heavily promoted by Himmler and Fegelein but could only be partly implemented as the military situation deteriorated rapidly. Unlike at the beginning of ‘Barbarossa’, when Himmler had managed to withdraw *Kommandostab* troops from the subordination under army units after a short time, the *Reichsführer* had now lost the power struggle with the *Wehrmacht*. Out of basic necessity, the SS Cavalry Brigade was thrown forward to hold the German line of defence during the Soviet counteroffensive in late December, 1941. Whereas previous engagements with the Red Army at Bialystok and Turov had not necessitated the assignment of the entire brigade, both regiments as well as the bicycle reconnaissance detachment had to be deployed this time. Moreover, the cavalrymen were sent to the focal points of battle and soon had to fight for survival: their engagement between Toropets and Rzhev was marked by a dearly purchased victory in a battle of encirclement and the destruction of one of its battalions. Fegelein’s hubris and the impossibility of withdrawing the troops led to unsustainable losses of about 50% of the unit’s manpower, which necessitated its complete reconstruction in 1942. The soldiers had assumed a new role in the fighting as they had been turned into frontline troops for the first time. This instance was a clear case of ‘learning by doing’ as the men still

displayed deficits in training and suffered much higher casualties than their more experienced army comrades. As far as ideology was concerned, they had nothing left to learn as, influenced by their earlier behaviour, they gave no quarter, either to civilians, or to guerrillas, or to Red Army soldiers. Within the operational history of the *Waffen-SS*, the SS Cavalry Brigade is comparable to other formations as it shared some of their most important features, such as initiative and fanaticism in combat and the involvement in war crimes. Moreover, it operated in eastern Europe exclusively, which parallels the deployment of the five core divisions of the *Waffen-SS*. Its formation was also promoted by the strong personality of the commander. This fact and its 'dual role' bear analogy to the 3<sup>rd</sup> SS division *Totenkopf* under Theodor Eicke in particular. What set the SS cavalry apart from other SS combat units was its precursor role in the Holocaust and the fact that it was not originally intended for frontline service.

After the end of the Second World War, the surviving SS cavalymen tried to find their way back into civilian life, often after long periods of captivity in the Soviet Union. Many veterans came back to West Germany, where they integrated into a society that did not care about what they had done during the war. The authorities did not take a great interest in bringing perpetrators to justice. Prosecution in the case of the SS Cavalry Brigade was also impeded by the fact that its former commander, Hermann Fegelein, was dead. During the night from 28 to 29 April, 1945, he had been executed on Hitler's orders in the garden of the Reich chancellery in Berlin as the *Führer* had suspected him of treason and made him a scapegoat, following Himmler's unsuccessful attempt to make peace with the Western allies. For more than a decade after 1945, the crimes of Himmler's horsemen went completely unpunished, and former SS soldiers, amongst them also some of Fegelein's men, organised themselves in the *Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit* (HIAG), the

association of *Waffen-SS* veterans. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, three particular events helped to trigger judicial proceedings against former members of the SS Cavalry Brigade. Firstly, the Central Office of the State Justice Administrations for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes was founded at Ludwigsburg on 1 December, 1958. This institution finally provided a powerful instrument of justice, after many local investigations of Nazi crimes had been unsuccessful. Secondly, the witness statement of Franz Magill at the trial of Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, in which the former SS cavalry officer openly admitted the mass murder at Pinsk, called the attention of judicial authorities to the crimes of the SS Cavalry Brigade in November, 1959. Thirdly, the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 brought the West German government under international pressure to take other Nazi perpetrators to court.

Several trials against former SS cavalymen were conducted from 1960 onwards, the two most important ones of which aimed at bringing former officers to justice for the crimes they had committed in the Pripet Marshes during the summer of 1941. In their course and verdicts, the legal proceedings against Gustav Lombard and his subordinates remarkably differed from those against Franz Magill and others. No officer from the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment was brought to justice; the trial dragged on unsuccessfully for ten years (despite the fact that the court could use documents which clearly proved the guilt of the defendants) and became a prominent example for the setbacks in the complicated process of West Germany's 'coming to terms with the past'. In the case against former members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, the situation was different: the trial was held before a different court, where a determined investigation led to four convictions. Despite the fact that prison sentences of four and five years may seem low in view of the terrible crimes of the unit, they represent the maximum penalty that could be imposed, as it had not been possible to prove

‘base motives’ which would have fulfilled the elements of murder according to postwar West German criminal law.

The question of why the SS cavalymen became perpetrators in the Holocaust cannot be answered easily. Although the SS Cavalry Brigade played an important role in implementing radical Nazi policies in Poland and at the beginning of the campaign against the Soviet Union, it would be far too simplistic to attribute these crimes to a National Socialist attitude alone. It is also necessary to transcend the viewpoint which was developed during the court proceedings in the 1960s. The investigators discovered a recurring scheme: during their deployment in the Soviet Union, the soldiers did not question their tasks, did not revolt and for the most part did not try to find ways of avoiding participation, either for fear of possible consequences or because they simply did not know how to do this.<sup>769</sup> Ideology as a factor was neglected during the investigations; thus, judicial authorities concluded that ‘an order is an order’ was the basic principle through which the SS cavalry squadrons had functioned.

In order to explain the behaviour of the SS cavalymen, historical research has developed two different theories so far. Martin Cüppers holds the view that the ‘majority of the brigade members strongly supported National Socialist ideology and identified themselves with its aims’.<sup>770</sup> In his view, the combination of radical and very vaguely worded orders from Hitler and Himmler and their different interpretations by the commanders in the field formed the basis for mass murder; a compliance with the motives of the officers such as anti-Semitism, National Socialist ideology, and the will to ‘tear down the barriers of civilisation by individual actions’ continued from the top to the bottom of the hierarchy of units of the *Kommandostab*

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<sup>769</sup> Interview with Dr Heinrich K., retired regional prosecutor in Braunschweig, 3 August, 2011.

<sup>770</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, p. 353.

such as the SS Cavalry Brigade.<sup>771</sup> As opposed to this viewpoint, Ruth Bettina Birn has assumed ‘a mixture of belief in authority and orders, the fear of being perceived as ‘weak’ and the feeling of a hopeless entanglement of which the men believed they could not escape it, out of respect for and under the pressure of their comrades’.<sup>772</sup> Although both of these hypotheses seem plausible, neither of them fully suffices to explain why the soldiers of the SS Cavalry Brigade became perpetrators. Cüppers’s approach, despite being based on a huge range of different sources and constituting the most recent and comprehensive work so far, is based too strongly on ideology, with a focus on the officers of the brigade. In the shorter and earlier study by Birn, the aspect of ideology is missing from the explanation for the behaviour of the ordinary men. Nonetheless, she has viewed their perspective to a greater extent. A new study of this particular unit has to include the findings of both authors and must also take into account the latest research on perpetrator history.

This can be achieved by viewing the SS Cavalry Brigade according to Welzer’s ‘frame of reference’ model: in each of the three situations the soldiers of the unit found themselves in between 1939 and 1942 – occupation duty, killing squad, and front-line military unit – they managed to adapt themselves to a new environment. Although ideology played an important role in this as the reason behind the criminal orders the unit received and the driving force of the officers (who had already shown their strong National Socialist attitude before the war), this was not the decisive factor. The character of the unit was defined by the interaction of ideology and the desire of the SS cavalry’s leadership to create a fully-fledged military unit, which manifested itself most strongly in the ‘dual role’ of the brigade in Belorussia and Russia. From the beginning, the leaders tried to instil a strong esprit de corps within the regiments; they stressed this by issuing numerous orders which expressed their

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<sup>771</sup> Cüppers, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 177-178, p. 181.

<sup>772</sup> Birn, ‘Zweierlei Wirklichkeit’, p. 280.

desire to found a new cavalry tradition within the SS, an aim to which everything else became subordinate.<sup>773</sup> The specific framework the rank and file was subject to consisted of a military atmosphere which propagated toughness as an ideal and punished mistakes relentlessly; during these three years (with the period from the summer of 1941 onwards being of special importance) there was a constant development towards the forming of killing squads and acts of mass violence. As members of an SS unit, the men were drilled not to question orders; during their often brutal basic training, they built up the desired esprit de corps as well as comradeship which made them function during the mass killings in the summer of 1941 and held the units together throughout the following winter, even against hopeless odds.<sup>774</sup>

After analysing the theories of Cüppers and Birn and viewing the perspective of the investigators from the Magill case (from whom Birn's findings were partly derived), it can be stated that all three approaches contain very important findings. The central research question I have formulated, however, can be answered by applying a combination of the available explanations instead of one single theory. The institutional-level conduct of the SS Cavalry Brigade was partly defined by ideology, as this aspect formed the basis of the SS Cavalry Brigade's main tasks, the operation as a security force in Poland and as a killing squad in Belorussia. Undoubtedly, it strongly influenced the officers who commanded the unit; their subordinates, too, were susceptible to this to some extent as the above mentioned excesses have shown.

A military background with strict rules of discipline, to which the vast majority of

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<sup>773</sup> See for example Tagesbefehl des Kommandeurs der SS-T-Reiterstandarte 1 vom 27.11. 1940, quoted in: Bayer, *Kavallerie der Waffen-SS*, p. 13; Brigadebefehl vom 1.8. 1941, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/20; Tagesbefehl Nr. 15 vom 29.10. 1941, 1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment, in: BArchF, RS 4/441, p. 69; Tagesbefehl vom 24.1. 1942, *ibid.*, p. 24. Of these orders, the Brigadebefehl of 1 August, 1941, is of most importance as it can be considered the 'founding document' of the SS Cavalry Brigade.

<sup>774</sup> For the role of comradeship in military units, see Thomas Kühne, 'Kameradschaft – 'das Beste im Leben eines Mannes''. Die deutschen Soldaten des Zweiten Weltkrieges in erfahrungs- und geschlechtergeschichtlicher Perspektive', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 22 (1996), p. 509 and p. 515.

the SS troopers conformed, formed the other component which made the brigade's role in the annihilation process possible. This being the situation, the actual behaviour was defined by an institutional brutalisation from above: the element of fanaticism filtered down from Heinrich Himmler and Hermann Fegelein to the ordinary men, with the officer corps of the unit as the key element in between. The *Reichsführer-SS* and his most senior equestrian created a unit according to their radical aims which, in the course of several years, saw a change in personnel from a majority of sportsmen to one of radicalised recruits. Bound by order and obedience, a still heterogeneous group could be deployed in a 'dual role', which encompassed mass violence as well as fighting on the frontline.

## Glossary

### SS ranks

SS-Reiter (trooper)

SS-Oberreiter (senior trooper)

SS-Sturmmann (private)

SS-Rottenführer (private 1<sup>st</sup> class)

SS-Unterscharführer (corporal)

SS-Oberscharführer (sergeant)

SS-Untersturmführer (second lieutenant)

SS-Obersturmführer (first lieutenant)

SS-Hauptsturmführer (captain)

SS-Sturmbannführer (major)

SS-Obersturmbannführer (lieutenant colonel)

SS-Standartenführer (colonel)

SS-Oberführer (senior colonel – no equivalent in the *Wehrmacht*)

SS-Brigadeführer (major general)

SS-Gruppenführer (lieutenant general)

SS-Obergruppenführer (SS general)

SS-Oberstgruppenführer (SS colonel general)

SS, Wehrmacht and police terms

Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets Mitte	supreme commander of the rear areas of Army Group Centre
Begleitbataillon Reichsführer-SS	guard battalion of the Reichsführer-SS
Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD	task forces of the security police and the security service, the Nazi party secret service
Geheime Staatspolizei (Gestapo)	secret police in Nazi Germany
Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer	Higher SS and police leader
Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS im SS-Führungshauptamt	staff of the Reichsführer-SS at the SS main command office, Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS in short
Kommandantur im rückwärtigen Heeresgebiet (Korück)	a military agency that supervised Feldkommandanturen (FK) and Ortskommandanturen (OK)
Kriminalpolizei (Kripo)	criminal investigation department
Leichte Kavallerie-Kolonne	light cavalry platoon, supply unit
Ordnungspolizei	order police, regular German police
Reitende Abteilung	cavalry detachment
Reitende Batterie	mounted battery
Rückwärtige Armeegebiete	Army Rear Areas
Rückwärtige Heeresgebiete	Army Group Rear Areas
Sicherheitspolizei	security police, the combined forces of the Gestapo and the Kripo
SS-Führungshauptamt	SS main command office
SS-Kavallerie-Regiment	SS Cavalry Regiment

## Abbreviations

BArchB	Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde
BArchF	Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg
BArchK	Bundesarchiv Koblenz
BArchL FK	Bundesarchiv-Außenstelle Ludwigsburg Feldkommandantur, regional military headquarters in the occupied territories
HIAG	Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit ('mutual aid organisation'), an organisation of Waffen-SS veterans in West Germany
HSSPF	Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer, Higher SS and police leader
KDOS RFSS	Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS
NAK	National Archives Kew
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, the Nazi party
OK	Ortskommandantur, urban military headquarters in the occupied territories
RAA	Radfahraufklärungsabteilung, bicycle reconnaissance detachment of the SS Cavalry Brigade
SA	Sturmabteilung, paramilitary arm of the Nazi party (Nazi stormtroopers)
SD	Sicherheitsdienst, the intelligence agency of the SS and the Nazi party
SSO	SS organisations, a database at the Federal Archive in Berlin
SS	Schutzstaffel, paramilitary arm of the Nazi party
StAW	Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv – Staatsarchiv Wolfenbüttel
TV	Totenkopfverbände, concentration camp guard units of the SS

VT	Verfügungstruppe, the first military units of the SS
VUA	Vojenský ústřední archiv, Central Military Archive of the Czech Republic at Prague
WLL	Wiener Library London

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## Structure of the SS Cavalry Brigade in Belorussia (July – August, 1941)

### **Brigade staff**

SS-Standartenführer Hermann Fegelein  
(commander)

SS-Hauptsturmführer Christian Reinhardt  
(1<sup>st</sup> staff officer, deputy commander)

SS-Untersturmführer Kurt Becher  
(aide-de-camp)

### **1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment**

SS-Standartenführer Hermann Fegelein  
(commander)

**Reitende Abteilung** (mounted detachment)  
SS-Sturmbannführer Gustav Lombard  
(commander)

1<sup>st</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer  
Waldemar Fegelein (commander)

2<sup>nd</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer  
Ulrich Goertz (commander)

3<sup>rd</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer  
Johann Schmid (commander)

4<sup>th</sup> squadron (machine gun squadron) -  
SS-Obersturmführer Hermann Gadischke  
(commander)

### **Non-mounted units (1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment)**

5<sup>th</sup> squadron (infantry gun squadron) -  
SS-Obersturmführer Siegfried Kotthaus  
(commander)

6<sup>th</sup> squadron (anti-tank squadron) -  
SS-Sturmbannführer Albert Faßbender  
(commander)

7<sup>th</sup> squadron (bicycle reconnaissance squadron) -  
SS-Obersturmführer Wilhelm Plänk  
(commander)

8<sup>th</sup> squadron (mounted battery) - SS-  
Hauptsturmführer Arno Paul (commander)

Light cavalry platoon (supply unit) - SS-  
Hauptsturmführer Franz Rinner (commander)

### **2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment**

SS-Standartenführer Heimo Hierthes  
(commander)

**Reitende Abteilung** (mounted detachment)  
SS-Sturmbannführer Franz Magill  
(commander)

1<sup>st</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer Stefan  
Charwat (commander)

2<sup>nd</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer Walter  
Dunsch (commander)

3<sup>rd</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer  
Hans-Viktor von Zastrow (commander)

4<sup>th</sup> squadron (machine gun squadron) -  
SS-Obersturmführer Kurt Wegener (commander)

### **Non-mounted units (2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment)**

5<sup>th</sup> squadron (infantry gun squadron) -  
SS-Hauptsturmführer Herbert Schönfeldt  
(commander)

6<sup>th</sup> squadron (anti-tank squadron) –  
commander's position vacant in August, 1941

7<sup>th</sup> squadron (bicycle reconnaissance squadron) -  
SS-Obersturmführer Paul Koppenwallner  
(commander)

8<sup>th</sup> squadron (mounted battery) -  
SS-Hauptsturmführer Friedrich Meyer  
(commander)

Light cavalry platoon (supply unit) -  
SS-Obersturmführer Paul Hoppe (commander)

This scheme is a simplified version of the brigade roster during the summer of 1941. It is based on the following documents: Befehl zur Umgliederung des SS-Kav.Rgts vom 26.2. 1941, in: BArchB, NS 19/3489; Führerstellenbesetzungsliste vom 30.7. 1941, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/91; Schreiben an die Kommandeure und Chefs der SS-Kav.Brigade, 1 August, 1941, in: BArchF, RS 3-8/20; Abschlußbericht der ZStL vom 20.8. 1963, Beteiligung der SS-Kavalleriebrigade Fegelein an Vernichtungsaktionen gegenüber der jüdischen Bevölkerung im Pripjetgebiet / Weißrußland im Sommer 1941 (Lombard u.a.), in: BArchL, B 162/5527, pp. 356-359.

## Structure of the SS Cavalry Brigade during the winter of 1941 – 1942

### **Brigade staff**

SS-Standartenführer Hermann Fegelein  
(commander)

SS-Hauptsturmführer Karl Gesele  
(1<sup>st</sup> staff officer, deputy commander)

SS-Obersturmführer Anton Ameiser  
(aide-de-camp)

### **1<sup>st</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment**

SS-Sturmbannführer Gustav Lombard  
(commander)

1<sup>st</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer Waldemar  
Fegelein (commander)

2<sup>nd</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer Ulrich  
Goertz (commander)

3<sup>rd</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer Johann  
Schmid (commander)

4<sup>th</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer Hermann  
Gadischke (commander)

5<sup>th</sup> squadron - SS-Obersturmführer Hermann  
Schneider (commander)

### **2<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment**

SS-Sturmbannführer Hermann Schleifenbaum  
(commander)

1<sup>st</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer Stefan  
Charwat (commander)

2<sup>nd</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer Walter  
Dunsch (commander)

3<sup>rd</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer Hans-Viktor  
von Zastrow (commander)

4<sup>th</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer Kurt Wegener  
(commander)

5<sup>th</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer  
Herbert Schönfeldt (commander)

### **Bicycle reconnaissance battalion (RAA)**

SS-Sturmbannführer Albert Faßbender  
(commander)

1<sup>st</sup> squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer  
Wilhelm Plänk (commander)

2<sup>nd</sup> squadron - SS-Obersturmführer  
Paul Koppenwallner (commander)

3<sup>rd</sup> squadron (anti-tank squadron) -  
SS-Untersturmführer Rudi Schweinberger  
(commander)

### **Brigade artillery unit**

SS-Hauptsturmführer Arno Paul  
(commander)

1<sup>st</sup> battery - SS-Hauptsturmführer Arno  
Paul (commander)

2<sup>nd</sup> battery - SS-Hauptsturmführer  
Friedrich Meyer (commander)

### **Supply and support units**

Engineer squadron - SS-Hauptsturmführer Karl  
Fritsche (commander)

Veterinary squadron - SS-Obersturmführer Fritz  
Eichin (commander)

Medical unit - SS-Hauptsturmführer Otto  
Mittelberger (commander)

Ambulance platoon - SS-Obersturmführer Alfred  
Becker (commander)

Light cavalry platoon (supply unit) -  
SS-Obersturmführer Paul Hoppe (commander)

This scheme represents the structure of the brigade before it took major casualties at the beginning of 1942. It is a simplified version of Führerstellenbesetzungsliste SS-Kav.Brigitade, 20 November, 1941, in: BArchL, Dokumenten-Sammlung Verschiedenes, B 162/21679, pp. 317-323.

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NS 19	Personal staff of the Reichsführer-SS
NS 31	SS main office (SS-Hauptamt)
NS 33	SS main command office (SS-Führungshauptamt)
R 20	Units and schools of the order police
SSO	SS organisations database

#### Bundesarchiv-Außenstelle Ludwigsburg

B 162/5526-5544	Court proceedings against Gustav Lombard and others
B 162/21678-21679	Original documents of the SS Cavalry Brigade and the 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiments from the court proceedings against Gustav Lombard and others and the court proceedings against Franz Magill and others
Dokumenten-Sammlung Verschiedenes	Document collection (various original documents of the SS Cavalry Brigade)

#### Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg

MSg 2	Military history collection
MSg 3	Records of veterans' organisations (Verband deutscher Soldaten / VdS)
RH 20	Armies
RH 22	Army Group Rear Areas / Army Rear Areas
RH 24	Army corps
RH 26	Infantry divisions
RS 3	Divisions of the Waffen-SS
RS 4	Brigades, legions, regiments and combat groups of the Waffen-SS

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Kdos RFSS  
N Pol. Rgt. (1)

8th SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer*  
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File 703

Letter from SS-Oberreiter Emmerich, member of a Veterinär-Ersatzkompanie in Radom, Poland, to Armin Düsterfest in Rückwerda, near Litzmannstadt (Lodz), 19 March, 1942

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