

GESTAPO

INSTRUMENT OF TYRANNY

Edward Crankshaw

This is a page of glory in our history
which has never been written
and is never to be written.

HEINRICH HIMMLER



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E. C.

Introduction

A REMARKABLE feature of the trial of the major war criminals at Nuremberg was the striving of various counsel for the defence to saddle each other's clients with the blame. This was especially evident when it came to the "organisations" which found themselves on trial: the S.A., the S.S., the Gestapo, the General Staff. In fact, there was little else counsel could do: they were faced with a miserable task. The facts were there and could not be denied. The crimes had been committed and could not be talked out of existence. It could not be denied, for example, that concentration-camps existed and that innumerable men and women from all over Europe had been tortured in them, or killed, or left to die of exhaustion and starvation; that there had been massacres of hostages and prisoners-of-war; that there had been a meticulously planned attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe, children as well as adults, by gassing them to death. Cruelty and savagery unequalled in the history of modern Europe had been practised on a scale unequalled in the history of the world. It had been uncovered by the Allies, described by the survivors, and freely confirmed in detail by a host of witnesses.

Counsel's only hope, each for himself, was to make out that his own client was blameless in these matters by pinning the responsibility on to another. Some of them pursued this line so stubbornly that anyone with patience and a twisted sense of humour could go through the verbatim reports of the major trials and prove that although all these things had been done, and more besides, they had been done without the knowledge of anybody at all in Germany except for a few

men who were dead, or missing, and a handful of witnesses who, for one reason and another, found comfort in confessing to almost unimaginable crimes.

Several million people (prosecuting counsel put it at twelve million; but that figure has since been shown to have been a little too high) had been put to death in atrocious circumstances; several million men, women, and children from the heart of Europe had been put to death in the heart of Europe; and nobody knew who had done it, or even that it had been done. This display of blessed ignorance made no difference to the upshot of the trials; but it did cause a good deal of unnecessary confusion. And to this day most people do not know what really happened.

This is an unsatisfactory state of affairs. The Germans, for reasons not plain to the outsider, regard themselves as being the most civilised race in the world. These things happened in their midst and were carried out by them. Germany is a part of Western Europe: she has made notable contributions to the culture of Western Europe. But these things happened only a few years ago, and not far away on the steppes of Central Asia, but in our midst: in the midst of the new European community. It is important for us all to discover how, and why, and who was really responsible—if only to decide whether they could happen again, and whether they could happen outside Germany, and, if not, why not.

It is necessary to understand the nature of these crimes, which shows important differences from the nature of the crimes committed, for example, by Russians under Stalin. And it is necessary to have some idea of how they happened. Otherwise the verdict oscillates senselessly between the two extremes of untruth: on the one hand, that all Germans were directly responsible; on the other, that they were due solely to Hitler and a hard core of Nazi brutes.

There are many ways into this subject. I have chosen the

history of the Gestapo because it offers an extreme example of that purposeful confusion which covered, like a smoke-screen, the most terrible activities of the Third Reich. Very few people have a clear idea of what the Gestapo in fact was; and it has come to serve in Germany as a kind of universal scapegoat. Certainly the Gestapo stood behind the blackest deeds committed by Germans all over Europe and inspired and organised their execution. But it was essentially a small, compact, and highly professional corps which participated directly in only a part of the atrocities which horrified the world. The activities of the Gestapo, for example, ended more or less at the gates of the concentration-camps. This fact will save us from the repetition of individual acts of sadism which, by first sickening the mind, then numbing it, could come between us and the object in view. At the same time, by establishing what the Gestapo did and what it did not do, we shall have a much clearer view of what was done by other organisations whose membership accounted for a very considerable proportion of the able-bodied population of Hitler's Germany and which sought, not always unsuccessfully, to saddle the Gestapo with their crimes.

CHAPTER 1

The Gestapo is Born

GESTAPO stands for *Geheime Staats Polizei*, or Secret State Police. The term was approved by Goering in April 1933, two months after he had taken over the Prussian Police and purged it, replacing many of its career officials by trusted Nazis. In its origins the Gestapo was simply Department IA of the old Prussian Political Police uprooted from its home in the Prussian Ministry of the Interior and transferred to a separate building, a commandeered art school in the Prinz Albrecht Strasse, which was to become notorious. This was done so that it could be more easily kept apart from the Prussian State apparatus as a whole, which still included many anti-Nazis and "luke warms".

Goering first thought of calling his new department the G.P.A. (*Geheime Polizei Amt*); but it occurred to him that this was too much like the G.P.U., as the Soviet Political Police was then called. He need not have bothered. The term Gestapo, which might have been made especially for Sir (then Mr.) Winston Churchill, was the invention of a clerk in the Berlin post-office, who simply needed an abbreviation for one more Government department.¹ He did not know what he was starting. Nor, probably, did Goering.

For although the Gestapo was born in Berlin in 1933 and at first limited to Prussia, its real history begins in Munich.

Those who think of the Gestapo as the creation of Heinrich Himmler are closer to the mark than the pedants, in spite of the fact that Himmler did not take it over from Goering until April 1934. For the Prussian Gestapo in the first year of its existence was, in effect, very little more than Goering's personal terror squad, the real business of smashing popular opposition to the Hitler régime being left to the S.A. and the S.S. It was only when Himmler came to Berlin that the Gestapo developed into the elaborate and terrible machine which became the scourge of Germany and was then perfected as an instrument to terrorise the populations of conquered countries and to exterminate certain categories of human beings, above all Jews, who were considered unfit to live. The beginning of this transformation coincided with the effective absorption of the Gestapo, a department of State administration, into the S.S., a purely Party organisation, and its union under Reinhard Heydrich with the S.S. Security Service, the *Sicherheits Dienst*, or S.D. The Gestapo, as it was to become known to the world, took its tone and meaning from the S.D.—so much so that throughout this narrative Gestapo and S.D. will be treated as being inextricably connected. This, indeed, they were, the protestations of the defence counsel at Nuremberg notwithstanding.

Here, then, is the first source of confusion. The Gestapo in its final form was a product of the S.S. The S.S. in the end was over half a million strong. But the Gestapo in its heyday, when its mastery extended from the Atlantic to the Volga, from the North Cape to the Mediterranean, was a strictly limited organisation, never employing more than 40,000 individuals, including women and clerks. The S.D. had only 3,000, and acted, in so far as its functions can be separated, as the long-range Intelligence Service of the Gestapo.²

These are facts which must be borne constantly in mind unless we are to lose ourselves in the confusion deliberately