PROJECT REPORT

THE GERMAN POLICE AND THE NAZI REGIME – A HISTORICAL RESEARCH PROJECT OF THE GERMAN POLICE UNIVERSITY

By

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Initiated by the ministers of interior in 2008, the German Police University implemented a historical project about the police during the Nazi Regime. The project was divided into three parts:

• an exhibition at the German Historical Museum in Berlin (from April to August 2011)
• a small permanent exhibition for police training facilities and police universities of applied sciences
• provision of teaching materials about the police during the Nazi period.

As a preparation for the exhibition in Berlin and as a review of current research about the German police and the Nazi Regime, a symposium was held in May 2009 at the German Police University in Münster. More than one hundred participants and 29 experts from Austria, Russia, Israel, Norway, Greece, Italy and Germany participated and the outcome published.1

The main exhibition at the German Historical Museum took place from April to August 2011, titled “Order and Annihilation – The Police and the Nazi Regime”. On an area of 950 sqm more than 500 objects were shown, distributed in nine thematic groups:

1. An institution with a past

As the body with the state monopoly on the use of force, the police have the task of caring for security and order. This is the case in democratic states as well as in dictatorships.

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The rule of the National Socialist state was based on acceptance, conformity and extreme force. The police remained its reliable bastion until the downfall of the regime. The Nazi state enforced its political and ideological aims with the support of the police. Many policemen shared the Nazi vision of a Volksgemeinschaft (an ethnicity centred folk community), based on racial exclusion. Not only the Gestapo – the Secret State Police –, but also the Criminal Investigation Police and the Public Order Police participated in the persecution of actual and alleged opponents of the regime as well as in the genocide of the Jews and the Sinti and Roma.

Many policemen were able to continue their careers after the war. Only a few had to take responsibility for their crimes before a court of law. For a long time the police in Germany showed no interest in shedding light on their own past.

2. Military Traditions and Democratic Approaches in the Weimar Republic

For Germany the First World War ended in November 1918 with defeat and with the collapse of the monarchy. The German Empire emerged from the revolutionary convulsions of the post-war period as a parliamentary republic. The new government of the Empire secured its political power with the help of the army and voluntary paramilitary units, the Freikorps. The police recruited their personnel from these organizations. The police were under the control of the individual federal Länder, or states.

From the very beginning the Republic was under attack by extremist forces. The police, furnished with military equipment, were involved in particular in the forcible suppression of leftist revolts. This experience left its mark on the behaviour of the police in their further operations. In 1924 the political situation began to ease. The Social Democratic Minister of Interior, Carl Severing, began to transform the police into a civilian and modern ‘People’s Police’ (Volkspolizei), at first in Prussia and then in the entire German Reich. Despite of a number of successful reforms he failed in his attempt to alter the military self-conception and anti-republican mindset of the police’s officer corps.

3. The Police as an Agency of the National Socialist Dictatorship

The appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of the Reich on 30 January 1933 led to the establishment of the National Socialist dictatorship. Within a few months the Län-
der in the German Reich were ‘brought into line’ and the political parties were banned. The police forces were the most prominent instrument in the persecution of political opponents and the installation of the dictatorship.

The Nazi state created new structures for the police. From 1934 on they had to swear an oath to the Führer Adolf Hitler. The mindset and actions of the police should no longer be oriented on law and order, but rather on Volk – the German people – and ‘race’. The police should act as a “doctor on the body of the ‘folk community’ (Volksgemeinschaft)” and engage in a preventive fight against all undesirable elements.

The Geheime Staatspolizei – the Gestapo – stood for the embodiment of Nazi terror. As an institution for the fight against political and ideological opposition, they were endowed with extensive powers. In effect, it was at the discretion of the Gestapo to say who was to be considered an opponent.

4. The Radicalisation of the Police during the 2nd World War

With the outbreak of war the police had to take on new tasks: they were to guarantee the cohesive solidarity of the ‘home front’. The Nazi regime enacted a great number of laws and decrees to increase the regulation of everyday life. Gestapo and Criminal Investigator Police pursued even the most minor offences by ‘antisocial parasites’ with unrelenting severity.

From 1941 on more and more people from the occupied territories were deported into the German Reich for forced labour. They were subjected to strict regulation by the police, ranging from mandatory labelling to where they could stay. Forced labourers who refused to carry out instructions or attempted to flee were faced with deportation to Gestapo camps.

In 1942 the Allies began destroying German cities in bombing attacks and brought public life increasingly to a standstill. In order to maintain order, the police acted with greater severity toward the population. In the final phase of the war anyone who declined to follow the regime into the coming downfall, was threatened with Nazi terror.

5. Europe in the Grip of the NS-Police

The Second World War began with the invasion of Poland by the German Reich on 1 September 1939. The Wehrmacht offensive in 1940 led to the conquest of large parts of Northern and Western Europe. The war in the Balkans and against the Soviet Union in 1941 expanded the German sphere of influence to include almost all of Europe.

The police imposed their organisational structure on all of the occupied territories. As deputies of leading figures Himmler, higher SS and police officers exerted direct influence on occupation policy. However, in pursuing their aims, the German police
were dependent on the support of the local population. Police, SS and Wehrmacht reacted to attacks and sabotage with ruthless severity, even against persons with no involvement at all. Murder and terror by German police units became synonymous with Nazi tyranny. The brutality of the occupiers led to ever greater resistance in all of the occupied countries.

6. Boundless Murder
German police forces executed the National Socialist genocide of the Jews, Sinti and Roma. All branches of the police were directly involved in the registration, collection and murder of the victims. When the war broke out in 1939, the Security Police forced the Polish Jews to live in ghettos. In the course of the Nazi annihilation policy almost all of the ghettos were forcibly dissolved by the end of 1943. The ghetto inhabitants were murdered or deported to extermination camps. From the summer of 1941 mobile units of the police in the Soviet Union were already involved in murdering Jews as well as prisoners of war and civilians suspected of putting up resistance. From autumn 1941 the Jewish population, at first from the German Reich and then from the entire territory under German control, were being deported and murdered.

7. Many Executors and Few Deniers
During the war up to 355 000 men and women belonged to the Public Order Police, Criminal Investigation Police and Gestapo. The Public Order Police had the most manpower with around 310 000 members in 1942. These were supplemented by auxiliary formations and, in the occupied territories, by police units recruited from the local population. Ten thousands of Public Order Police grouped in more than 100 police battalions were deployed in the occupied territories. Every policeman was seen as a stanchion of the Nazi regime, although they had different functions and responsibilities. Many officers were particularly zealous in this regard. They dutifully performed their given tasks, whether traffic control or mass executions. Only a very small minority made use of the possibilities available to them of not committing crimes or even of helping those who were being persecuted.

8. New Beginnings, but no Zero Hour
After the unconditional surrender of the Wehrmacht on 8 May 1945 the Allied Forces took over police powers in Germany. In the period of reconstruction, the Western Allies soon resorted for pragmatic reasons to employing a good part of the former police personnel. In the Soviet occupation zone, by contrast, only a few policemen were able get their jobs back.
In the three Western zones the Allies organized the police according to federal principles and placed them under constitutional control. Based on what happened under the Nazi dictatorship, the responsibilities of the police and the intelligence agencies
were strictly separated in the Federal Republic of Germany. The four Allied Powers convicted the major war criminals in Nuremberg, but most of the police crimes went unpunished. It was the trials beginning at the end of the 1950s in the Federal Republic of Germany that first made public the degree to which the police had been involved in Nazi crimes. Court investigations were often directed against people who were now back working for the police. Through collusions and false testimonies they often distorted the findings of the criminal investigations. Most policemen never had to face trial for the crimes they committed during the Nazi period.

9. The Reappearance of the Suppressed Past

For a long time the police in the Federal Republic of Germany had difficulty dealing with the Nazi past. Loyalty to the old comrades, many of whom were colleagues, prevented them from coming to grips objectively with this chapter of their history. Not only among the police, but in the vast majority of the German public, the prevalent belief was that the Gestapo alone had been responsible for the deportations and mass murder.

The view of the police during the National Socialist period changed in the 1980s. At that time the generation who had begun their professional careers in the Nazi state had started to retire. This made it possible to encourage an impartial discussion of the topic, which went hand in hand with a transformation in society in the way of dealing with the National Socialist past. Since 1990 the discussion about Nazi crimes in reunited Germany has become a central component of political culture. Scientific research and the commitment of citizens’ groups have been able to refute the legend of the spotless police in the National Socialist state.

More than 53,000 visitors came to see the exhibition and the general public as well as the media took note of this topic. These brief abstracts of the nine thematic groups of the exhibition can only touch superficially on the material actually exhibited; however there is good reason to believe that learning from history can be instrumental for training and education of police officers and the general public as well in the present day Europe.

An exhibition catalogue can be ordered at the library of the German Police University (verkauf@dhpol.de).