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# Fegelein's Horsemen and Genocidal Warfare

The SS Cavalry Brigade in the Soviet Union

Henning Pieper



## Fegelein's Horsemen and Genocidal Warfare

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# Fegelein's Horsemen and Genocidal Warfare

The SS Cavalry Brigade in the  
Soviet Union

Henning Pieper  
*Independent Scholar, Germany*

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Summary: "Fegelein's Horsemen and Genocidal Warfare explores the deployment of the SS Cavalry Brigade in 1941-2, with a special focus on the development of its 'dual role'. The brigade became a pacemaker of the Holocaust in Belorussia during the summer of 1941, and fought against the Red Army in the region between Toropets and Rzhev, a focal point of the Eastern Front, between December 1941 and June 1942. SS cavalrymen underwent a continuous brutalisation which saw them commit acts of mass violence with thousands of victims, a development only comparable to that of the Einsatzgruppen and battalions of the order police. Going beyond a unit history, Henning Pieper analyses the role and behavior of the brigade's personnel and places it within the context of research on perpetrators and the operational history of the Waffen-SS. Thus, military history, Holocaust research, and perpetrator history are combined in this interdisciplinary approach"— Provided by publisher.

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*For my parents, Herbert and Dietlind Pieper*

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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 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 Bavaria. 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

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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. As the SS Cavalry Brigade had to be restructured after the first winter in the Soviet Union and took on a completely different form, the delineation of the unit in this work will not include the 8<sup>th</sup> SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer* or the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 37<sup>th</sup> SS Volunteer Cavalry Divisions which were deployed later in the war.

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 equestration. 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 part of the Polish elite. At the same time, the SS cavalrymen 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 and 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. 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>2</sup> More precise and brutal orders were issued now: the cavalrymen 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>3</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>4</sup>, tactics were soon changed to killing all Jews regardless of gender or age.<sup>5</sup> This approach, which was followed during two missions in the Pripet Marshes, resulted in the killing of 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>6</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 Velikie 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>7</sup> In May, the unit was relieved from the front and withdrawn to Debica in southeastern 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 1942–43, 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. The general state of source material is very good, especially in the fields of German SS and military documentation. For 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 the Czechs after the end of the war.<sup>8</sup> The most significant source complex in this context

is that of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS*, which provides key information on the advance of the SS Cavalry Brigade into Belorussia, mass killings, combat operations against the Red Army during the advance on Moscow, and the heavy losses of the unit after the collapse of the German offensive in the winter of 1941–42.<sup>9</sup>

The Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv at Freiburg is the second important institution that preserves sources on the SS Cavalry Brigade. As opposed to the above-mentioned cohesive body of SS material available in Prague, the documentation at Freiburg also illustrates the establishment and deployment of the SS cavalry in Poland between 1939 and 1941 and shows that the mounted SS units served ideological purposes from a very early stage. The archival holdings 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.

The branch of the German Bundesarchiv at Lichterfelde, Berlin, also holds a large 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 of 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 some 400 former SS cavalrymen. For this work, however, only statements containing significant information on executions or the situation within the horse units were used. Indictments and conclusions of the two cases and other documents, such as testimonies of survivors, can also be accessed at these institutions. The result of the Magill trial was also published in an academic series in 1979.<sup>10</sup>

For historical analysis it is important to note that few ego documents of SS cavalrymen, such as diaries or letters, were made accessible to the public, as they could have implicated their writers in Nazi crimes and helped investigations after the war. Thus, only fragmentary evidence from this field could be found in the form of an SS trooper's field-post letter and several pages of reminiscences written by Gustav Lombard, which of course omit the deployment of his regiment in the Pripet Marshes.<sup>11</sup> Enquiries at German archives which specialise in the acquisition of ego documents did not lead to any results.<sup>12</sup> The same also applies to the documentation of the association of *Waffen-SS* veterans: it mostly refers to events from the second half of the war, or to post-war gatherings and the view of the *Waffen-SS* in the media of post-war West Germany, but does not contain accounts by individuals which could be of use for this work.<sup>13</sup>

After 1945, some veterans of the SS cavalry presented their view in the form of *Kameradenliteratur* (comrade literature). Despite their biased and commemorative character, these books can help to explain the mentality of the men of the SS Cavalry Brigade: a strong bond existed between them based on horse-riding and the development of the later cavalry role.<sup>14</sup>

As opposed to these rather one-sided works, hardly any academic studies have focused 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. The first accounts referring specifically to the SS Cavalry Brigade were published in the 1980s and 1990s. In short essays, Yehoshua Büchler and Ruth Bettina Birn outlined the unit's deployment in 1941 and disproved the view previously held in German literature about the character of its missions: instead of classifying the actions of the brigade and the other units of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS* as counterinsurgency, they incorporated them into the context of the Holocaust and the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> Karla Müller-Tupath's work deals with the biography of Kurt Becher, an SS cavalry officer and close aide of Hermann Fegelein.<sup>16</sup>

So far, the SS Cavalry Brigade has been analysed in detailed monographs only by two historians. Paul J. Wilson's study concentrates on the pre-war Equestrian SS within the Nazi state and analyses the role of this organisation as part of the *Allgemeine SS*.<sup>17</sup> Martin Cüppers, on the other hand, demonstrates the organisation and operations of the *Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS* and its subunits and highlights their genocidal character. He presents a very important consideration, namely that the SS Cavalry Brigade escalated the practice of executions soon after the beginning of Operation Barbarossa by destroying entire Jewish communities, including women and children, and therefore has an exceptional position within the context of German mobile killing squads.<sup>18</sup>

My work 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 1941–42 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 focused on a police formation, the Reserve Police Battalion 101.<sup>19</sup> In the question of how the policemen became perpetrators, however, they came to different conclusions. Goldhagen followed a monocausal approach by blaming a specific 'eliminationist' form of anti-Semitism; he assumed that this attitude was typical of all Germans and motivated them to kill the Jews. In contrast, Browning offers a more productive multicausal explanation and shows in detail how the policemen behaved when they were ordered to kill. 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. Leaning towards Browning, I will use a multilayered evaluation of sources and avoid the monocausal approach taken by Goldhagen.

Another important explanation for perpetrator behaviour has been formulated by Harald Welzer: he argues that 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>20</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>21</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.

Further unit histories and group biographies complemented the explanatory models developed by Browning, Welzer, and Neitzel and raised important questions about perpetrator history, as they identified further facets of the killing process. The influence of the SS and police leadership on the 'ordinary men' of the order police and the mentality of the killing squads, which was based on military identity and Nazi ideology, especially anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism, facilitated mass murder.<sup>22</sup> Studies focusing on the *Einsatzgruppen* of the SS came to similar conclusions: commanders and their subalterns were driven to fulfil the radical aims of Adolf Hitler and managed to motivate heterogeneous groups of subordinates to carry out acts of mass violence.<sup>23</sup> In this context, it is essential to ask what effect this had on the men and if it was possible to avoid participation, a procedure that has been followed by several works on the Holocaust from the perpetrators' point of view.<sup>24</sup>

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 *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>25</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.<sup>26</sup>

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>27</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>28</sup>

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>29</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 post-war 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 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 cavalymen 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 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 the 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 cavalymen 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 cavalymen 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 cavalymen 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 cavalymen will be integrated into the historical context and into the field of Holocaust research. Beside the analysis conducted in the main text, the work is supplemented by an appendix which contains organisational diagrams illustrating the structure of the brigade during the summer of 1941 and the winter of 1941–42. Also, the lives of several important perpetrators from the SS Cavalry Brigade are presented in the form of short biographies. By incorporating English primary and secondary sources into the research, and by translating German terms within the text, I hope 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: The Pre-war *SS-Reiterstandarten*

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 right-wing 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 was 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>1</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>2</sup> On this regional 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>3</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>4</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. First, a decree issued by the Ministry of the Interior required that all rural riding associations in Germany 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>5</sup>

Due to their different strength and social composition, there was a 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>6</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>7</sup> Also, it became more selective from about 1935 onwards as Himmler introduced the prerequisite of horse ownership, a change that was brought about by the intention to 'expel opportunists and the unskilled'.<sup>8</sup> This step also coincided with the beginning of national and international sporting success of the mounted units.

For the purpose of integrating the rural elites, including many members of the German nobility, into his organisation, Heinrich Himmler 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>9</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>10</sup>

As a result, the horsemen within the SS became elite; the formations had a largely ceremonial and representative character, committed to the advancement of equestration. Unlike other paramilitary arms of the Nazi Party, the *Reiterstandarten* did not display radicalism and brutality in public, as they were not used for street fighting or intimidation of Jews and did not have to guard concentration camps. There is some evidence which indicates a preparation for paramilitary duties: 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. Due to the small size of the organisation, however, it can be assumed that they were not employed in this role very often: the focus on sports and representation was dominant.<sup>11</sup> 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>12</sup>

## The mentality of the SS equestrians

In some cases the roots of a local *Reitersturm* can be traced back to right-wing 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>13</sup> Its founders were 25 former members of the *Bund Oberland*, the successor of the paramilitary *Freikorps Oberland*.<sup>14</sup> After the *Reitersturm* had been set up, cooperation with a 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>15</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>16</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>17</sup> Egon B., 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>18</sup>

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>19</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>20</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>21</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>22</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 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>23</sup>