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PRIDE OF THE FATHERLAND:
THE IMPACT OF NAZI RACIAL IDEOLOGY ON THE 3. SS *TOTENKOPFDIVISION*

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ABSTRACT

One of the more elite military formations in the German Army during the Second World War was the 3. SS *Totenkopfdivision*. This unit was originally created out of concentration camp guards and acquired a reputation for fanaticism and brutality during its four years of combat on the Eastern Front. Yet because of its unique relationship with the concentration camp system, Nazi racial ideology negatively impacted the performance of *Totenkopfdivision* in the field. Already heavy casualties were increased because of the willingness of the soldiers to unnecessarily expose themselves to danger as they believed that they were naturally superior to their Soviet counterparts. Losses proved almost impossible to replace as the concentration camp system retained 35,000 men to serve as guards and, despite numerous protests, refused to release them to serve at the front. Nazi racial ideology also interfered with the equipment that *Totenkopfdivision* needed to function. Germany was forced to rely increasingly on slave labor, but took no steps to ensure the welfare of those laborers. Skilled Jewish laborers were replaced with unskilled non-Jewish laborers because top Nazi officials wanted to eliminate the Jews, causing constant delays to production. Camp conditions further hampered productivity. In the end, while Nazi racial ideology was not the only reason that *Totenkopfdivision* could not complete its objectives, it was unmistakably a significant contributor to its defeat.

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Introduction

“Anyone who displays the slightest sympathy with these enemies of the state must vanish from our ranks. My SS men must be tough and ready for all eventualities and there is no room among us for weaklings.”
- Theodor Eicke¹

The story of *Totenkopfddivision* (Death’s Head Division), or, as it was known by the end of the war, 3. *SS Panzer-Division ‘Totenkopf’*, is one of almost unmatched skill and bravery. *Totenkopfddivision* raced Erwin Rommel to the English Channel during the invasion of France in 1940 and fought with Army Group North to the gates of Leningrad during Operation Barbarossa in 1941. Over the next four years, *Totenkopfddivision* established a reputation as one of Nazi Germany’s most elite units and fought in critical battles from Kharkov to Kursk to Warsaw, saving the German Army from total disaster on multiple occasions. *Totenkopfddivision* survived months of encirclement in the Demyansk Pocket and escaped far enough west by the end of the war to surrender to American forces, yet took so many casualties during its four years on the Eastern Front that it almost ceased to exist as a credible fighting force on multiple occasions. Yet there was much more to *Totenkopfddivision* than just exemplary soldiery. In order to understand the reasons behind *Totenkopfddivision*’s success as a fighting force, one must understand its origins in Nazi racial ideology and in the concentration camp system. Formed from the *Totenkopfverbände*, the concentration camp guards, the men of *Totenkopfddivision* were indoctrinated in Nazi racial ideology by the division’s first commander, Theodor Eicke. The

¹ Quoted in: Rudolf Höß, *Commandant of Auschwitz: The Autobiography of Rudolf Höß*, trans. Constantine Fitzgibbon (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1959), 266.

combination of physical violence, racial hatred, and political ideology made *Totenkopfdivision* one of the most effective fighting units of the war.

As elite a formation as *Totenkopfdivision* was, its capabilities were handicapped by the same ideology that its members fought and died for. In order to pursue their racial exterminationist goals, top Nazi officials deliberately kept tens of thousands of potential soldiers from the front lines to serve as concentration camp guards. An ardent belief in German racial supremacy over their Soviet counterparts pushed the men of *Totenkopfdivision* to unnecessarily expose themselves to danger, resulting in significantly higher casualties compared to most other divisions – losses that were seldom replaced. Vital equipment and supplies were often absent because of disruptions to the labor force, most notably in the form of deportations, death, and atrocious working conditions. These factors made it impossible for *Totenkopfdivision* to be successful in achieving its objectives and maintaining its military effectiveness, thereby contributing to Germany's defeat.

To understand that the factors contributing to *Totenkopfdivision*'s loss of fighting effectiveness arose from Nazi ideology is to also understand *Totenkopfdivision*'s fundamental connection to Nazi exterminationist policies. As this examination will show, *Totenkopfdivision* had a truly unique relationship with the concentration camps, one that has largely been overlooked. This link should not be ignored because it connects the horrors of the Holocaust to parts of the German military that history revisionists and Nazi apologists are attempting to absolve of responsibility.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In March 1933, the Nazis opened the first concentration camp at Dachau.² Its first inmates were political prisoners, ostensibly sent to Dachau by the Nazis to learn how to be productive members of German society. Responsibility for the camp soon passed to the *Schutz-Staffel* [Protection Squad], better known as the SS. The SS was established in 1925 as Hitler's personal bodyguard, but had expanded rapidly since then and now acted as an umbrella organization for a vast array of groups.³ Its members were supposed to be the best representation of the Aryan race, and potential recruits had to meet extremely strict physical and racial requirements. Beginning June 1, 1935, members had to provide documents that proved their pure Aryan heritage back to 1800; officers had to provide a family tree back to 1750.⁴ Those who failed were forced out of the SS.

At the helm of the SS was Heinrich Himmler, a man determined to do whatever necessary for his own personal advancement and a master of playing other top Nazis against each other to achieve his own ends. It was from Himmler that the strict guidelines for SS membership originated. Indeed, Himmler closed SS recruiting from 1933 to 1935 and used that time to expel 60,000 members, many of whom were homosexuals, alcoholics, or came from questionable backgrounds.⁵ In June 1933, following a political scandal involving the death of inmates at Dachau, Himmler appointed Theodor Eicke as commandant of Dachau.

Theodor Eicke was a spiteful and brutal man, but he was totally devoted to his work and had a gift for organization. He served as a paymaster in the German Army during the First World

² Permanent Exhibition, Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site, May 17, 2014.

³ Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's SS*, trans. Richard Barry (New York, NY: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1990).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

War and was decorated for bravery multiple times.⁶ After the war, Eicke attempted to become a policeman, but was unable to keep his job because of his outspoken radical and violent opposition to the Weimar Republic. He eventually became a security officer for the chemical company IG Farben and performed well enough at his work to receive several promotions. Eicke was fired in late 1931, however, because of his political activities with the Nazi Party.⁷

Eicke joined the Nazi Party in 1928 and the SS in 1930. His energetic recruiting and organizational abilities caught Himmler's attention, and Eicke rose to the rank of SS-*Standartenführer* by the end of 1931. Eicke's involvement in numerous violent political incidents forced Himmler to exile him to Italy, albeit temporarily, to prevent Eicke from causing further trouble for the Nazi Party. Eicke returned once Hitler became Chancellor, but was soon arrested and ejected from the SS because of a rivalry with another SS officer in which Eicke and some of his men took the officer hostage at gunpoint. Although he was reinstated shortly afterward, it was the beginning of contention between Himmler and Eicke that would last the rest of Eicke's life.⁸

Eicke began his work at Dachau by immediately reorganizing both the camp structure and its guards, the *Totenkopfverbände* (Death's Head Units). Those who dissatisfied him were transferred out of Dachau. According to Rudolf Höß, the future commandant of Auschwitz,

At the beginning of Eicke's period of service as commandant, the majority of the guards came from the Bavarian country constabulary and they occupied the most important posts. To Eicke the police were like a red rag to a bull...in a very short time he replaced all the police (except two, whom he brought into the SS) with SS and chased the 'laponesten,' as they were called in camp slang, out of the camp.⁹

⁶ Höß, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 265.

⁷ Adrian Weale, *Army of Evil: The History of the SS* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2010), 96.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁹ Höß, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 266.

Eicke told the *Totenkopfverbände* that they were special, even among the SS, and for the first few years of their existence, they wore brown instead of SS black to display this distinction.¹⁰

As commandant, Eicke developed two policies that were soon to expand far beyond Dachau and become standard practice throughout the concentration camp system. The first was a series of unwritten rules on how camp guards were to conduct themselves, revolving largely on the concepts of blindly following orders from superiors and his own insistence that the guards were to recognize camp prisoners as existential threats to Germany.¹¹

The second policy concerned the punishment of prisoners for various infractions. Corporal punishment was required so as to acclimate Eicke's men to violence and increase their negative view of the enemies of Nazi Germany. Other punishments for infractions included death, solitary confinement with only bread and water, reassignment to extraordinarily difficult labor, and tying prisoners to a tree for a period of time.¹² It is necessary at this time to examine what precisely Nazi racial ideology encompassed so that the reader may have a better understanding of the hatred with which the *Totenkopfverbände* held the prisoners.

Nazi ideology purported a belief in a racial hierarchy. At the top of the hierarchy was the so-called Aryan race; the chief contributors to civilization and the race that was destined to rule over the lesser, weaker races. Aryans were persons of Nordic descent and were, ideally, tall, blond-haired, and blue-eyed. The Nazis, of course, believed themselves to be Aryans, although neither Hitler nor many other top Nazis possessed any of the aforementioned physical characteristics. At the bottom of the Nazi racial hierarchy were the Slavs and Blacks, second only to the Jews. To the Nazis, the Jews were the ultimate enemy of humanity and civilization;

¹⁰ Höhne, *Order of the Death's Head*, 455.

¹¹ Höß, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 266-267.

¹² Weale, *Army of Evil*, 99.

as such, they posed an existential threat to the world, especially the Aryans. The Jews would stop at nothing to enslave and destroy the rest of humanity, and it was up to the Aryans to stop them. For evidence of this alleged Jewish conspiracy, the Nazis pointed to the prominence of Jewish families, such as the Rothschilds, in the banking industry and other monetary professions. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a text claiming to be the minutes of a secret meeting between prominent Jewish leaders in which they discussed plans for world domination, was also frequently cited.

Hitler discussed his beliefs at length in his autobiography *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle). To Hitler, the Jews were parasites, with no culture of their own, whose only purpose in life was to be a drain on the society that they inhabited.¹³ The Jews were also devoted to defiling the other races of the world: “For hours the black-haired Jew boy, diabolic joy in his face, waits in ambush for the unsuspecting girl whom he defiles with his blood and thus robs her from her people...with the same concealed thought and the clear goal of destroying...the white race which they hate.”¹⁴ The Jews, too, were responsible for the creation and establishment of communism, Nazism’s bitterest rival: “in an infinitely sly manner, he [the Jew] stimulates the need for social justice, dormant in every Aryan, to the point of hatred against those who have been better favored by fortune, and thus he gives the fight for the abolition of social evils a definite stamp of a view of life. He founds the Marxist theory.”¹⁵ Worse, Hitler believed the Jews and Marxists in Germany to be responsible for Germany’s loss in the First World War. To Hitler, the Jews and Marxists had spread dissent in Germany and caused the collapse of the German home front. This resulted in the surrender of the German Army and the Allies’ imposition of the

¹³ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. John Chamberlain (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940), 420.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 448-449.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 440.

hated Treaty of Versailles on Germany. Finally, Hitler used *Mein Kampf* to promote the idea of an international Jewish conspiracy intent on destroying the world and to justify his efforts to stop it: “If, with the help of the Marxian creed, the Jew conquers the nations of this world, his crown will become the funeral wreath of humanity....Therefore, I believe today that I am acting in the sense of the Almighty Creator: *By warding off the Jews I am fighting for the Lord’s work* [emphasis in original].”¹⁶

Eicke, like Hitler, harbored a deep anti-Semitism. To him, the Jews were the greatest enemy of Germany, and Eicke made sure that every guard at Dachau felt the same way. Copies of the notorious anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Stürmer* were posted for the guards to read and distributed to non-Jewish inmates at Dachau. If an article that was critical of the concentration camps was released anywhere in the world, Eicke collectively punished all the Jewish prisoners.¹⁷ It must be mentioned that for all prisoners in Dachau, Jewish or otherwise, there was no reprieve from Eicke’s treatment. Eicke’s new system was designed to psychologically break those unfortunate enough to be sent to Dachau. The prisoners were enemies of the state and were to be destroyed if they showed even the slightest sign of resistance. This does not mean that all the prisoners were to be exterminated, as was done in the death camps later in the war, but, rather, that their spirit was to be crushed.¹⁸ Prisoner tasks were not meant to be productive, but to weaken the mental state of the prisoners to the point that they forgot their opposition to the Nazi government.¹⁹

¹⁶ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 84.

¹⁷ Weale, *Army of Evil*, 104-105.

¹⁸ Höß, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 265-266.

¹⁹ Weale, *Army of Evil*, 98.

Eicke's reward for his personal participation in the 1934 purge of troublesome elements in the Nazi Party, the so-called Night of the Long Knives, was a promotion to SS-*Gruppenführer*, the second highest commissioned rank in the SS, and the title of Inspectorate of the Concentration Camps. Eicke was now in direct control of Germany's concentration camps and their guards, and his policies now expanded to these camps. Over the next few years, almost all the other concentration camps were shut down, and their prisoners relocated to new camps built on Eicke's model. Eicke personally oversaw the design and construction of Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Flossenbürg, Mauthausen, Gross-Rosen, and Ravensbrück, all of which were under his control and were led by men who had served at Dachau as guards.²⁰ In 1935, Hitler personally authorized Eicke to increase the strength of the *Totenkopfverbände* to 2,500, a number which continued to grow throughout the 1930s. Despite the protests of the *Wehrmacht*, the German regular army, members of the *Totenkopfverbände* were declared exempt from compulsory military service, which helped further increase the number of volunteers.²¹ By 1937, the *Totenkopfverbände* had been organized into three regiments, *Totenkopfstandarten*, each responsible for the camps in a different region of Germany. The regiment centered at Dachau, "Oberbayern," numbered almost 1,500 by this time.²² The annexation of Austria in March 1938 and the establishment of a concentration camp at Mauthausen created a fourth regiment.

In 1939, as war seemed increasingly imminent, Eicke requested permission to create a division out of the *Totenkopfverbände*. Himmler eventually relented, but the division was not organized in time to participate in the invasion of Poland in September as a cohesive unit. The

²⁰ Höß, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 269-270.

²¹ Letter to Eicke concerning *Totenkopfverbände* service in the *Wehrmacht*, January 20, 1939, in: Coll. RH 15, Box 423a, Bundesarchiv, Freiburg, Germany.

²² Permanent Exhibition, Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site, May 17, 2014.

individual *Totenkopfstandarte*, however, did participate as quasi-police units that followed behind the front lines. In October, Eicke's wish was fulfilled, and the *Totenkopfverbände* was remodeled into a full-sized division as part of the *Waffen SS*—the newly formed branch of the SS that fought side by side with the rest of the German military. The division stayed close to its roots and chose the name *Totenkopfdivision*. To make *Totenkopfdivision*, Dachau was totally evacuated of its prisoners so that the guards could be replaced and sent off to military training.

From its birth, *Totenkopfdivision* had a unique relationship with the concentration camps. Its soldiers and leader all came from the world of the concentration camp. According to Höß, Eicke's messages "stayed fast and became part of their flesh and blood...they never forgot the instructions that Eicke had given them."²³ Indeed, it was these lessons that would set *Totenkopfdivision* apart on the battlefield and earn its soldiers their elite reputation. *Totenkopfdivision* was first sent into combat in the invasion of France with, as will be discussed later, lethal results for many of the French colonial troops that the division encountered.

The link between *Totenkopfdivision* and Nazi racial ideology is significant, yet has been unacknowledged or overlooked by scholars. Both the military history of *Totenkopfdivision* and the Holocaust have been researched exhaustively, and a wide array of secondary sources exists. There is not, however, a work that goes beyond stating a link between the two and therefore there is no work that provides as focused an examination on the topic as this paper will. This examination will show that Nazi racial ideology significantly hampered *Totenkopfdivision*'s ability to successfully fight the Soviets and complete their military objectives.

The first chapter examines the manpower problems that plagued *Totenkopfdivision* throughout the war. *Totenkopfdivision* took high casualties on the Eastern Front, but the priority

²³ Höß, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 267.

given to Nazi racial thought ensured that tens of thousands of replacements were kept from the front lines to guard the concentration camps. Wounded *Totenkopfdivision* soldiers were transferred to the camps to recover, only to be refused transfers back to *Totenkopfdivision*. Top Nazi officials ignored Eicke's pleas for assistance while others made extreme efforts to ensure that the concentration camp guards stayed where they were.

The second chapter examines the effects of materiel and equipment shortages. *Totenkopfdivision* needed hundreds of tons of ammunition and fuel to function properly, but records reveal that *Totenkopfdivision* was in constant need of more supplies. These supplies were produced by slave labor under the direction of Hitler's Minister of Armaments Albert Speer. Nazi racial ideology, however, meant that the laborers were treated so poorly as to be almost incapable of work, and tens of thousands of laborers perished in the process. Production was interrupted by insistence that industrialists replace skilled Jewish labor with unskilled non-Jewish labor so that the Jews could be deported to the camps. In the camps, working conditions and exterminationist policy kept productivity low, much to the anger of the industrialists. When combined, these factors ensured that *Totenkopfdivision* did not have the equipment it needed on the front lines.

The final chapter is a case study of the Battle of Kursk in July 1943. Kursk provides a clear example of the negative impact of both the manpower and equipment shortages. Even before the battle began, *Totenkopfdivision* lacked the power it needed to break through the miles upon miles of in-depth Soviet defenses that stood between the division and the final objective at Kursk. While *Totenkopfdivision* enjoyed more success than other German units, the shortages it experienced—shortages that were amplified during the battle—meant that *Totenkopfdivision* could

not surmount obstacles that historically had not posed a problem and the division was stopped far short of Kursk.

Together, these chapters show that top Nazi officials knowingly and deliberately deprived *Totenkopfdivision* of the components it needed to wage a successful war against the Soviet Union. Nazi leaders could not overcome their belief in ideology long enough to allow for *Totenkopfdivision* and the rest of the German Army to defeat Germany's enemies. Instead, they engaged in actions that amplified *Totenkopfdivision's* own problems and made them insurmountable.

A wide range of sources was consulted for this study. There is a vast array of secondary sources, all of which add to this examination but do not provide the full picture. These include general histories of the Second World War and the Nazi Party. There are also many memoirs published by former Nazi officials that, although they suffer from bias, are useful for examining Nazi racial ideology as well as the conflicts that existed between the military and top Nazi officials.

There are numerous military histories that provide general context but also document the actions of specific units. Among these are two critical texts that focus solely on the military exploits of *Totenkopfdivision*. The first is Karl Ullrich's text *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*.²⁴ This work offers a unique view in the day-to-day operations of *Totenkopfdivision*. It is a divisional history, complete with maps, photographs, and tables, and makes extensive use of first-hand accounts. Ullrich himself served as an officer with *Totenkopfdivision* for much of the war and he relates his own personal experiences on the Eastern Front in addition to those of others. Yet this

²⁴ Karl Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean: The History of the 3. SS Panzer-Division "Totenkopf"*, trans. Jeffrey McMullen (Winnipeg, Canada: J. J. Fedorowicz Publishing, Inc., 2002).

is precisely the reason that one has to be careful when examining Ullrich's work. It is made abundantly clear that Ullrich was still an unrepentant Nazi at the time of his writing. Many of the incidents and attitudes that will be discussed in this paper are either quickly glossed over or are missing entirely from his text. Ullrich mentions the concentration camps only once, and insists that they were established as a temporary measure to protect members of the political left and to prevent a civil war in Germany.²⁵ He devotes great effort to trying to convince the reader that *Totenkopfdivision* did nothing wrong during the war, and certainly never committed a war crime. To the contrary, he argues that the Soviets and Americans committed the war crimes instead. Further, Ullrich insists that the war was not Germany's fault, and that the United States joined the war to fight for the survival of Bolshevism.²⁶ If one is to believe Ullrich, then one must ignore the mountains of evidence that directly contradict many of Ullrich's statements. Ullrich's work is an important resource for an examination of *Totenkopfdivision*'s combat experiences, but must be viewed with heavy skepticism at all other times.

A far more reliable source, and the definitive work on the history of *Totenkopfdivision*, is undoubtedly Charles Sydnor's *Soldiers of Destruction*.²⁷ Sydnor's work provides an extensive divisional history, just as Ullrich does. Sydnor, however, does not suffer from the same revisionist delusions as Ullrich. Sydnor talks at length about the numerous war crimes committed by *Totenkopfdivision* on the Eastern Front and provides the reader with the archival locations of his sources. He devotes an entire chapter to an examination of the criminality of both the division and the men who served in it, identifying at least six major war criminals and Holocaust

²⁵ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 279-280.

²⁷ Charles Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction, the SS Death's Head Division, 1933-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

perpetrators who served in *Totenkopfdivision* at one time or another. Sydnor does more to examine the link between the division and Nazi racial policy than most, if not all, authors of the other works on this subject. Heinz Höhne's *The Order of the Death's Head*²⁸ and Bernd Wegner's *The Waffen SS*²⁹ provide detailed information on the SS as a whole, describing the atmosphere in which *Totenkopfdivision* was born and operated. Both scholars also discuss the role of the SS in the Holocaust, but stop short of directly linking *Totenkopfdivision* to policies of racial extermination as done in this paper. Additional and more recent information may be found in Adrian Weale's *Army of Evil*.³⁰ Weale's text is also much more recent than the other sources and contains updated and new information.

For information on the Holocaust, this paper draws extensively from Saul Friedländer's two-volume work *Nazi Germany and the Jews*,³¹ specifically the second volume, which focuses on the years 1939-1945. Friedländer covers every aspect of the Holocaust from deportation and the ghettos to forced labor and extermination. Since Friedländer limited his work to the Jewish experience, there are components missing from his work that are crucial to this topic, but these missing components are covered by Richard J. Evans' *The Third Reich at War*.³² Despite its title, Evans only discusses combat when there are racial components involved, such as the treatment of Soviet prisoners during the invasion of the Soviet Union. Instead, Evans focuses on the non-military aspects of life during the Third Reich, discussing at length labor, both slave and willing, and the Jewish experience. More specific information is available in Götz Aly's *Architects of*

²⁸ Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*.

²⁹ Bernd Wegner, *The Waffen SS: Organization, Ideology and Function*, trans. Ronald Webster (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

³⁰ Weale, *Army of Evil*.

³¹ Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007).

³² Richard Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2009).

Annihilation,³³ Ulrich Herbert's *Hitler's Foreign Workers*,³⁴ and Allen Michael's *The Business of Genocide*.³⁵

In addition, archival sources were consulted that outlined the operations of the concentration camps, *Totenkopfdivision*'s experience on the Eastern Front, as well as supplies, movements, and reinforcements. Primary documents about the military aspects of this topic are available at the Bundesarchiv in Freiburg, Germany.³⁶ Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Israel, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. offer documents related to the concentration camps and forced labor.³⁷ These same collections are filled with letters from top Nazi officials in which they discuss, and sometimes argue about, whether the war or the ideology is more important.

Drawing on both primary and secondary sources, this paper will show the unique link that existed between Nazi racial ideology and *Totenkopfdivision*. This link helped to forge the *Totenkopfdivision* into an elite fighting force, but ultimately restricted the ability of *Totenkopfdivision* to function as an effective military unit. The special tie between this division and the concentration camp system is significant because it connects parts of the German military to the Holocaust and contradicts those who have argued that the *Waffen SS* is not responsible for many of Nazi Germany's crimes, especially the Holocaust.

³³ Götz Aly and Susanne Heim, *Architects of Annihilation: Auschwitz and the Logic of Destruction*, trans. A.G. Blunden (London, Great Britain: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002).

³⁴ Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced Labor in Germany under the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³⁵ Michael Allen, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

³⁶ Hereafter abbreviated as "BA"

³⁷ Yad Vashem hereafter abbreviated as "YV"; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum hereafter abbreviated as "USHMM"

Chapter 1

Hitler's Fire Brigade—Manpower and Casualties

*"I had it under my command on frequent occasions later on and think it was probably the best Waffen SS division I ever came across."
-Field Marshal Erich von Manstein³⁸*

At the heart of this paper are the men of *Totenkopfdivision*. Courageous, fierce, and totally devoted to each other and the Nazi cause, the soldiers of *Totenkopfdivision* were some of the best to fight in the Second World War. Yet it was often the case that *Totenkopfdivision* was in desperate need of additional manpower, especially as the war dragged on into 1944 and 1945. The source of *Totenkopfdivision*'s problem in maintaining its necessary complement of men was an aspect of Nazi racial ideology that impacted this division more than any other. Tens of thousands of potential soldiers were deliberately kept from the front lines to serve as guards for the thousands of concentration camps scattered across Hitler's Europe, despite the constant protest of division officers. This problem was amplified by the high level of casualties that *Totenkopfdivision* took during the fighting on the Eastern Front. A belief in the racial superiority of the German soldier over the Soviet pushed the men of *Totenkopfdivision* to unnecessarily expose themselves to danger, and they paid for it with their lives. These shortages, and the refusal to replace them, would drastically affect *Totenkopfdivision*'s ability to successfully fight the Soviets.

³⁸ Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories: The War Memoirs of Hitler's Most Brilliant General*, trans. Anthony Powell (Munich, Germany: Bernard & Graefe Verlag, 1982), 188.

Nazi Germany launched the invasion of the Soviet Union, codenamed Operation Barbarossa, on June 22, 1941. Over 3,000,000 German and other Axis-allied soldiers poured across the German-Soviet border along a 1000-mile front that extended from the Baltic Sea in the North to the Black Sea in the South.³⁹ This colossal force was divided into three Army Groups: Army Group North, Army Group Center, and Army Group South. Hitler tasked Army Group North, under the command of Field Marshall Wilhelm von Leeb, with occupying the Baltic countries and then pushing on to seize the city of Leningrad.⁴⁰ *Totenkopfdivision* was to participate in Army Group North's drive across Northern Russia although, much to Eicke's disdain, they were initially to be held in reserve.

Totenkopfdivision fielded a total strength of 18,754 troops at the onset of Operation Barbarossa.⁴¹ At the beginning of the war in 1939, *Wehrmacht* infantry divisions were considered to be at full strength at 17,000 men. SS divisions were often larger than their *Wehrmacht* counterparts, especially after losses forced the *Wehrmacht* to declare in 1944 that a full strength Infantry Division consisted of only 12,000 men.⁴² For comparison, two other *Waffen* SS divisions, *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler* (LSSAH) and *Reich*, fielded strengths of 10,796 and 19,021 men respectively.⁴³ The 19,000 men of *Totenkopfdivision* were divided up into three Infantry Regiments under the commands of *SS-Standartenführer* Max Simon, *SS-Standartenführer* Karl Hermann, and *SS-Oberführer* Matthias Kleinheisterkamp.⁴⁴ Each of these

³⁹ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 178.

⁴⁰ Matthew Cooper, *The German Army 1933-1945: Its Political and Military Failure* (New York, NY: Stein and Day Publishers, 1978), 268.

⁴¹ George Stein, *The Waffen SS: Hitler's Elite Guard at War 1939-1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 120.

⁴² The U.S. War Department, *Handbook on German Military Forces* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 94.

⁴³ Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 120.

⁴⁴ Kurt Mehner, *Die Waffen SS und Polizei 1939-1945: Führung und Truppe* (Norderstedt, Germany: Militair-Verlag Klaus D. Patzwall, 1995), 180-181.

regiments had a combat strength of 3,250 soldiers, and they were supported by a multitude of company-strength units including artillery, anti-tank, and reconnaissance.⁴⁵ At this time, *Totenkopfdivision* represented one of the more powerful units in the German Army, and one that had been hardened by months of intense combat experience during the French campaign in 1940.

As previously stated, *Totenkopfdivision* was held in reserve at the beginning of Barbarossa and therefore had to sit out the initial assault on Soviet border defenses. However, a combination of the rapidity of the German advance and an increase in Soviet resistance forced von Leeb to commit *Totenkopfdivision* to help the overextended panzer columns commanded by Lieutenant General Erich von Manstein. *Totenkopfdivision* immediately began to take heavy casualties. According to the division's war diary, between July 31, 1941, and December 15, 1941, *Totenkopfdivision* suffered 1,827 dead, 7,380 wounded, and 229 missing, for a total of 9,436 casualties. For 138 days of combat, this amounted to an average of sixty-eight casualties per day and accounted for 50% of the unit's strength at the onset of Operation Barbarossa.⁴⁶ For comparison, between July 6 and July 12, 1941, *Totenkopfdivision* suffered nearly twice the total casualties of two other divisions involved in the same fighting.⁴⁷ The losses were so severe that Eicke was forced to disband the 2nd Infantry Regiment and distribute its surviving members to the other two Infantry Regiments in order to maintain their combat effectiveness.⁴⁸ *Totenkopfdivision* received few replacements and those that *Totenkopfdivision* did receive were resented by Eicke for what he perceived to be their lack of commitment to Nazi ideology.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ U.S. War Department, *Handbook on Germany Military Forces*, 91-92.

⁴⁶ Casualty List from 31 July-18 November 1941, November 18, 1941, in: Coll. RS 3, Box 316, BA; Casualty List from 19 November -15 December 1941, December 15, 1941, in: Coll. RS 3, Box 316, BA.

⁴⁷ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 168.

⁴⁸ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 90.

⁴⁹ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 206.

Eicke was also forced to draw his replacements from the general pool of SS recruits rather than from the concentration camp guards as a consequence of a prolonged struggle between Eicke and the SS Leadership Main Office (SS-FHA) over control of the *Totenkopfverbände*.⁵⁰

Losses for *Totenkopfdivision* reached almost catastrophic proportions during the winter of 1941 after a massive Soviet counteroffensive encircled much of the division and other German units around the city of Demyansk. After four months of fending off relentless Soviet attacks, *Totenkopfdivision* had suffered a further 6,674 casualties and had received only 5,000 replacements.⁵¹ The casualties continued to mount after Hitler refused to relieve *Totenkopfdivision* and instead demanded that it stay to defend a supply corridor that had been opened to the soldiers trapped in the Demyansk Pocket. Himmler also refused to do much to help *Totenkopfdivision*, supplying only 3,000 ill-trained reservists and withholding vehicles and heavy weapons.⁵² By August, *Totenkopfdivision* had no way to replace casualties and its two Infantry Regiments possessed a combined strength of less than 1,000 men.⁵³ When *Totenkopfdivision* was finally pulled off the line in October 1942, Himmler simply ordered the division to be rebuilt from scratch, rather than replace all the losses.

The rebuilt *Totenkopfdivision* was brought back to full strength and designated as a *Panzergranadier* Division, meaning that it was now equipped with dozens of tanks, including the brand new *Panzerkampfwagen* VI “Tiger” tanks. *Totenkopfdivision* avoided serious casualties during the German counteroffensive to retake the city of Kharkov in March 1943, yet was still well below full-strength for the German summer offensive.⁵⁴ The German offensive failed,

⁵⁰ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 133.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 235.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 249-251.

⁵⁴ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 193.

Totenkopfdivision took heavy casualties, and from that point was never again at full strength.⁵⁵ *Totenkopfdivision* spent the remainder of the war being rushed from crisis to crisis as one of the German Army's so-called fire-brigades, units tasked with preventing Soviet offensives from turning into German catastrophes. The situation grew so desperate in February 1944 that *Totenkopfdivision* was loaned replacements that were meant for another SS division. After two weeks of service, the other SS division, 5. SS Panzer-Division "Wiking," requested that its replacements be returned. *Totenkopfdivision*, backed by the commander of their Army Group, refused. Only after a series of heated meetings were the men released.⁵⁶ In September, *Totenkopfdivision* was instrumental in stopping the Soviet drive on Warsaw, but at great cost. It was during this time that Hitler remarked to the commander of the German 9th Army that he wished he had more soldiers to give to *Totenkopfdivision* because "whenever one sent them reinforcements [they] always counterattacked successfully."⁵⁷

Those reinforcements that Hitler wished he could give to *Totenkopfdivision* were not as difficult to locate as he made it seem. Rudolf Höß served as the commandant of Auschwitz from May 1, 1940, to December 1, 1943, and then again for much of 1944 to supervise the extermination of hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews. Höß swore in a statement given after the war that approximately 3,500 *Waffen* SS members served at Auschwitz either as guards or other camp personnel at the time of Höß' departure from Auschwitz in December 1943.⁵⁸ He added that "out of those who served originally at the camp, approximately 2500 *Waffen* SS were

⁵⁵ Christopher Mann, *SS-Totenkopf: The History of the 'Death's Head' Division 1940-1945* (London, United Kingdom: Amber Books, 2001), 129.

⁵⁶ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 235.

⁵⁷ Military Conference, September 28, 1944. Quoted in: David Glantz, *Hitler and His Generals: Military Conferences 1942-1945* (New York, NY: Enigma Books, 2003), 511.

⁵⁸ Deposition of Rudolf Höß, March 20, 1946, Pohl Trial, International Military Tribunal Vol. XXXV, 492.

posted to field units and replaced by others, so that during my term of service all told 6000 men *Waffen-SS* served at one time or another at Auschwitz.”⁵⁹ In a similar deposition, Anton Kaindl, the commandant of Sachsenhausen from August 22, 1942, until the end of the war, stated that every guard, regardless of the concentration camp in which he was serving, was specifically a member of the *Waffen SS*, not merely an SS member.⁶⁰ The commandant of Ravensbrück, Fritz Suhren, independently confirmed Kaindl’s statements in his own deposition.⁶¹ The depositions are supported by an order issued by Himmler on April 22, 1941 in which Himmler detailed which SS units were to be considered part of the *Waffen SS*. From this point forward, as stated by Höhne, “the concentration camp guards ranked as members of the *Waffen-SS*. They carried the same pay-books, they wore the same uniform as the true *Waffen-SS*...all transfers between concentration camps now had to pass via *Waffen-SS* headquarters.”⁶²

Significantly, Höß’ statement confirms that the *Totenkopfverbände* enjoyed a special relationship with *Totenkopfdivision* and were occasionally rotated back and forth with troops on the front lines. This is supported by the sworn testimony of Kaindl and Suhren that all concentration camp guards and staff were members of the *Waffen SS*. This meant that men assigned to the concentration camps as guards and staff were not being pulled from a different SS organization such as the *Allgemeine SS*, which could potentially have members unfit for military service. Rather, the *Totenkopfverbände* comprised men who had met the rigorous physical standards and requirements imposed by Himmler for members of the *Waffen SS* and were therefore capable of serving at the front as fully functioning soldiers. The depositions

⁵⁹ Höß, IMT Vol. XXXV, 492.

⁶⁰ Deposition of Anton Kaindl, March 8, 1946, Pohl Trial, IMT Vol. XXXV, 483.

⁶¹ Deposition of Fritz Suhren, March 8, 1946, Pohl Trial, IMT Vol. XXXV, 485-486

⁶² Höhne, *The Order of the Death’s Head*, 464.

confirm that, contrary to popular belief, the *Totenkopfverbände* did not exist as an independent and separate entity from the *Waffen SS*. It refutes the argument made by Nazi apologists, such as Karl Ullrich, that the *Waffen SS* and the *Totenkopfverbände* were distinct, and that the *Waffen SS* were not involved with the concentration camps and thus not complicit.

The depositions also draw attention to the sheer number of men—as much as tens of thousands—kept away from the front to serve in the *Totenkopfverbände*. For example, in addition to the 2,500 men in service at Auschwitz at any one time, Kaindl admitted that Sachsenhausen employed roughly 200 guards and 3,000 other personnel while Suhren stated that the guards at Ravensbrück also numbered around 200.⁶³ Archival records indicate that the Senior Staff, including Officers and NCOs, at Mauthausen numbered around 350 men.⁶⁴ This number does not include any guard below the rank of *Sturmmann*, of which there were undoubtedly many. Each of these three camps required more than a full company of men to serve as guards, and therefore at any one time each kept more than a full company of replacements from the front lines where they were so desperately needed. Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen each kept the equivalent of a full SS *Panzergrenadier* regiment worth of guards out of action.⁶⁵ While the individual camps may not have kept a significant number of men from the front, the numbers add up when all the concentration camps are combined.

According to the U.S. War Department's *Handbook on Germany Military Forces*, created in 1945 for US Army Chief of Staff George Marshall, full-strength for an SS Panzer Division like *Totenkopfdivision* was 17,262 men in 1944.⁶⁶ This included the division headquarters and all

⁶³ Deposition of Anton Kaindl, IMT Vol. XXXV, 483; Deposition of Fritz Suhren, IMT Vol. XXXV, 486.

⁶⁴ List of Senior Staff at Mauthausen, Unknown Date, in: Coll. M.38, File 16533, YV.

⁶⁵ U.S. War Department, *Handbook on German Military Forces*, 106.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

its supporting regiments, including the crews for the division's 359 armored vehicles. Yet in 1945, as *Totenkopfdivision* was scrambling to stop the Soviet offensives around Budapest and Vienna, 35,000 able-bodied men were kept from the front line as members of the *Totenkopfverbände*.⁶⁷ The equivalent of two full-strength SS Panzer Divisions were serving as guards, even as the Reich collapsed around them. Certainly 35,000 troops would have been of more use to Nazi Germany serving as an additional two divisions and reinforcing the ones that already existed rather than guarding camps that were rapidly being shut down, evacuated, and liberated.

Those who were stationed at the concentration camps found it difficult to apply for a transfer to a fighting unit on the front lines. *SS-Blockführer* Hans Stark, who worked at Auschwitz, complained in his post-war statement that his attempts to transfer to the front were rejected:

I had been a member of the SS for a long time and my whole outlook was colored by the training I had received during this period. I certainly felt that these orders were an injustice [orders to execute certain prisoners at Auschwitz as requested by the local Gestapo or the RSHA] and also tried repeatedly to volunteer for service at the front; however, I was only able to leave Auschwitz when my request to continue my studies was approved.⁶⁸

SS-Blockführer Stark had joined *Totenkopfstandarte* 'Brandenburg' in 1937 and served at Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, and Dachau before being transferred to Auschwitz in June 1941. There he was responsible for registering new inmates and was also part of team that carried out the execution of certain prisoners.⁶⁹ While useful, he was not a vital part of the Auschwitz system and could easily have been replaced. Indeed, he must have been replaced when he was

⁶⁷ Testimony of Rudolf Höß, April 15, 1946, Pohl Trial, IMT Vol. XI, 409.

⁶⁸ Statement of Hans Stark, April 23, 1959. Quoted in: Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess, ed., *The Good Old Days: The Holocaust as Seen by its Perpetrators and Bystanders* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1991), 301.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

put on leave so that he could finish his studies, yet his unessential duties at Auschwitz were deemed to be more important than front-line service.

On August 17, 1943, *SS-Obergruppenführer* Oswald Pohl visited Auschwitz. Pohl was a high-ranking official in the SS and, after 1942, was in charge of the SS Economy and Administration Head Office (SS-WVHA). As head of this office, Pohl was directly responsible for the administration of the concentration camps.⁷⁰ It was Pohl who had created the Inspectorate of the Concentration Camps, the position first given to Eicke in 1935. Pohl will feature prominently in the next chapter, but his visit to Auschwitz contributes directly to the discussion here. After finishing his tour of the camp, Pohl proclaimed to the guards assembled before him that they would no longer have to worry about being sent to the front lines. They were to be guards at Auschwitz and were henceforth totally exempt from military service.⁷¹ It is extremely difficult to interpret Pohl's statements as anything other than a blatant declaration of Nazi priorities. As stated by Höß, there were thousands of men at Auschwitz, all of whom were exempted from future military service by a high-ranking Nazi official who answered directly to Himmler. While this research did not uncover similar statements concerning any other camps, it is reasonable to assume that Auschwitz was not alone in its apparent prioritization of its demands over the needs of the troops at the front. At a time when manpower was so desperately needed to stop the Soviet counteroffensives after the Battle of Kursk, thousands had just been told that they were staying put.

The priority given to racial ideology, operationalized in the concentration camps, had an even more direct impact on *Totenkopfdivision* and threatened the division's well-being on more

⁷⁰ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 265.

⁷¹ Report on visit of Oswald Pohl to Auschwitz, August 17, 1943, in: RG-11.001M.0020.00000890-893, USHMM.

than one occasion. A Soviet mine seriously wounded Eicke in early July 1941 and he was sent to the rear to recover. Eicke left the commander of the 3rd Infantry Regiment, *SS-Oberführer* Matthias Kleinheisterkamp, to lead the division in his absence, although Kleinheisterkamp was almost immediately replaced on Himmler's orders by *SS-Brigadeführer* Georg Keppler.⁷² On September 21, 1941, Eicke had recovered enough to resume command of *Totenkopfdivision*. He returned to find the division in a pitiful state of affairs, lacking vital equipment and short 2,800 replacements, more than a regiment's worth of men and around 10% of original fighting strength.⁷³ He immediately filed a report with *SS-Gruppenführer* Karl Wolff, Himmler's adjutant, demanding that *Totenkopfdivision* be relieved from the front and given time to rest.⁷⁴ Of particular interest in this letter is Eicke's demand to *SS-Brigadeführer* Hans Jüttner. Jüttner was the Chief of the SS-FHA, Eicke's immediate superior when Eicke was Inspectorate of the Concentration Camps, and a man with whom Eicke had fought on numerous occasions as Jüttner tried to break Eicke's monopoly on the use of the *Totenkopfverbände* as a source of replacements.⁷⁵ Only a month earlier, Jüttner had dissolved the reserve battalions that Eicke had established exclusively for *Totenkopfdivision* and transferred all of their personnel and equipment to the SS-FHA.⁷⁶

In his letter to Wolff, Eicke demanded that Jüttner release *Totenkopfdivision* NCOs who, while home on leave, had been reassigned to other SS agencies, including the *Totenkopfverbände*, and forbidden from returning to the front lines. *Totenkopfdivision* desperately needed these men if it was to continue as a functioning fighting unit. To make

⁷² Mann, *SS-Totenkopf*, 93.

⁷³ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 187.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

matters worse, Eicke's rivals had taken advantage of his absence to reduce both the quantity and quality of the troops and equipment that *Totenkopfdivision* was receiving. Before the situation could be remedied, the Soviets launched a major counteroffensive on September 23, 1941. The focal point of attack was the sector of line held by *Totenkopfdivision*, targeted after Soviet scouts discovered a weak point in the German line near Lushno. Though *Totenkopfdivision* survived this offensive, whole units were wiped out and the fighting capability of the division dropped even further. For example, the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Infantry Regiment suffered seventy-two dead, 132 wounded, and six missing during the Lushno offensive, a rate higher than losses suffered during the offensive at Kursk two years later.⁷⁷

While *Totenkopfdivision* was fighting for survival in the Demyansk Pocket throughout 1942, Simon complained in a letter to Eicke that the SS-FHA kept assigning wounded *Totenkopfdivision* soldiers to serve as guards in the concentration camps until they had recovered. Once they had recovered, however, the camp commandants refused to release them back to *Totenkopfdivision*.⁷⁸ The problem was never resolved, despite attempts by Eicke to persuade Hitler to personally intervene. While many men in the *Totenkopfverbände* were transferred to rebuild *Totenkopfdivision* after Demyansk, the sheer number of members of the *Totenkopfverbände* who were kept from *Totenkopfdivision* attests to the prioritization of Nazi racial ideology over manpower needs.

It is at this point that the extent to which *Totenkopfdivision* soldiers believed in Nazi racial ideology becomes pertinent. It is well documented that Eicke was an ardent believer in Nazism and did everything in his power to instill the same beliefs in his men. He considered the

⁷⁷ Battle Report: Defensive Battles at Lushno and Ilowka from 24-27 September 1941, October 9, 1941, in: Coll. RS 3, Box 316, BA.

⁷⁸ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 245.

Jews to be the most important enemy of Nazi Germany, followed by the freemasons and Bolsheviks. Eicke truly believed that the prisoners in the concentration camps were enemies of the state and as such they deserved to be there and punished severely for even the slightest sign of resistance. The prisoners were sub-humans. This ideology was reflected in his training program. Men of the *Totenkopfverbände* received not only of physical training, but political training as well, personally formulated and directed by Eicke.

Rudolf Höß began his career in the *Totenkopfverbände* in 1934 as a guard at Dachau. His memoirs provide a detailed account of life as a guard at Dachau and the training that Eicke insisted all of his men undergo. Höß recounted:

Eicke's instructions from first to last were: behind the wire lurks the enemy, watching everything you do so that he can use your weaknesses for his own advantage. Do not let yourselves be taken in, but show the enemy your teeth. Anyone who displays the slightest sympathy with these enemies of the state must vanish from our ranks. My SS men must be tough and ready for all eventualities and there is no room among us for weaklings.⁷⁹

There was no reprieve from lessons of this nature. Three out of every four weeks were devoted to training, and Eicke demanded that education officers in each *Totenkopfverbände* battalion give daily political lessons.⁸⁰ The fourth week was to be spent serving as a concentration camp guard so as to confirm the lessons.

Eicke reportedly found the original SS indoctrination manuals, already full of Nazi racial propaganda, to be insufficient for his purposes. He created his own manual, based on his own personal views.⁸¹ He wrote a penal code that gave detailed instructions for responses to prisoner infractions. Corporal punishment was required so as to acclimate Eicke's men to violence and increase their negative view of the enemies of Nazi Germany. All guards were required to attend

⁷⁹ Höß, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 266.

⁸⁰ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 28.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

the public beatings of prisoners, and Eicke rotated the men responsible for carrying out the punishment so that each man would have a turn.⁸² By the beginning of the war, Eicke's penal code was standard practice in all concentration camps. The effect of Eicke's political training and these beatings soon became apparent in the zeal with which members of the *Totenkopfverbände* carried out the beatings and the harshness with which they treated the men behind the wire.

Such attitudes also became immediately apparent on the battlefield with the invasion of Poland in September 1939. By this point, the original members of the *Totenkopfverbände* had been called up and begun to operate as the military formation that would eventually become *Totenkopfdivision*. These units did not participate in the first wave of the invasion, and were instead used in a manner similar to that of the *Einsatzgruppen* during Operation Barbarossa. Their sole responsibility during the invasion of Poland was to eliminate Polish intellectuals and Jews, and to cleanse the areas of undesirable persons to pave the way for settlement by ethnic Germans. *Totenkopfstandarte* "Brandenburg" carried out this task to such a vigorous extent that *Wehrmacht* officers who witnessed some of the atrocities, such as the execution of hundreds of Jews and the destruction of all Jewish shops and the synagogue in the town of Włocławek, complained about their behavior.⁸³ Their complaints reached the highest level of the *Wehrmacht*, but the official responses never amounted to more than a brief conversation between Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch, commander in chief of the *Wehrmacht*, and Himmler.⁸⁴

⁸² Höß, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 266.

⁸³ Correspondence between Eicke and officers in 2. SS-*Totenkopfstandarte* 'Brandenburg', October 10, 1939-October 25, 1939, in: Reel 8, Box 8, Folder 34, USHMM.

⁸⁴ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 43.

The impact of Eicke's indoctrination also manifested itself during the invasion of France in 1940. On June 19, *Totenkopfdivision* soldiers killed every Moroccan soldier that they encountered during a skirmish in a French village, killing thirty by the end of the day. Two days later, the 3rd Battalion of the 1st Infantry Regiment filed a report about an engagement they had fought earlier in the day in which twenty-four French soldiers were taken prisoner while thirty-one black soldiers were "put out of action." The day ended with "forty-four dead Negroes."⁸⁵

Totenkopfdivision's actions in Poland and France were only a prelude to what was to come in the Soviet Union. As Slavs, the Russians were perceived to be as inferior racially as the Poles. Nazi hatred of Communism and Nazi racial ideology that linked Judaism and Bolshevism meant that to the members of *Totenkopfdivision*, the Soviet soldier was just as dangerous as the prisoners that they had guarded in the concentration camps. Soviet Political Commissars posed an even bigger threat. The perception of the Russians as sub-human was only reinforced by the actions at the highest levels of the *Wehrmacht* and the Nazi Government in the immediate run-up to Operation Barbarossa. Just before Operation Barbarossa began, Hitler issued the infamous Commissar Order, instructing all German soldiers that Soviet Political Commissars were to be shot upon capture:

Political Commissars have initiated barbaric, Asiatic methods of warfare. Consequently they will be dealt with immediately and with maximum severity. As a matter of principle they will be shot at once whether captured during operations or otherwise showing resistance.⁸⁶

General Hoepner, leader of the 4th Panzer Group, which fought alongside *Totenkopfdivision* in Army Group North, issued marching orders to his troops in May:

⁸⁵ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 117.

⁸⁶ The Commissar Decree, June 6, 1941. Quoted in: Roderick Stackelberg and Sally Winkle, ed., *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 278.

The war against Russia is a fundamental part of the German people's struggle for existence. It is the old struggle of the Germans against the Slavs, the defense of European culture against the Muscovite, Asiatic deluge, the defense against Jewish Bolshevism. This struggle must aim to smash the Russia of today into rubble, and as a consequence it must be carried out with unprecedented harshness.⁸⁷

Similarly, on September 12, 1941, Field Marshall Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of the Supreme Command of the *Wehrmacht* (OKW), issued an order regarding the treatment of Jews and Communists. The order stated in part that "The struggle against Bolshevism demands ruthless and energetic actions against the Jews, the principal carrier of Bolshevism."⁸⁸

Eicke and the men of *Totenkopfdivision* took such orders seriously and carried them out with merciless efficiency. *SS-Standartenführer*'s Simon's 1st Infantry Regiment, the same unit that had murdered a number of black soldiers in France, could not believe that the Soviet soldiers they encountered wanted to keep fighting. Rather than accepting that Soviets were capable of fighting just as well as Germans, they concluded that Soviet soldiers who offered resistance long after they had been bypassed by the first wave of the German attackers were being commanded by fanatical Commissars and therefore they all must be hunted down and killed without mercy.⁸⁹ As such, hundreds of Soviet stragglers were likely shot when they attempted to surrender. There are no direct reports of such events, but a considerable amount of circumstantial evidence supports this claim. Reports from *Totenkopfdivision* officers during the first few days of Operation Barbarossa describe Soviet soldiers as "fanatical, in-human creatures who employed the vilest tricks to kill German soldiers."⁹⁰ Simon sent a report to Eicke in early July detailing an

⁸⁷ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 176.

⁸⁸ Order Concerning Jews in the Occupied Eastern Territories, September 12, 1941, in: Coll. RL 24, Box 9, BA.

⁸⁹ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 160.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

action in which over 200 Soviet soldiers were killed in a skirmish, many of whom attempted to surrender.⁹¹ One soldier recalled that,

Friedrichs...had stopped two Red Army men and waved them over, demanding that they surrender...one of the two dropped to the ground and tossed a hand grenade at Friedrichs...for all of us there was a lesson not to underestimate the degree of fanaticism with which the Russians appeared willing to carry on the fight.⁹²

Ullrich himself was careful not to say anything directly about Russian racial inferiority, but his writing is filled with contempt for Bolshevism, and he spends a considerable amount of time discussing the racial composition of the Soviet soldiers that *Totenkopfdivision* fought. He quotes soldiers who refer to the Russians as “Mongols” on more than one occasion and states that the Russian civilians often commented that they were better off under German control.

Over the course of the next four years, *Totenkopfdivision* earned a reputation for brutality. The fanaticism of its soldiers on the battlefield drew acclaim from numerous high-ranking *Wehrmacht* generals, including one of Germany’s greatest, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein. Manstein commended *Totenkopfdivision*’s performance on the battlefield, stating that “The division always showed great dash in the assault and was steadfast in defense [*sic*]. I had it under my command on frequent occasions later on [after 1941] and think it was probably the best *Waffen* SS division I ever came across.”⁹³ Manstein also noticed *Totenkopfdivision*’s high casualty rate, however, and he expressed concern about the division’s continued combat effectiveness. In his postwar memoirs, *Lost Victories*, Manstein commented on *Totenkopfdivision*’s performance during Operation Barbarossa, expressing his opinion that:

The division suffered excessive losses because its troops did not learn until they got into action what army units had mastered long ago. Their losses and lack of experience led them in turn to miss favorable [*sic*] opportunities, and again this caused unnecessary

⁹¹ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 160.

⁹² Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 74.

⁹³ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 188.

actions to be fought...The upshot of all this was that I repeatedly had to come to the division's assistance, without even then being able to prevent a sharp rise in casualties.⁹⁴

He added that:

...there is not the least doubt that it was an inexcusable mistake to set them [the *Waffen SS*] up as a separate military organization. Hand-picked replacements who could have filled the posts of N.C.O.s in the army were expended on a quite inadmissible scale in the *Waffen SS*, which in general paid a toll of blood incommensurate with its actual gains.⁹⁵

To Manstein, while the political training contributed to *Totenkopfdivision's* fighting prowess, in the long run it did more harm than good. The political training was no substitute for military training and those shortcomings were noticeable. In addition to this, Eicke's insistence on rigorous physical and racial standards above even those demanded normally by the *Waffen SS* severely limited the potential pool of replacements. As Manstein argued, this problem was compounded by the refusal of the *Waffen SS* to draw suitable replacements from *Wehrmacht* recruits and the inability of the *Wehrmacht* to use capable *Waffen SS* soldiers as replacements.

Another way in which fanaticism had a definitive and noticeable impact on *Totenkopfdivision* was in how they treated their Soviet counterparts. As previously mentioned, the soldiers of *Totenkopfdivision* had no respect for the fighting abilities of the Soviet soldier and were unpleasantly surprised when they encountered resistance at the onset of Operation Barbarossa. A sense of extreme racial superiority, combined with a perception that the Soviet Army was always on the verge of collapse, led *Totenkopfdivision* soldiers to take unnecessary risks and needlessly expose themselves to danger. Ullrich commented that in mid-1943:

The morale in the Red Army was also extremely poor according to statements by many reliable people....the majority no longer believed a victory for the Red Army was possible. Nearly all of the Red Army soldiers stated that they were not sure what they were fighting for; they were unhappy with the Bolsheviks.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 188.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 192.

Totenkopfdivision soldiers paid a high price for such attitudes. For example, in July 1941, a *Totenkopfdivision* officer committed suicide rather than risk being captured by the Soviets even though his comrades were on their way.⁹⁷ During the massive Soviet counter-offensive in September 1941, *SS-Sturmmann* Fritz Christen found himself alone after the rest of his unit had been killed. Rather than retreat, he stayed with his anti-tank gun and continued to fight. When relief arrived three days later, he was discovered surrounded by the bodies of at least 100 Soviet soldiers and had personally destroyed 13 Soviet tanks.⁹⁸ It is easy to argue that Christen's survival was a unique occurrence, and while it helped stop the Soviet offensive, Christen could have easily been killed with the rest of his unit. Officers and NCOs, especially experienced ones, are harder to replace than common foot soldiers. That said, it is still difficult to replace experienced foot soldiers, a fact that suggests that *Totenkopfdivision's* unrelenting fanaticism on the battlefield did more harm than good. Eicke himself fell victim to such beliefs as he was killed in February 1943 by Soviet anti-aircraft fire while attempting to lead from the front.

Totenkopfdivision's fanatical assaults, stubborn defense, and lust for killing Soviets impressed many top Nazis, including Hitler, and cemented its reputation as one of the top formations in the German Army. But this elite status came at a high price. Because of *Totenkopfdivision's* reputation, both Hitler and Himmler refused to withdraw the unit from the Demyansk Pocket in 1942, even after repeated appeals from both Eicke and Simon.⁹⁹ Both Hitler and Himmler were convinced that withdrawing *Totenkopfdivision* would result in the collapse of a large part of the German front in Northern Russia. For seven months *Totenkopfdivision* was

⁹⁷ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 166.

⁹⁸ Mann, *SS-Totenkopf*, 98.

⁹⁹ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 232.

ordered to help hold open the supply corridor to Demyansk against an ever strengthening Soviet foe, yet no reinforcements were provided. When *Totenkopfdivision* was finally relieved, it possessed the fighting strength of only a single infantry battalion and had survived only through the impressment of every SS soldier that Simon could find around Demyansk, including cooks, medical orderlies, and staff officials.¹⁰⁰

It is important to note that *Totenkopfdivision*'s brutality had ramifications far beyond the fighting on the Eastern Front. Officers who had served with *Totenkopfdivision* were responsible for some of the most notorious German war crimes on the Western Front. Heinz Lammerding spent four years serving as an officer in *Totenkopfdivision* before he was given command of the 2. SS Panzer Division "*Das Reich*." In June 1944, Lammerding personally sanctioned and ordered the public hanging of French civilians in Tulle as well as the destruction of the village of Oradour-sur-Glane and the murder of its inhabitants. *SS-Gruppenführer* Hermann Priess was directly involved with the execution of over 80 American prisoners of war during the Ardennes Offensive in December 1944, known as the Malmedy Massacre. Simon ordered multiple reprisal killings against Italian civilians during his command of the 16. *SS Panzergrenadier* Division.¹⁰¹ *Totenkopfdivision* was also home, albeit temporarily, to Jürgen Stroop, the man responsible for ruthlessly putting down the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt in 1943. While these atrocities may not have been racially motivated, they are a testament to the brutality with which members of *Totenkopfdivision* fought, and demonstrate that their experiences with the division continued to shape their conduct long after they had left.

¹⁰⁰ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 248-249.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 320-321.

It is possible at this point to make an evaluation of the impact of Nazi racial ideology and the Holocaust on *Totenkopfdivision*, at least with respect to manpower. The evidence presented here suggests that the Holocaust was deemed to be far more important than *Totenkopfdivision*'s ability to successfully wage war against the Soviets. Both the testimonies of the camp commandants and the documentation on the number of camp guards serving in this capacity provide a clear idea of the large number of men (again, as many as 35,000) that were kept from fighting at the front. Eicke and Simon complained directly on multiple occasions that *Totenkopfdivision*'s fighting capabilities were being hampered by the concentration camp system. Once sent to camps to recover from wounds, it proved extremely difficult to get *Totenkopfdivision* soldiers reassigned to the front lines. Guards who requested transfers to the front often found their requests rejected and were forced to remain at the camp. Others were told that their work at the camps was more important, and they were needed much more as guards than as soldiers. The prioritization of the Holocaust by leading officials over the needs of *Totenkopfdivision* had a negative impact over an extended period, and manifested itself at multiple crucial moments, such as Demyansk, when *Totenkopfdivision* simply did not have the manpower it needed to be able to carry on as an effective fighting force and complete its assigned objectives.

Nazi racial ideology also had a direct impact on the number of casualties that *Totenkopfdivision* suffered. Belief in the racial inferiority of the Russian caused *Totenkopfdivision* soldiers to needlessly expose themselves to danger and thereby suffer heavy casualties for only minimal gains. Others opted to kill themselves rather than risk capture by the Soviets. The men of *Totenkopfdivision* gave no quarter and asked for none. These factors, paired with incomplete military training because of Eicke's insistence on political training, produced

casualties that proved extremely difficult to replace both in manpower and experience, especially among officers and NCOs. *Totenkopfdivision*'s fanatical performance on the battlefield impressed its superiors. While such behavior cemented its reputation as one of the finest formations in the German Army, its effect was to put *Totenkopfdivision* in impossible situations. The division was expected to deliver miracles, and at great cost. In short, Nazi racial ideology and the Holocaust increased *Totenkopfdivision*'s losses, and then prevented the division from making up those losses. As such, *Totenkopfdivision*'s performance on the battlefield was severely hampered, contributing to Germany's defeat.

Chapter 2

The Tools of War: Armaments and Equipment

“The removal of workers without timely replacement damages the needs of the front and extends the loading time of the railway wagons, and is therefore counterproductive to the war.”
-German Army Chief Quartermaster¹⁰²

In any war, having the proper and necessary equipment is just as important as having the men to use it. Without materiel such as ammunition, food, and weapons, it becomes almost impossible to fight a war, much less a successful one. Lack of proper equipment plagued *Totenkopfdivision* from its formation in 1939, and the problems only grew worse as the war progressed. While the shortages were initially manageable, by the end of the war they had become the deciding factor in more than one defeat. Significantly, the source of German materiel shortages primarily lay not in problems in transportation or organization, but rather in Nazi racial ideology and the unwavering commitment of Nazi decision-makers to their exterminationist policy. As will be explored in this chapter, the production of vital war materiel was severely hampered by the racial attitudes of many in the Nazi government. Top Nazi officials demanded that armaments producers use unskilled labor because the majority of skilled laborers were Jewish. Even in cases where Jews were used as slave labor, exterminations coupled with miserable working conditions both in the concentration camps where much of the labor was conducted and the factories themselves drastically reduced the workers' capabilities as well as

¹⁰² Telex by the Army Chief Quartermaster concerning the deportation of Jewish laborers from Radom, August 5, 1942, in: Coll. O.53, File 130, YV.

the size of the labor pool. In the end, this practice would prove to be part of the reason for *Totenkopfdivision's* failure in the East.

At the outset of the war, Eicke was forced to locate supplies for his division largely on his own. Eicke worked hard to scavenge whatever equipment he could, constantly badgering both the Army and the SS for more vehicles and weapons, and more than once resorting to theft from other *Wehrmacht* units. Even then, his efforts often fell short. Much needed heavy artillery, for instance, was only provided a matter of weeks before the invasion of France.¹⁰³ Losses suffered during the French campaign were illegally replaced with plundered French equipment. Eicke also used his influence within the concentration camp system to procure large numbers of vehicles and other equipment, and then store them in the camps to use as a reserve exclusively for *Totenkopfdivision*.¹⁰⁴ This reserve was quickly taken away by Himmler, who wished to exert more authority over the *Waffen SS* and to use Eicke's supplies for the entire *Waffen SS*.¹⁰⁵ Eicke was allowed to maintain sole dominion over the supplies from Buchenwald concentration camp, which provided truck parts, although this did not stop him from attempting to steal supplies from other camps; Eicke's most prolific supply procurer was arrested and court-martialed in October 1940 trying to smuggle equipment out of Dachau.¹⁰⁶ Eicke's actions were not unusual. For example, Buchenwald was notorious for being run by a corrupt administration. The camp's first commandant, *SS-Standartenführer* Karl Koch, was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943 and charged with forgery, embezzlement, mismanagement, and insubordination.¹⁰⁷ Eicke's efforts to fully equip *Totenkopfdivision* continued into 1941 as the *Wehrmacht* prepared for Operation

¹⁰³ Mann, *SS-Totenkopf*, 73-74.

¹⁰⁴ Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, 462.

¹⁰⁵ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 120-121.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁰⁷ Weale, *Army of Evil*, 106-107.

Barbarossa. As the invasion of the Soviet Union progressed and *Totenkopfdivision*'s equipment suffered the usual wear and tear of constant combat, Eicke's pleas for assistance increased.

Despite their constant presence, equipment shortages did not have an extremely noticeable impact on *Totenkopfdivision*'s performance in the field until the summer of 1943. Beginning in August, Karl Ullrich began to complain incessantly of a lack of ammunition. He mentioned the problem at almost every opportunity, commenting on August 15 that "the ammunition situation was poor, especially for the light field howitzers, mortars, and the 10-cm cannon battery. Rifle grenades were in short supply as well."¹⁰⁸ On August 18, he noted that "there was a shortage of heavy infantry ammunition....the ammunition shortage was critical, especially for mortars, light infantry guns and light field howitzers."¹⁰⁹ By the end of September, Ullrich added tank spare parts and fuel, which heavily restricted vehicle movement, to the growing list of shortages.¹¹⁰ Ullrich believed that it was these shortages that forced

Totenkopfdivision to retreat on several occasions in the wake of fierce Soviet attacks:

The battered *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division 'Totenkopf'* was in an exceptionally difficult situation; it was without ammunition or air cover. So it happened on 12 September 1943 that *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Regiment 3 'Theodor Eicke'*...was unable to hold the line in all places....the ammunition shortage forced further withdrawals.¹¹¹

Relief for the desperate and battered division did not come, however, and *Totenkopfdivision* was rushed from crisis to crisis.

The onset of 1944 offered no respite and brought only more complaints from Ullrich. He made sure to document precisely how poor the equipment and supply situation was, down to the exact number of weapons missing. He wrote:

¹⁰⁸ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 223.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

At the time the division had 7 *Sturmgeschütze* [assault guns], 5 *Panzer III*'s, 6 *Panzer IV*'s and 2 *Tigers* available. *SS-Panzer-Regiment 'Totenkopf'* had a lot of crews without tanks.

The supply of weapons and equipment at the time did not appear very rosy: the following items were short: 514 light machine guns; 4 heavy machine guns; 7 medium mortars; 9 light infantry guns; 1 light field howitzer; 1 self-propelled howitzer; 14 2-cm *Flak*; 1 8.8cm *Flak*; 14 heavy *Pak*, 41 self-propelled heavy *Pak*.¹¹²

As for the men themselves, after heavy fighting in March: “uniforms were torn; shoes and socks were short. The felt boots were no longer serviceable. Many of the men wore Russian rubber boots.”¹¹³ The fuel shortages grew worse and prevented *Totenkopfdivision* from engaging in multiple actions. The fuel shortage was finally remedied in April, but other shortages were not addressed before June.

As quickly as they were replaced, the equipment and ammunition were used up in the fighting around Warsaw. By the end of August, Ullrich again commented that *Totenkopfdivision*'s ability to successfully defend its position was in question because of a lack of ammunition and fuel. Ullrich was not the only *Totenkopfdivision* officer to notice the shortages. Others, especially in the divisional artillery, such as *SS-Sturmbannführer* Fritz Messerle and *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Erich Mohr often mentioned that their respective units' fighting abilities were greatly hampered by a lack of ammunition.¹¹⁴ These problems persisted until the division surrendered to the Americans in May 1945.

Keeping a division like *Totenkopfdivision* fully supplied was no easy task. *Totenkopfdivision*'s sister unit, *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler* (LSSAH), fired off over 4,000 tons of munitions between June 22, 1941 and June 15, 1942. This included over 7,500,000 machine-

¹¹² Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 233.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 259-263.

gun rounds, almost 2,000,000 rifle rounds, and tens of thousands of artillery rounds.¹¹⁵ At the beginning of Operation Barbarossa, LSSAH was just over half the size of *Totenkopfdivision*, and participated in fewer large-scale combat operations. As such, it is reasonable to assume that *Totenkopfdivision* used far more materiel than LSSAH in the same time period. These figures also exclude fuel for tanks and other vehicles, as well as food, clothing, and spare parts for weapons. As the war progressed, *Totenkopfdivision* added more and more vehicles to its arsenal and many of them, such as the Panzer V ‘Panther’ and Panzer VI ‘Tiger’, were notorious for their high fuel consumption and highly specialized parts which were difficult to replace if damaged. Food and clothing were required for no less than 12,000 men at any one time.

Responsibility for providing *Totenkopfdivision* and the rest of the *Wehrmacht* with the ammunition and equipment it needed lay with the German armaments industry, commanded from 1942 onwards by Minister of Armaments Albert Speer. Speer had been a close personal friend of Hitler’s since joining the Nazi Party after hearing Hitler speak in 1930.¹¹⁶ The two had bonded over their mutual love of architecture, often spending hours together planning the rebuilding of Berlin as the capital of a vast Nazi empire. Speer himself designed the so-called “towers of light” that featured so prominently at Nazi Party rallies throughout the 1930s and helped design parts of the Reich Chancellery. Speer took over as minister of armaments in February 1942 after his predecessor, Dr. Fritz Todt, was killed in a plane crash. Coincidentally, Todt had just been arguing with Hitler about Germany’s wartime needs in the face of the overwhelming industrial might of the Allies.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Munitions shot by LSSAH in the East from 22 June 1941 to 15 June 1942, November 23, 1942, in: Coll. RS 3, Box 134, BA.

¹¹⁶ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1970), 15.

¹¹⁷ Allen, *The Business of Genocide*, 172.

After fending off attempts by *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring to persuade Hitler to make Göring himself minister of armaments, Speer began the arduous task of overhauling the German economy to make it capable of supporting the Reich's vast military needs. Speer later claimed that within six months, armaments production had increased almost 60% and that "after two and a half years, in spite of the beginning of heavy bombing, we had raised our entire armaments production from an average index figure of 98 for the year 1941—admittedly a low point—to a summit of 322 in July 1944."¹¹⁸ He offered tax breaks to companies that reduced their prices to a certain level, thereby cutting down on the cost of armaments. He also closed down numerous factories that were producing inessential items or items that were too specialized, and those that simply were not producing enough. The resources and manpower from these factories were then diverted into factories that were more directly beneficial to the German war effort. The use of more advanced and precise equipment was encouraged so as to cut down on steel waste. Such actions meant that by 1945, one ton of steel produced four times as many munitions as it had in 1941. This reduction in waste, coupled with a decrease in domestic access to coal, meant in turn that arms production doubled in Speer's first year in office.¹¹⁹

Yet none of Speer's actions would have mattered without sufficient manpower to operate the factories. Labor was hard to come by as more and more able-bodied men were sent to the front. Hitler also refused to let women occupy full-time jobs in factories, fearing that such an action would lead to discontent at home and provoke another "stab-in-the back," as Hitler believed had happened during the First World War.¹²⁰ Labor shortages would have to be addressed using foreign workers, and under Speer's tenure, many foreign laborers were forced

¹¹⁸ Quoted in: Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 327.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 327-329.

¹²⁰ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 359.

into service against their will. Locating workers for Speer's factories was the responsibility of the General Plenipotentiary for Labor, a position created by Hitler in March 1942. Fritz Sauckel, the first man appointed to this position, had a reputation as a devoted Nazi and had organized the Aryanization of arms manufacturers in Thuringia in the 1930s. Hitler, therefore, was confident that Sauckel would not show leniency to the foreign workers, even if the loss of those workers hurt the war effort.¹²¹

Slave labor was not a new concept to Nazi Germany in 1942. Inmates at Dachau had been subjected to forced labor since the camp's creation in 1933. Other concentration camps followed suit and required their prisoners to do the same. For example, inmates at Mauthausen in Austria were forced to work in a local quarry, hauling large blocks of stone up the infamous "stairway of death."¹²² Many historians believe that this work was never intended to be useful, but was designed solely to work the prisoners to death. A massive influx of foreign workers for Germany's factories began after Germany started expanding beyond its original borders, however. Many of these workers came from the East, especially Poland and Russia. German industries employed over 1.2 million prisoners of war and foreign workers by May 1940. Of these, some 700,000 were Poles, many of whom were "drafted" to work in agriculture since Himmler considered them too racially inferior to be useful at any other type of work. This belief was seemingly validated by their poor productivity levels in coal mines, though poor health and mistreatment rather than racial inferiority were the likely causes for low productivity.¹²³ Operation Barbarossa captured over 3,000,000 Soviet soldiers, offering an apparent solution to the demand by industrialists for 1.1 million additional workers in 1941. These prisoners were

¹²¹ Ibid., 347.

¹²² Höß, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 270.

¹²³ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 348.

treated so poorly by their captors, however, that by March 1942 only about 150,000 were still able to work, 1.4 million having died by the end of 1941.¹²⁴ Sauckel reminded local officials that “flogged, half-starved and dead Russians do not mine coal for us, they are totally useless for making iron and steel,” on more than one occasion.¹²⁵

As the war progressed, the demands for labor increased. To supply this need, the Germans increased the conscription of workers from the East. To this end, they began to use increasingly brutal tactics. According to Evans, “the SS burned down whole villages if the young men evaded labor conscription, picked up potential workers off the streets, and took hostages until sufficient candidates for conscription came forward.”¹²⁶ The *Wehrmacht* drew up plans to kidnap 50,000 children from the East and put them to work in armaments factories. Additional workers were brought in from Western Europe, although these were generally treated better than their Eastern counterparts and some even came voluntarily. By the end of 1944, over 8,000,000 foreign laborers were working in Germany, more than a quarter of the total German workforce.¹²⁷

It did not matter to top Nazis, however, how vital foreign workers were to German industry. After all, Hitler had appointed Sauckel largely because he knew that Sauckel would not object if the foreign laborers perished in the process. Himmler declared during one of his infamous Posen speeches in October 1943 that “whether 10,000 Russian women collapse with exhaustion in the construction of an anti-tank ditch for Germany interests me insofar as the ditch gets dug for Germany.”¹²⁸ This, of course, would mean that the armaments industry had just been

¹²⁴ Allen, *The Business of Genocide*, 166.

¹²⁵ Quoted in: Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 356.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers*, 279.

deprived of 10,000 potential workers. Nazi officials consistently displayed short-sightedness when it came to wartime production needs, often refusing to waver in their racial attitudes toward many of the foreign workers, even at the expense of production.

This short-sightedness is most evident, however, with respect to Jewish slave labor. Despite temporary use of Jewish slave labor, ultimately the Nazis would not allow the labor requirements of armaments production to interfere with their exterminationist policy. Nazi Germany, and the SS in particular, made extensive use of Jewish slave labor. As with non-Jewish Nazi slave labor, such practices began in the concentration camps in the 1930s, but expanded to include the newly created ghettos in Eastern Europe. Many Jews were pressed into service in armaments factories that were erected near the ghettos so as to have access to cheap, but skilled, labor. Many also found themselves working directly for the SS. Archival records indicate that SS units stationed in Warsaw in late 1940 issued dozens of passes to Jewish laborers. Pass holders had the ability to pass through German checkpoints so that they could perform some kind of service for the SS, such as electrical work or other tasks.¹²⁹ For example, David Szmiga was issued a pass that allowed him to work in the SS stables during October 1940 and rendered him, at least on paper, exempt from any other work during that time. This pass, however, was only valid between 7 AM and 6 PM, after which time he would not be allowed through any of the checkpoints.¹³⁰ Dozens of such passes in the collections of the Bundesarchiv in Freiburg, Germany, suggest that this practice was not exclusive to this particular SS unit.

Indeed, even *Totenkopfdivision* made direct use of Jewish labor. In January 1941, the Second Battalion of the 10th Infantry Regiment filed a request with the relevant authorities in

¹²⁹ Passes issued to Jews by *SS-Totenkopf* Cavalry Regiment 1, October-December 1940, in: Coll. RS 4, Box 321, BA.

¹³⁰ Ausweis for David Szmiga, October 1, 1940, in: Coll. RS 4, Box 321, BA.

Krakow to postpone the deportation of thirteen Jews. The Jews in question were employed by the Second Battalion primarily as tailors and cobblers, and their work was not yet completed. Thus, the Second Battalion wished to postpone their deportation until the work was finished. The exchange of letters reveals that this battalion eventually reached a compromise with the authorities in Krakow, allowing them to halt the deportation of these thirteen Jews until suitable Aryan workers had arrived to replace them.¹³¹

It appeared, at least for a time, that the Nazis were invested in keeping alive working Jews in the ghettos, especially the Lodz ghetto. Non-working Jews, however, were a burden on the Reich. Adolf Folkmann, a survivor, recalled that “every mass murder began...with an order requiring all Jew to re-register. Working Jews were to be given new work permits. Those who were not doing ‘strategically important’ work were killed over the next few months.”¹³² There was even a time that Jewish laborers were apparently preferred to their Polish counterparts. At the beginning of 1942, deportation trains on their way to Poland would be stopped and able-bodied Jews pulled off and sent to work in the General Government. Hans Frank, the head of the General Government and an ardent Nazi, stated: “if I want to win the war, I must be an ice-cold technician. The question what will be done from an ideological-ethnic point of view I must postpone to a time after the war.”¹³³ A notice from the Chief of Security Police and Security Service, *SS-Gruppenführer* Mueller, to Himmler dated December 16, 1942, discusses the details of 45,000 Jews who were to be deported to Auschwitz in early January. Mueller stated that 10,000-15,000 of those Jews, however, were likely to be in decent physical condition and were

¹³¹ Letters between 2nd Battalion, *Totenkopf* Infantry Regiment 10 and the Chief of the District of Krakow, January 24, 1941, in: RG-15_098m_155_00000101-106, USHMM.

¹³² Quoted in: Aly and Heim, *Architects of Annihilation*, 209.

¹³³ Quoted in: Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 347.

therefore to be set aside for use as slave labor.¹³⁴ The Jews whose lives were spared during these mass executions hoped that their employment would protect them. Chief Nazi ideologues who opposed the use of Jewish labor, however, were becoming increasingly vocal in their opposition, and as such it became increasingly difficult for industrialists to continue using Jewish labor.

On January 20, 1942, a handful of top Nazi officials met at Wannsee to discuss the logistics of exterminating the Jews of Europe. They had been invited by Himmler's right-hand man, Reinhard Heydrich, who himself had been tasked by Göring with finding a final solution to the Jewish question. Those present at the meeting decided that "under appropriate supervision, in the course of the final solution, the Jews are to be suitably assigned to labor in the East. In big labor gangs...Jews capable of work will be brought to these areas, employed in roadbuilding, whereby a large part will undoubtedly disappear through natural diminution."¹³⁵ Others would be sent to concentration camps such as Theresienstadt. The end goal of Nazi racial policy was the eventual total destruction of European Jewry, however. As such, even the Jews employed by armaments industries, whether in Germany or Poland, would have to go.

Thousands of Jews were working for armaments industries by the beginning of 1942. Nazi officials recognized how essential Jewish slave labor had become to the armaments industries, but increasingly chose deportation and extermination over production. Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, complained in his diary entry for May 11, 1942, that "there are still some 40,000 Jews in Berlin...It is exceedingly difficult to shove them off to the

¹³⁴ Letter from Chief of the Security Police and Security Service to Heinrich Himmler, December 16, 1942, in: Coll. O.53, YV.

¹³⁵ Minutes of the Wannsee Conference, January 20, 1942. Quoted in: Stackelberg and Winkle, *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook*, 349.

East because a large part of them are at work in the munitions industry.”¹³⁶ A few days later, Goebbels got his wish. Soviet sympathizers bombed an anti-Soviet exhibition in Berlin. Hitler was reportedly furious and demanded the immediate deportation of all Jews remaining in Berlin. Goebbels recorded that Speer objected to this decision, arguing that it would do more harm than good: “Speer objects to the inclusion of those Jews who work in the armaments industry; we must find a way to get replacements.”¹³⁷ Goebbels concluded: “It is quite funny that nowadays we consider the Jews as irreplaceable high-quality workers, whereas not too long ago we constantly declared that Jews did not work at all and understood nothing about work.”¹³⁸ Goebbels clearly did not consider the Jews to be truly irreplaceable, as plans were made only days later to go ahead with the deportations and to bring in non-Jewish foreign workers to fill the vacancies.

In August 1942, the Army High Command declared that deportations or killings of Jews in the General Government had to be authorized in advance by the High Command, so as not to hinder production in vital military industries.¹³⁹ The night before, on August 4, Jewish forced laborers in Radom had suddenly been seized and deported without notification or approval by the *Wehrmacht*. The result was that only half the laborers arrived for work the next day, causing delays in the loading of trains that were to be sent to the front that day. The Army Chief Quartermaster protested, saying that such actions damaged the war effort.¹⁴⁰ In September, the Army High Command monthly report stated that there were over 10,000 Jews working directly

¹³⁶ Joseph Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries, 1942-1943*, trans. Louis Lochner (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1948), 211.

¹³⁷ Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 348.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Notice from OKH concerning Jewish forced laborers, August 5, 1942, in: Coll. O.53, File 130, YV.

¹⁴⁰ Telex by the Army Chief Quartermaster concerning the deportation of Jewish laborers from Radom, August 5, 1942, in: Coll. O.53, File 130, YV.

for the *Wehrmacht* in the General Government. It was noted that their replacement would likely cause some difficulty for the armaments industry, but their replacement was to take place as soon as possible, regardless of the cost.¹⁴¹

Polish and Ukrainian laborers were conscripted to replace Jewish workers. These were, for the most part, unskilled laborers, but were provided en masse by Sauckel. It was no easy task, however, to replace the estimated 300,000 Jews working as industrial laborers, at least a third of whom were listed as skilled.¹⁴² Correspondence between the Chief of the Military District in the General Government and the Higher SS and Police Command (HSSPF) reveals that while many officials in the General Government and armaments industries expressed concerns, the deportations and replacements continued and in multiple cases caused disruptions to productivity.¹⁴³ Himmler expressed his disregard for such concerns in the wake of the Warsaw

Ghetto Uprising:

I can tell you that I have had great difficulties with many economic institutions...in the past, if we wanted to go after them, we were told: hands off! You're disrupting the war economy! Hands off! This is an armaments factory...it is these so-called armaments factories that Party comrade Speer and myself intend to clear out in the coming weeks and months. And we will do so without sentimentality...but with a full heart for Germany.¹⁴⁴

Even officials within the SS occasionally expressed dismay at the insistence that the Jews be replaced. At a meeting in May 1943, the State Secretary and head of the HSSPF in the General

¹⁴¹ Monthly Report of the Army High Command in the General Government, September 16, 1942-October 15, 1942, in: Coll. O.53, File 130, YV.

¹⁴² Letter from the Chief of the Military District in the General Government to the OKW, September 12, 1942, in: Coll. O.53, File 130, YV.

¹⁴³ Correspondence between the Chief of the Military District in the General Government and the HSSPF, October 13, 1942-October 14, 1942, in: Coll. O.53, File 130, YV.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in: Aly and Heim, *Architects of Annihilation*, 213.

Government, Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger, expressed his desire to convince Himmler to leave the Jews employed by armaments industries alone. It was recorded that Krüger:

discussed the matter with Lieutenant General Schindler [head of the armaments inspectorate of the OKW...] and thought that in the end the Reichsführer's wish could not be fulfilled. The Jewish workers included specialists, precision mechanics, and other qualified artisans, that could not be simply replaced by Poles at the present time.¹⁴⁵

Himmler, however, would not be swayed and the deportations continued. Many of the Jews who were deported from the Polish ghettos during this time were sent straight to the *Aktion Reinhard* extermination camps. Others would still be used for labor, but this time in a concentration camp.

Not all Jews were deported to extermination camps. Some were sent to labor camps to be used by the armaments industries. Rudolf Höß testified after the war that the highest number of functioning labor camps during the war was roughly 900. He added that there “were camps with 100 internees and camps with 10,000 internees. Therefore I cannot give any figure of the total number of people who were in these labor camps.”¹⁴⁶ Many German companies exploited the available labor and set up branches of their operations at several concentration camps. IG Farben established a synthetic rubber and fuel plant at Auschwitz, for example, just as Heinkel set up a military aircraft factory at Oranienburg.¹⁴⁷ Inmates at Buchenwald made rifles and other weapons. In some cases, the prisoners forced to work at these sites were housed in the main camp; in others, small satellite camps were built solely for the purpose of providing easy access to labor. All of the camps were controlled by the SS. While the factories remained under the control of the private enterprises, their leaders answered to Speer.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 497.

¹⁴⁶ Testimony of Rudolf Höß, April 15, 1946, Pohl Trial, IMT Vol. XI, 422.

¹⁴⁷ Allen, *The Business of Genocide*, 168-170.

¹⁴⁸ Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 374.

The continued exploitation of Jewish labor in the concentration camps was largely the work of *SS-Obergruppenführer* Oswald Pohl, head of the SS Economy and Administration Main Office. As previously stated, the concentration camps fell under Pohl's domain, and as such so too did any labor they produced. In the concentration camps, Pohl saw a great opportunity to create an economic powerhouse run by the SS, especially since the labor was now free. Pohl was an old enemy of Eicke. Having control over the latter's money supply, he had made a point of inspecting Dachau while it was run by Eicke and heavily scrutinized any and all financial transactions involved, much to Eicke's annoyance. Pohl and Eicke also frequently quarreled over the treatment of prisoners, with Pohl often releasing those who he knew personally, in direct violation of Eicke's belief that concentration camp prisoners were not there temporarily.¹⁴⁹ After receiving control of the concentration camps in 1942, Höß claimed that Pohl immediately demanded that the prisoners receive better treatment so that they would be more productive.¹⁵⁰

Whether or not this is true, the concentration camp system expanded exponentially under Pohl's direction. Thousands of smaller satellite camps were created with the sole function of providing access to labor. While the expansion of the camps increased German access to labor, this action had an unforeseen effect that impacted the troops at the front, especially *Totenkopfdivision*. The creation of more camps and the expansion of the already existing camps meant more prisoners. More prisoners meant that more guards were needed to supervise them. In this manner, thousands more men were required to fill the ranks of the *Totenkopfverbände*—men that remained in the concentration camp system instead of being sent to the front to fight the Soviets with *Totenkopfdivision*.

¹⁴⁹ Höß, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 250-251.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

Despite his relocation of many of the Jews to the concentration camps, Pohl claimed to care about the needs and production of the armaments industry. In May 1942, his office sent a memo to all of the major camps regarding punitive measures that would be taken if any false statements were made by the camp commanders regarding the need for armaments and other defense requirements. The memo closed by stating that such false statements could only negatively affect the armaments industry.¹⁵¹ As previously noted, Höß claimed that Pohl advocated better treatment of the prisoners so that they would be more productive. Only through economic productivity would the SS be able function independently of the state, which was Pohl's dream.

In these camps, Jews were housed with all the other prisoners, although the lack of segregation did not grant them a reprieve from Nazi racial attitudes. The prisoners were subject to the same miserable living conditions and food that all the others in the concentration camp system had to endure. Some industrialists claimed that their complaints about the condition of the workers caused the SS to treat prisoners slightly better:

At first the factory managers complained that the prisoners arrived in a weakened condition and after a few months had to be sent back, exhausted, to the regular camps. Since their training time alone required several weeks and instructors were scarce, we could not afford to train a new group every few months. In response to our complaints the SS made considerable improvements in the sanitary conditions and rations of the camps.¹⁵²

It is easy to follow Speer's logic. Workers who could not physically perform their task were of no use to the armaments industries and therefore hampered production. Conditions had to improve if productivity was also to improve.

¹⁵¹ Letter from the SS-WVHA to all major camp commanders, May 26, 1942, YV.

¹⁵² Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 370.

While conditions may have improved in some of the camps, they certainly did not at Auschwitz. Auschwitz itself had been expanded greatly in 1941 so as to accommodate the labor needs of the IG Farben plant and other munitions producers.¹⁵³ Höß stated:

Before the war, the concentration camps had served the purpose of self-protection, but during the war, according to the will of the *Reichsführer SS* [Himmler], they became a means to an end. They were now primarily to serve the war effort, the munitions production. As many prisoners as possible were to become armaments workers....the intention of the *Reichsführer SS* was the Auschwitz should become one immense prison-cum-munitions-center.¹⁵⁴

This statement is not entirely true, as Himmler's actions displayed that he was far less concerned with the labor being produced by the concentration camps than the death of their inmates.

Auschwitz did become a larger-scale munitions producer, but Himmler never advocated the use of Jewish labor to do so. Höß noted that any change in the working conditions for the prisoners of Auschwitz did not change the outcome for those prisoners:

It is true that tens of thousands of Jews were moved from Auschwitz for the new armaments project, but this was only a question of out of the frying pan and into the fire...the prisoners would have been spared a great deal of misery if they had been taken straight into the gas chambers at Auschwitz. They soon died, without making any substantial contribution to the war effort and often without having done any work at all.¹⁵⁵

By 1943, the IG Farben plant at Auschwitz, known as Monowitz, employed 29,000 workers, a quarter of whom were Jewish inmates at Auschwitz. Between 1943 and 1944, 35,000 prisoners worked at Monowitz, 23,000 to 30,000 of whom perished. Prisoners, already starved and deprived of basic sanitation, were subject to inspections by SS officers. Those who were judged unfit for further work were sent to the gas chambers.¹⁵⁶ The price for this policy was that

¹⁵³ Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 235.

¹⁵⁴ Höß, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 125.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁵⁶ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 363-364.

Monowitz took over two years to build and only began to produce rubber after the war had ended when it was under the control of the Soviets. Monowitz did, however, begin producing methanol in October 1943, accounting for 15% of Germany's production of that chemical only a year later.¹⁵⁷

Himmler was never comfortable with the retention of thousands of Jews for labor, even if they were in concentration camps. To him, they represented a massive security threat to the Reich. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, along with the revolts at Treblinka and Sobibor in 1943, convinced him that he was correct and that the only solution to this threat was extermination. Multiple labor camps in the East were evacuated and the prisoners within them sent to Auschwitz.¹⁵⁸ The occupants of Majdanek, Travniki, and Poniatova, some 42,000 prisoners who had mostly served as forced laborers, were executed on November 3, 1943.¹⁵⁹ Himmler's actions directly denied tens of thousands of potential laborers to the armaments industries, drastically reducing both the potential labor pool and the number of available replacements for those who perished from mistreatment and physical exhaustion. Himmler's views were supported by the SS Reich Security Main Office (SS-RSHA), who were, according to Höß, "always in favor of the complete extermination of all Jews, and saw in the creation of each new work camp and in every further thousand Jews selected for work the danger that circumstances might arise that would set them free and keep them alive."¹⁶⁰ The SS-RSHA and Pohl clashed constantly over the use of Jewish labor, and it appeared for a while that Pohl was winning as more and more Jews were put to work rather than being sent to the gas chamber. The reality, however, was that the prisoners

¹⁵⁷ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 370.

¹⁵⁸ Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 494-497.

¹⁵⁹ Aly and Heim, *Architects of Annihilation*, 213.

¹⁶⁰ Höß, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 178.

died anyway because of the deplorable conditions that they lived and worked in. In the end, the SS-RSHA and Himmler still achieved their objective though the process of extermination took longer to accomplish.

It is, of course, difficult to prove that the death of a single forced laborer affected the supplies that reached *Totenkopfdivision*. It is equally difficult to trace which armaments factories provided *Totenkopfdivision* with its equipment. Many of the shortages that the division faced were shared by sizeable portions of the *Wehrmacht*. It is easy, however, to argue that Nazi racial policy had a detrimental impact on armaments production as a whole. Millions of foreign workers were brought to Germany to fill vacancies left by the conscription of their German predecessors. These workers were treated poorly and subject to Nazi racial prejudices, resulting in the death of thousands. Jewish laborers, exploited by the armaments industries in the ghettos and then by both the armaments industries and SS in the concentration camps, played a crucial role in wartime production. Though many in the armaments industries and *Wehrmacht* initially resisted Nazi exterminationist attitudes, their efforts to protect Jews as essential workers could not save Jews from deportation and murder. Their places were taken by unskilled foreign laborers, often at great expense to the factories that employed them. Those Jews laboring in the concentration camps were worked to death or executed along with the millions whom the Nazis did not even attempt to use as labor.

To summarize, Nazi racial attitudes greatly inhibited the number of potential laborers and ensured that even those who were put to work were unable to do so for long. In the end, labor needs were not met, and sufficient armaments were not produced. Ullrich continued to complain that *Totenkopfdivision* did not have the material necessary to successfully fight the Soviets, and subsequent events show that a lack of material was crucial to the losses incurred by this division.

Chapter 3

Bridge Over the River Psel: The Battle of Kursk, July 1943

“By giving up the Psel bridgehead, which had cost so much of our blood and superhuman effort, the other offensive plans had to be sacrificed as well.”

-SS-Hauptsturmführer Fritz Messerle¹⁶¹

Nazi racial ideology had a noticeable impact on *Totenkopfdivision*'s performance throughout the duration of the war. Manpower was heavily restricted and access to proper equipment was often lacking. A more focused discussion of a specific incident in the history of the division serves to illustrate the deleterious effects of such policies. The incident in question is the German summer offensive of 1943 directed at Soviet positions around the city of Kursk, situated near the modern Russian border with Ukraine. A closer examination of this offensive serves to demonstrate the desperate need for manpower, the high casualty rate, and the equipment shortages that contributed to *Totenkopfdivision*'s inability to complete its objectives.

Totenkopfdivision, fresh off its success in Field Marshal Erich von Manstein's counteroffensive, was naturally selected to be part of the assault. Yet *Totenkopfdivision* was plagued by both manpower and materiel problems even before the offensive began, and these same issues only grew worse as the battle dragged on. *Totenkopfdivision* started understrength and took heavy casualties throughout the course of the battle. Equipment that was already in short supply, especially the vaunted panzers, broke down or was destroyed in combat and proved difficult to replace. As a result, the division's performance suffered. To better understand

¹⁶¹ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 193.

Totenkopfdivision's role and performance at Kursk, a general overview of the situation on the Eastern Front prior to the battle will be provided, followed by an examination of the direct impact of Nazi racial ideology on *Totenkopfdivision*'s advance to the Psel River.

THE BATTLE OF KURSK

Manstein's counteroffensive in early 1943 was successful in recapturing much of the land lost to the Soviets after the disaster at Stalingrad, but he was unable to break through Soviet defenses around the city of Kursk as a consequence of the spring thaw.¹⁶² The result was a large bulge that extended deep into German lines, providing an obvious target for any upcoming German offensives (Fig. 1).¹⁶³ Yet as tempting and obvious a target as Kursk was, the German General Staff did not initially plan to eliminate the bulge. In his postwar memoirs, Manstein stated that he wanted the *Wehrmacht* to remain on the defensive and then launch counteroffensives to destroy any Soviet thrusts in a manner similar to the counteroffensive at Kharkov.¹⁶⁴ Hitler disagreed with his generals, however, and demanded that the *Wehrmacht* attack the Red Army as soon as the weather permitted. As a result, the German General Staff, with a strong guiding hand from Hitler, settled on a spring offensive, codenamed Operation *Zitadelle*, directed at Soviet positions at Kursk.

Zitadelle was designed to accomplish several tasks. First, it was intended to draw in the bulk of Soviet armored forces on the central and southern Eastern Front and then destroy them. Second, the German General Staff envisioned that success at Kursk would restore the operational

¹⁶² Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 446.

¹⁶³ Dennis Showalter, *Armor and Blood: The Battle of Kursk: The Turning Point of World War II* (New York, NY: Random House, 2013), 40.

¹⁶⁴ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 444-445.

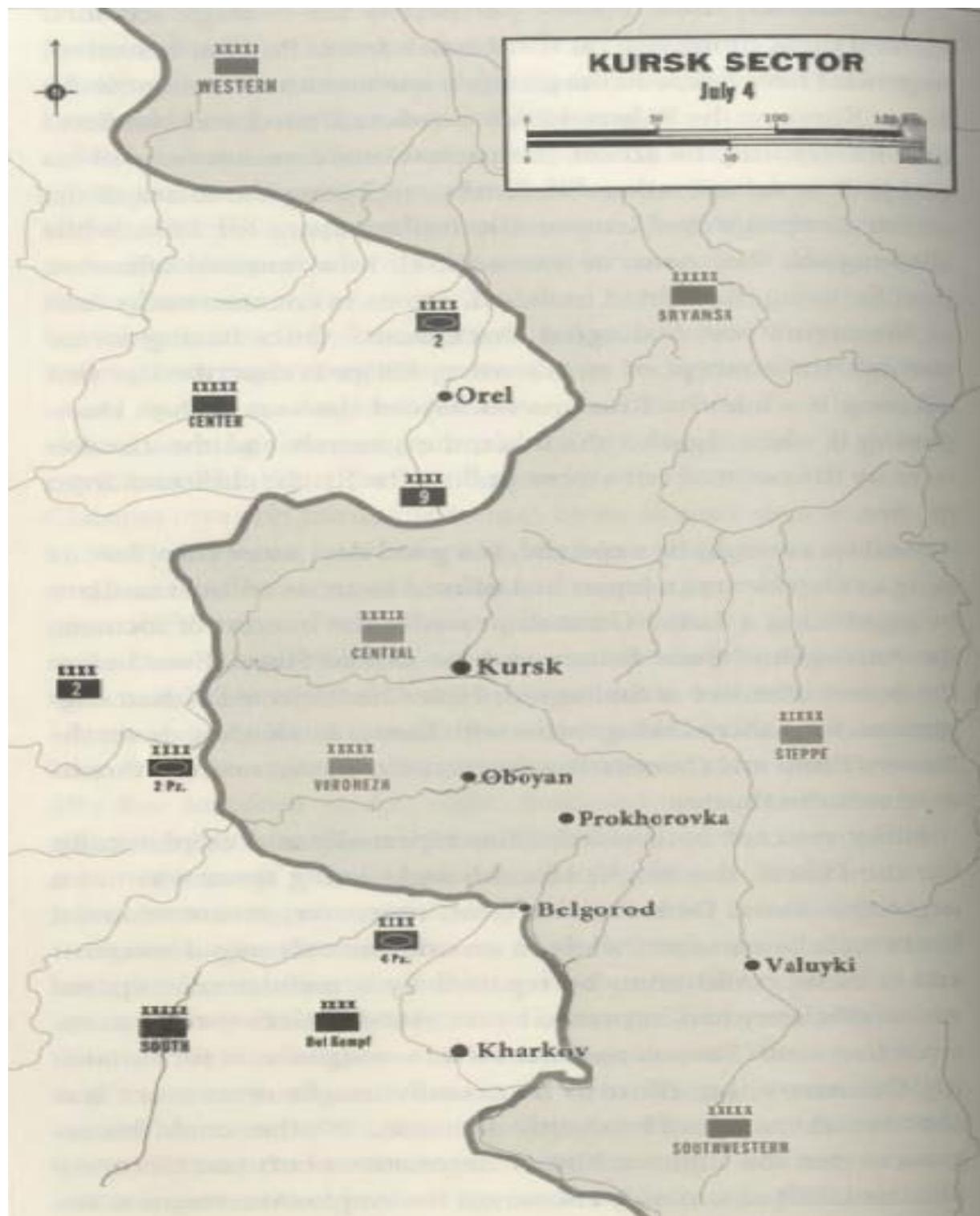


Figure 1 - German and Soviet Field Positions around Kursk, July 4, 1943.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Showalter, *Armor and Blood*, 40.

and strategic initiative to the *Wehrmacht*, thereby erasing the blow to its prestige from the disaster at Stalingrad. Third, Hitler worried about the commitment of his allies to the war effort and hoped that a victory at Kursk would reinvigorate them.¹⁶⁶ Last, many German generals, Manstein included, no longer believed that a decisive victory over the Soviet Union was possible. Instead, they hoped that victory at Kursk would tempt the Soviets to agree to an armistice; something they believed was only possible before the Western Allies landed on the continent.¹⁶⁷ *Zitadelle* called for German forces to assault the northern and southern flanks of the Kursk salient, focusing the bulk of their attention on the areas in which the salient began. The two pincers were to meet up at Kursk and trap the Soviet defenders in an encirclement, as executed at Kiev in September 1941. Originally set for early spring so that the Red Army would not have time to consolidate its positions, *Zitadelle* was continuously postponed by Hitler, who wanted to wait until the latest German tank, the Panzer V ‘Panther’, could be distributed. After the surrender of the *Afrika Korps* in May, Hitler reshuffled units that had been marked to participate in *Zitadelle* to prepare to defend Italy. After months of arguing, and even a brief cancellation by Hitler, a launch date of July 5 was finally decided on, over two months after it was originally supposed to begin.¹⁶⁸

Totenkopfdivision was assigned to the southern front of the German offensive as part of the II SS Panzer Corps, commanded by *SS-Obergruppenführer* Paul Hausser. For *Zitadelle*, the II SS Panzer Corps would operate on the extreme right flank of the 4th Panzer Army, the German force assigned to the southern front of the Kursk salient. *Totenkopfdivision*, along with its sister units 1. *SS Panzergrenadier-Division “Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler”* (LSSAH) and 2.

¹⁶⁶ Showalter, *Armor and Blood*, 41.

¹⁶⁷ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 443.

¹⁶⁸ David Glantz, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 55.

SS Panzergrenadier-Division "Das Reich," was to break through Soviet defenses and push towards the villages of Prokhorovka and Oboyan before meeting up at Kursk with Field Marshal Walter Model's 9th Army as it came down from the north.¹⁶⁹ Along the way were numerous strongpoints and formidable anti-tank belts that were to be eliminated before the advance could continue. This was a daunting task, but Hitler was confident that *Zitadelle* would succeed in a matter of days.

In order for *Totenkopfdivision* to smash through Soviet defenses, the division would rely largely on the support of the Panzer VI, better known as the 'Tiger' Tank. The Tiger was a 60-ton behemoth and was designed as an answer to the inability of German tanks to destroy their Soviet counterparts, primarily the T-34. In addition to its fearsome destructive capabilities, the Tiger was able to withstand attacks from almost all Allied weapons for the duration of the war. The Tiger crew manual, the *Tigerfibel*, boasted that in early 1943, a single Tiger was hit by almost 250 different anti-tank rounds of varying sizes, and not one penetrated the armor.¹⁷⁰ The armor on a Tiger was the thickest on any German tank to that point. *Totenkopfdivision* possessed 11 Tigers at the beginning of *Zitadelle*, a formidable force capable of wreaking destruction on a massive scale and one that would cause the Soviets considerable grief.¹⁷¹ Yet even the Tiger was not immune to the woes that plagued *Totenkopfdivision* both before and during the battle. The Tiger was notorious for its heavy fuel consumption, and its engine was underpowered to fully support the tank's weight. Spare parts for the Tiger were highly specialized and the design of the tank itself was complicated, making repairs difficult, especially in the middle of combat.

¹⁶⁹ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 192.

¹⁷⁰ Bob Carruthers, ed., *Tiger I Official Wartime Crew Manual [The Tigerfibel]* (Warwickshire, Great Britain: Coda Books, Ltd., 2001), 11.

¹⁷¹ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 193.

Furthermore, Tiger crews had to go through months of special and advanced training. Tiger commanders were supposed to be some of the best tank commanders in the German Army. While their performance in battle was therefore exceptional, this meant that their loss was often irreplaceable. The Tiger's fearsome performance in battle meant that Tiger crews drew disproportionate amounts of fire from Soviet anti-tank elements, increasing the risk to both the equipment and the men.

In the early morning hours of July 5, every German division deployed around the Kursk salient, including *Totenkopfdivision*, began the assault. Despite encountering fierce Soviet resistance, *Totenkopfdivision* and the rest of II SS Panzer Corps made good progress, smashing their way through 20 miles of Soviet defenses by dusk on July 6, farther than almost all other German units, if not the farthest. In addition to pushing through the toughest Soviet defenses, this initial penetration also put *Totenkopfdivision* in a position to cut Soviet supply lines to much of the salient and to begin rolling up the Soviet rear.¹⁷² For this reason, and others that will be discussed later in the chapter, the Soviet High Command panicked and began to send in whatever reserves they could find to stop the advance of II SS Panzer Corps. Kursk marked the first time that the Soviet High Command decided that the best way to stop an SS assault was to throw anything and everything into its path, an experience that would be repeated multiple times during the next two years, most notably during early 1945 when Hitler ordered *Totenkopfdivision* to retake the city of Budapest.

It took *Totenkopfdivision* until July 10 to reach the Psel River. It took even longer for *panzergrenadiers* under the command of Karl Ullrich, a *SS-Standartenführer* at the time, to

¹⁷² Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 284.

storm the opposite bank and begin to establish a bridgehead.¹⁷³ The Psel was the last natural barrier between *Totenkopfdivision* and Kursk. Kursk was still many miles away, but Soviet planners had not anticipated the Germans reaching past the Psel River, and the defenses on the Northern bank of the river were considerably weaker than those that *Totenkopfdivision* had broken through on July 5. LSSAH and *Das Reich* had kept pace with *Totenkopfdivision*, but remained on the German side of the River Psel, staying close to the village of Prokhorovka. The bridgehead was small, centered around defensive positions on a nearby hill and supported only by a handful of bridges that took several days to be built. The Tigers were too heavy to cross on the first bridges, and were forced to wait until the engineers could find a solution to get them across. In the meantime, the Soviets launched multiple assaults on the *Totenkopfdivision* soldiers who had taken positions on the hill, with the intent of collapsing the bridgehead. The line held, but *Totenkopfdivision* was prevented from advancing further.¹⁷⁴

It was the panic that *Totenkopfdivision* and the rest of II SS Panzer Corps caused among the Soviet High Command that ultimately ensured that *Totenkopfdivision* would never break out of the Psel River bridgehead. The Soviet commander, General Vatutin, was horrified at the prospect of II SS Panzer Corps breaking through the last Soviet line of defense and having an open pathway to Kursk. The 5th Guards Tank Army was pulled out of reserve and tasked with destroying II SS Panzer Corps before it could break out of the bridgehead or capture Prokhorovka.¹⁷⁵ On the morning of July 12, the Tigers finally crossed over the Psel. Before *Totenkopfdivision* could go on the offensive, however, they were struck by the arrival of the 5th

¹⁷³ Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 286.

¹⁷⁴ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 193.

¹⁷⁵ Showalter, *Armor and Blood*, 204.

Guards. *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Fritz Messerle, commander of *Totenkopfdivision*'s artillery, described what happened:

His attacks...led to breakthroughs that could only be cleared after heavy fighting. Strong enemy forces with numerous tanks broke through between *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division 'Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler'* and our division as far back as the former's artillery positions. Extremely intense tank engagements all across the front.¹⁷⁶

The tank battle at Prokhorovka is often referenced as one of the largest, if not the largest, armored battle in history. When it was over, the 5th Guards had been virtually destroyed with minimal loss to II SS Panzer Corps. Yet while II SS Panzer Corps had strategically won the battle at Prokhorovka, the assault was enough to sap any energy that the Germans still possessed. The next day, *Totenkopfdivision* was ordered to cease offensive actions and remain in place. The division had advanced the furthest of any German unit during *Zitadelle*, but it would go no further.¹⁷⁷ On July 16, *Totenkopfdivision* was ordered to evacuate the Psel River Bridgehead and take up new positions on the southern bank. LSSAH and *Das Reich* were to be relocated to Italy to oppose the Allied landings on Sicily that began on July 10. Operation *Zitadelle* was over.

THE IMPACT OF NAZI RACIAL IDEOLOGY

Nazi racial ideology had noticeable impacts on *Totenkopfdivision* both before and throughout the battle of Kursk. The first setback that *Totenkopfdivision* encountered was a familiar problem, a lack of manpower. According to Karl Ullrich, the division began *Zitadelle* already understrength by one third, or at least 6,000 men short.¹⁷⁸ Despite rebuilding after Demyansk, *Totenkopfdivision* suffered heavily during the Kharkov counteroffensive. The death

¹⁷⁶ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 193.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

of Eicke in February was a significant loss. Eicke had been trying to locate a unit and restore communication when his plane was shot down by Soviet anti-aircraft fire.¹⁷⁹ Eicke's death was largely the result of his own personality since he was a man who believed in leading from the front and was totally devoted to the Nazi cause. His loss would hurt the division, for while the division did not lose much if any of its highly aggressive nature, Eicke's leadership had inspired the men of *Totenkopfdivision* to perform tasks that others had deemed impossible. This leadership would be sorely missed.

Totenkopfdivision had received replacements while waiting for *Zitadelle* to begin, but replacements also had to be distributed to almost every other German unit on the Eastern Front, a task that proved harder and harder to do as the war dragged on and casualties increased. There were, however, thousands of able-bodied men that were being kept back from the front lines to provide the guards and staff of the countless of concentration camps spread across Hitler's Europe, including the new *Aktion Reinhard* extermination camps, now operating at full capacity. While the number of guards required for Treblinka or Sobibor was small, especially when compared to the thousands who worked at Auschwitz at any given time, they still could have been used to replenish the ranks of the woefully understrength *Totenkopfdivision*. Each train into one of the three *Aktion Reinhard* camps needed guards to ensure that none of the Jews onboard escaped, and each camp received multiple trains per day.¹⁸⁰ While many of the guards working at the *Aktion Reinhard* camps were Ukrainians or Lithuanians, they still answered to German non-commissioned and commissioned officers. Thus each camp pulled valuable troops from the

¹⁷⁹ Letter from *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Masarie to *SS-Brigadeführer* Simon, February 28, 1943, Quoted in: *Der Personal-Akt des SS-Obergruppenführers Theo Eicke, Chef der Konzentrations-Lager im Dritten Reich seine Briefe an SS-Reichsführer Himmler in den Jahren 1933-1943* (Haifa, Israel: Institute of Documentation in Israel for the Investigation of Nazi War Crimes, 1994).

¹⁸⁰ Train Schedule to Treblinka, September 23, 1942, YV.

frontlines. Taken together with the figures from the larger camps such as Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen, the number of guards withheld from replenishing *Totenkopfdivision* on the frontlines was significant.

In April, *SS-Brigadeführer Jürgen Stroop* used *SS-Panzergranadier* Training and Reserve Battalions in his suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.¹⁸¹ While the Uprising was crushed well before the beginning of *Zitadelle*, it still highlights the precedence of Nazi racial policy over military action. The insistence of Stroop, and other Nazi leaders, on suppressing the Ghetto Uprising diverted hundreds of troops from the front lines and exposed those same troops, including the replacement battalions, to unnecessary risk. Stroop's final report claimed that only six *SS-panzergranadiers* were killed and only twenty others were wounded.¹⁸² While this number may seem inconsequential, *Totenkopfdivision* would need every man it could get for *Zitadelle*. There is also some skepticism about the accuracy of Stroop's figures among historians, who suggest that the number was likely higher. Deficiencies in manpower only added to the problems that *Totenkopfdivision* encountered.

After *Zitadelle* began, there were no reinforcements to be found, either. Once a casualty was taken off the frontlines, he was irreplaceable for the remainder of the operation. The instant that *Zitadelle* began, the thousands of men posted as guards at the concentration camps were beyond the reach of those seeking reinforcements. Any guards sent as relief from any of the camps scattered across Hitler's Europe would have taken too long to arrive on the battlefield to be of any use. Clearly, for *Totenkopfdivision* to have the manpower necessary to break out of the Psel bridgehead and continue on towards Kursk, reinforcements would have had to arrive before

¹⁸¹ Jürgen Stroop, *The Jewish Quarter of Warsaw is No More*, trans. Sybil Milton (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1979), 6-14.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 3-12.

Zitadelle began. A full-strength *Totenkopfddivision* taking the same casualties would still have been stronger than *Totenkopfddivision* at the beginning of *Zitadelle*. There is, of course, no guarantee that this would have been the decisive difference, but *Totenkopfddivision* certainly would have had a better chance to meet its objectives.

War materiel too posed potential difficulties before combat began. Hitler had postponed *Zitadelle* partly to allow for more tanks and equipment to reach the front line units, including *Totenkopfddivision*. In Poland, ammunition production, as well as that of other vital war equipment, had been hindered by the change in factories from Jewish workers to their less skilled Polish and Ukrainian counterparts so that the Jews could be deported to an extermination camp as discussed in the previous chapter. None of the SS divisions possessed a full complement of tanks, and the new Panthers for which Hitler had postponed Kursk never reached the SS divisions. Ironically, there was no shortage in rations for this operation. The day before *Zitadelle* began, *Das Reich* drew rations for 20,000 troops despite only having an actual combat strength of no more than 7,500, while *Totenkopfddivision* drew rations for 23,800 despite only having a combat strength of roughly 14,000.¹⁸³ The disparity between rations drawn and available forces serves to highlight the deleterious nature of Nazi racial policy on the war effort.

Manpower and materiel problems only grew worse during *Zitadelle*. *Totenkopfddivision* could have advanced further on the first day of Kursk, but was halted after breaking through the initial lines of defense. This was not because of the onset of night, although the opening assault had taken a considerable amount of daylight to accomplish. Rather, the delay was a consequence of the tenacity of the Soviet defenders who refused to retreat and resorted to extreme measures,

¹⁸³ Niklas Zetterling and Anders Frankson, *Kursk 1943: A Statistical Analysis* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000), 225.

including the firing of Katyusha rockets over open sights, to try and hold back the *panzergrenadiers*.¹⁸⁴ The division's advance also was checked by the arrival on the field of a Soviet tank brigade. *Totenkopfdivision* lacked the strength it needed to push through what normally would not have posed much of an obstacle, especially given the power of *Totenkopfdivision*'s armor company and the resourcefulness of the division's infantry when it came to tank hunting. *Totenkopfdivision* took fewer casualties than either LSSAH or Das Reich on the first day, but only *Totenkopfdivision* was forced to stop because of insufficient strength.¹⁸⁵

On July 6, as *Totenkopfdivision* sat poised atop the Belgorod-Kursk railway, an unforeseen consequence of Nazi racial attitude began to manifest itself. The ferocity that *Totenkopfdivision* displayed in combat as they mercilessly attempted to defeat their racial enemy had not been noticed by just German generals and Hitler. The Soviets too had learned what it meant to fight against *Totenkopfdivision*, and the unit, as well as LSSAH and *Das Reich*, had developed a formidable reputation among its enemies as one of the best units in the German Army. The Soviets knew that wherever *Totenkopfdivision* was, there was certain to be a bitter fight with few prisoners on either side. Thus when the Soviet generals responsible for defending Kursk learned who had made the furthest penetration into their lines up to that point, they panicked and began to send in whatever reserves they had available to stop II SS Panzer Corps. To make matters worse for *Totenkopfdivision*, Soviet soldiers in the Kursk salient had already been told to stand their ground, but those facing II SS Panzer Corps, initially the 52nd Guards Rifle Division, only broke when faced with total annihilation.¹⁸⁶ Other Soviet units proved to be just as dedicated to stopping the German drive on Kursk.

¹⁸⁴ Showalter, *Armor and Blood*, 105.

¹⁸⁵ Zetterling and Frankson, *Kursk*, 207.

¹⁸⁶ Showalter, *Armor and Blood*, 106.

In his account of this fighting, Ullrich deliberately discusses the racial composition of the Soviet defenders, and contrasts the perceived inferiority of the Soviets with the superiority of the German soldier: “The prisoners also complained of being dissatisfied with the poor organization of the field mail and lack of leave.”¹⁸⁷ In addition, Ullrich decided that it was important enough to mention that he believed that at least 50% of the defenders were Uzbeks and not “normal” Russians, as if this distinction had some sort of guaranteed effect on their respective abilities as soldiers. It is logical to assume that Ullrich was not alone in his attitude towards the Soviets, and that many *Totenkopfdivision* soldiers held their counterparts in similar contempt. The Soviets could not possibly be as good soldiers as the men of *Totenkopfdivision*. Therefore ruthless, aggressive, and normally risky behavior was justified. It was such an attitude that killed SS-*Sturmbannführer* Kunstmann, the commander of *Totenkopfdivision*'s panzer regiment and an irreplaceable, experienced leader, on July 8.¹⁸⁸

By the time *Zitadelle* was cancelled and *Totenkopfdivision* was ordered to withdraw from the Psel River bridgehead, the division had sustained heavy losses. Between July 4 and July 20, *Totenkopfdivision* suffered 2,802 casualties, including more than 500 killed. While this number may seem small, it is important to note that it is higher than either of the other SS divisions. Only one division on the entire Southern Front, the 106th Infantry Division, had more soldiers killed in action. In addition, of the twenty divisions on the Southern Front, only LSSAH and the 332nd Infantry Division took more overall casualties than *Totenkopfdivision*.¹⁸⁹ This is a higher casualty rate than the division suffered during either Operation Barbarossa or the Demyansk Pocket. Of the remaining six months in 1943, only the month of August had more casualties than

¹⁸⁷ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 194.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁸⁹ Zetterling and Frankson, *Kursk*, 114-115.

the Kursk offensive. If one assumes that those wounded were wounded so severely as to be rendered incapable of further participation in combat, *Totenkopfdivision* would not receive enough replacements to make up for the losses at Kursk until October.¹⁹⁰ This, of course, would require one to ignore the fact that *Totenkopfdivision* remained in almost constant combat after Kursk and would never return to pre-*Zitadelle* strength.¹⁹¹

Vehicle losses too were critical. Of the 174 tanks and assault guns that *Totenkopfdivision* possessed on July 1, only 93 were still operational by July 16, almost a 50% loss rate.¹⁹² That the survivors included nine Tigers is as much testament to the armor capabilities of the Tiger as it is to the ability of *Totenkopfdivision*'s combat engineers to hastily and efficiently repair damaged vehicles. Even though LSSAH and *Das Reich* were more directly involved in the colossal tank battle at Prokhorovka, they emerged from *Zitadelle* with fewer tank losses than *Totenkopfdivision*, and only a few units in the 4th Panzer Army suffered more.¹⁹³

Of the losses that *Totenkopfdivision* suffered at Kursk, Ullrich said the following:

The long-serving, experienced soldiers were irreplaceable. The noncommissioned officers and officers were completely irreplaceable. The times were over when performance ratings could note: 'excellent in both the attack and defense!' It was the same with armaments, equipment and vehicles.¹⁹⁴

Zitadelle further diminished an already weakened *Totenkopfdivision*. *Totenkopfdivision* lost roughly 15% of its operational strength and half its vehicles. This meant that the division, already 33% understrength before *Zitadelle* began, left Kursk at only 50% authorized strength,

¹⁹⁰ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 229.

¹⁹¹ Mann, *SS-Totenkopf*, 129.

¹⁹² Glantz, *Kursk*, 351-353.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 229.

and in no shape to continue fighting with any degree of success against an enemy that could replace its own losses seemingly indefinitely.

While Nazi racial doctrine certainly played a role in *Totenkopfdivision's* performance and failure at Kursk, it is important to note that it was not the only factor. Years after the end of the American Civil War, Confederate General George Pickett was asked why he believed that the Confederate assault on the third day at Gettysburg had failed. The most common and expected response was to blame the strategic planning of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, the man who ordered the assault. Pickett, however, had a different theory: "I've always thought the Yankees [Union soldiers] had something to do with it."¹⁹⁵

The same can be said of the Battle of Kursk. *Totenkopfdivision* would not have failed were it not for the soldiers and officers of the Red Army who opposed them on the march to the Psel. The Red Army that *Totenkopfdivision* encountered at Kursk was much different than the one it had faced during Barbarossa and even Kharkov. The Soviet Officer Corps had finally recovered from Stalin's Purges in the late 1930s and the Red Army was now led by far more capable officers than it had been in 1941. Soviet soldiers had been hardened by months of combat experience, and the Guards units that were tasked with stopping II SS Panzer Corps were some of the best in the Soviet Army. They were also entrenched in intricate and advanced defensive networks that had been worked on for months. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of mines had been planted to slow down the attackers and force them into chokepoints. Finally, the Soviets at Kursk knew not only that the Germans were coming, but when *Zitadelle* would begin. The Kursk salient was as obvious a choice for the Soviets as it was for the Germans, and

¹⁹⁵ Gabor Boritt, *Why the Confederacy Lost* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19.

Soviet spies and German deserters had revealed much about the Germans' plans.¹⁹⁶ Indeed, the Soviets preempted the beginning of *Zitadelle* with a massive artillery barrage on the German staging areas, causing casualties and disorder before the offensive even began.¹⁹⁷ For an offensive that depended on surprise to achieve success, the only ones surprised during *Zitadelle* were the Germans.

That *Totenkopfdivision* failed at Kursk is not a matter of contention. The division managed to only reach the Psel River, not even halfway to its final objective at Kursk. It suffered high casualties in both manpower and materiel that proved to be irreplaceable. Even before *Zitadelle* began, *Totenkopfdivision* suffered from deficiencies caused in part by Nazi racial policy, with thousands of potential replacements used as guards at camps and materiel production slowed and delayed by the deportation and extermination of skilled labor. During the battle itself, those shortages had a noticeable impact on the division's ability to successfully complete its objectives as the division often lacked the power it needed to break through Soviet defenses in a timely manner. Contempt for the fighting skills of the Soviet soldier caused *Totenkopfdivision* soldiers to continue to expose themselves to unnecessary risk and pay for it with their lives. Finally, the fanaticism that drove *Totenkopfdivision* in combat caught the attention of the Red Army and convinced the Soviet High Command that they posed the greatest threat and therefore were to be stopped at all costs. Soviet soldiers no longer retreated as in the past, largely choosing instead to fight to the death while immense counterattacks helped bleed *Totenkopfdivision* dry.

¹⁹⁶ Glantz, *The Battle of Kursk*, 28.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

Yet while Nazi racial ideology had a negative impact on *Totenkopfdivision's* performance, one cannot say with any degree of certainty that it was the decisive factor. No German division penetrated Soviet defenses as far as *Totenkopfdivision*, but it is logical to assume that even if the negative impacts of Nazi racial ideology were absent, *Zitadelle* still would have failed. Simply put, the German Army simply did not have the same capabilities as it did in 1941, and the Red Army was far better prepared to stop them. The military situation was vastly different from June 1941 and even Stalingrad, and the Soviets had long since figured out how to counter the tactics that the *Wehrmacht* had been using since 1939. Nazi racial ideology hurt *Totenkopfdivision*, but it did not lose *Totenkopfdivision* the Battle of Kursk.

Conclusion

“They shared everything – joy and sorrow – and, in the end, gave double what they were still able to give.”
- SS-Oberführer Karl Ullrich¹⁹⁸

The survivors of *Totenkopfdivision* surrendered to the Americans in May 1945. Ironically enough, their last act as a unit was to disarm any remaining camp guards at Mauthausen, a condition of the American acceptance of their surrender. It was hoped that since *Totenkopfdivision* had surrendered to the Americans, they would not be turned over to the Soviets and would therefore be spared captivity in a Soviet prisoner of war camp in Siberia. The Americans, however, had different ideas and promptly marched the men of *Totenkopfdivision* over to Soviet lines and turned them over. This was too much for Karl Ullrich, who proclaimed, “The Americans had deceived us! The disappointment was enormous, devastating, and incomprehensible...the march over to the Russians was a road of suffering and the Golgotha of the 3. SS-Panzer-Division ‘Totenkopf’!”¹⁹⁹ Years of captivity followed, and many of the men of *Totenkopfdivision* failed to return home afterwards—arguably a fitting end for those whose entire existence depended on death.

At the heart of *Totenkopfdivision*’s failure in the East was Nazi racial ideology. Nazi racial thought was instilled in the men of *Totenkopfdivision* during training and during day-to-day operations, relentlessly forced into them by Theodor Eicke, and they believed in it to the end. The belief in their racial superiority pushed these men to needlessly expose themselves to

¹⁹⁸ Ullrich, *Like a Cliff in the Ocean*, 281.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 277.

danger. High casualty rates impacted both the number and the quality of the men in the division, that is, these men were irreplaceable both in numbers and experience. Thousands of potential reinforcements were kept from the front lines to guard the concentration camps. This number only increased as the war progressed and Oswald Pohl overhauled the camp system. Valuable equipment proved difficult to provide and replace as the Nazis turned more and more to slave labor to fill the deficiencies in their factories. Skilled laborers were replaced by unskilled workers simply because the original laborers were Jewish. Armaments production was constantly interrupted by deportations of Jewish workers, and conditions in the labor camps ensured that production was kept low. In the end, the Nazis were more concerned with exterminating their victims than with using them for labor. The negative impact of Nazi racial ideology on *Totenkopfdivision* is exemplified by *Totenkopfdivision*'s performance during the Battle of Kursk in 1943. *Totenkopfdivision* lacked the strength and the material it needed to break through the Soviet defenses and successfully advance on their objectives.

While this study demonstrates the negative impact of such policies, it does not argue another outcome to the war. Rather, these findings are important because current scholarship fails to connect the *Waffen* SS to the Holocaust. The traditional line of thought is that the *Waffen* SS was distinct from the *Totenkopfverbände*, and, while involved in war crimes of its own, the *Waffen* SS is absolved from responsibility for the concentration camps. The findings of this paper suggest otherwise. If the *Waffen* SS is not held responsible for its ties to the Holocaust, it opens the door for total disassociation and denial. This in turn creates misunderstanding as to how the Holocaust could have happened and promotes the belief that it cannot happen again. While not every member of the *Waffen* SS was directly responsible for the murder of millions, at minimum they fought for a regime and an ideology that was entirely dependent on genocide and

subjugation. Disassociation means that the *Waffen SS* becomes just another fighting group and their criminality is erased. The victims are forgotten.

The evidence discussed in this paper provides a clear link between the Holocaust and the *Waffen SS*. *Totenkopfdivision* was a product of the concentration camp system and it was an invaluable part of the *Waffen SS*. Ullrich argued that *Totenkopfdivision* and the *Waffen SS* did nothing wrong during the war. To allow such thought to stand uncorrected is to permit the revision of history. If history is revised and *Totenkopfdivision* is absolved from blame, then the ideas that *Totenkopfdivision* fought for are allowed remain unchallenged. The memory and horror of the Holocaust are replaced by political fiction with a racist agenda, and the path to repetition becomes exponentially easier. Such things should and must be unacceptable.

Appendix A

SS-Ranks and their US Army Equivalent²⁰⁰

| SS-Rank | US Army Equivalent |
|--|---------------------------|
| <i>SS-Schütze</i> | Private |
| <i>SS-Oberschütze</i> | Private First Class |
| <i>SS-Sturmmann</i> | Acting Corporal |
| <i>SS-Rottenführer</i> | Corporal |
| <i>SS-Unterscharführer</i> | Sergeant |
| <i>SS-Scharführer</i> | Staff Sergeant |
| <i>SS-Oberscharführer</i> | Technical Sergeant |
| <i>SS-Hauptscharführer</i> | Master/First Sergeant |
| <i>SS-Sturmscharführer</i> | Sergeant Major |
| <i>SS-Untersturmführer</i> | Second Lieutenant |
| <i>SS-Obersturmführer</i> | First Lieutenant |
| <i>SS-Hauptsturmführer</i> | Captain |
| <i>SS-Sturmbannführer</i> | Major |
| <i>SS-Obersturmbannführer</i> | Lieutenant Colonel |
| <i>SS-Oberführer/SS-Standartenführer</i> | Colonel |
| <i>SS-Brigadeführer</i> | Brigadier General |
| <i>SS-Gruppenführer</i> | Major General |
| <i>SS-Obergruppenführer</i> | Lieutenant General |
| <i>SS-Oberstgruppenführer</i> | General |
| <i>Reichsführer-SS</i> | (None) |

²⁰⁰ U.S. War Department, *Handbook on Germany Military Forces*, 586-587.

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