Heinrich Himmler Biography

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Biography

The German National Socialist politician Heinrich Himmler (1900-1945) commanded the SS, Hitler's elite troops, and was head of the Gestapo. He was perhaps the most powerful and ruthless man in Nazi Germany next to Hitler himself.

Born in Munich, Bavaria, on Oct. 7, 1900, Heinrich Himmler was the son of the former tutor of one of the Bavarian princes. In World War I he took his first opportunity to join the army (1917), but owing to his frail health he never reached the front. Yet he continued soldiering in veterans' bands after the war while a student at the university in Munich, and in November 1923 he marched in Hitler's ill-fated Beer Hall Putsch. After a brief flirt with the leftist Strasser faction of the Nazis, the young anti-Semitic fanatic joined Hitler in 1926 as deputy propaganda chief.

In January 1929 Himmler found his "calling" with his appointment as commander of the blackshirt SS (*Schutzstaffel*)--then still a small, untrained bodyguard. With characteristic drive and pedantic precision he rapidly turned this organization into an elite army of 50,000--including its own espionage system (SD). After the Nazis came to power in 1933, Himmler took over and expanded the Gestapo (*Geheime Staatspolizei,* secret police). In 1934 he liquidated Ernst Roehm, chief of the SA (storm troopers), and thus gained autonomy for the SS, which took charge of all concentration camps.

From this power base, to which he added the position of chief of all German police forces in June 1936 and that of minister of the interior in August 1943, Himmler coordinated the entire Nazi machinery of political suppression and racial "purification." From 1937 on, the entire German population was screened for "Aryan" racial purity by Himmler's mammoth bureaucratic apparatus. After the invasion of eastern Europe it became Himmler's task to "Germanize" the occupied areas and to deport the native populations to concentration camps.

After the plot of July 1944 against Hitler, Himmler also became supreme commander of all home armies. In 1943 he made contacts with the Western Allies in an attempt to preserve his own position and to barter Jewish prisoners for his own safety--an action which caused his expulsion from the party shortly before Hitler's death. On May 21, 1945, Heinrich Himmler was captured while fleeing from the British at Bremervoerde. Two days later he took poison and died.