

their own decisions, as well as to boost their standing among competitors for power. Whether or not Hitler choreographed a deliberately competitive instability to enhance his own dominion—a matter on which historians disagree—this dynamic radically dislocated the conduct of government after 1933. Access to Hitler—literally, gaining entry to his presence—became decisive. This was easier for Hitler's most trusted party comrades, who could meet him face-to-face in his conversational evenings or at Nazi Party events. The work of ministers and civil servants, by contrast, was impeded by Hitler's repudiation of established bureaucratic procedure and collective decision-making (cabinet meetings withered and finally vanished in 1938), and his reliance on his own instincts. 'I know if one of my decisions or actions is right', he explained to Hess. 'At that moment I can't yet say why, but I feel that it is right and developments will prove its rightness.'

The most consequential effect of the combination of Hitler's supreme responsibility with his cavalier approach to decision-making was that it fostered what might be called a politics of anticipatory fulfilment or political pre-emption. Hitler indulged his providential visions in rhetorical gestures and digressions, rather than in orderly instructions; he was also prone to irresolution, to 'choosing not to choose' until his 'instinct' took over. Subordinates filled the gaps between the broad ideological frameworks he laid down and the political conclusions that could be drawn from them, thereby propelling policy forward with an almost self-acting momentum. With their bureaucracies, they 'work[ed] towards the Führer', as one Nazi official put it in 1934, in a phrase that has come to encapsulate the regime's cumulative drive. We will encounter this dynamic at its most devastating in the crystallization of anti-Jewish policy during the war.

## The SS and police state

Brute force saturated and sustained the Nazi political system. Neither Hitler's dictatorship nor his most radical policies would

have been possible without one of the most fateful shifts in the distribution of power after 1933. This was the takeover of the German police and security forces by Heinrich Himmler and their alignment with the SS, through which the SS was transformed into the most powerful and dreaded organization in the 'Third Reich'. This transformation represented virtually a second, creeping seizure of power. It foreshadowed a comprehensive system of terror that would not only anticipate and neutralize alleged threats to the body politic, but also justify the powerful security apparatus this demanded.

The SS *was* the Nazi terror state, in that it was the supreme institutional embodiment of prerogative power and the rule of exception imposed by force. It achieved a position outside legal control and ethical norms, and operated across the political spectrum from the policing of everyday life to top-secret projects of mass murder. With Hitler's endorsement, Himmler inserted the SS as a para-state agency into those fields of policy and action that they deemed beyond the capacity of even the Nazified German state. Its role in the massacre of SA leaders in July 1934 was an early example that was crucial to cementing the power of the SS; but it was soon to be massively exceeded by the SS's leading role in racial war and genocide.

When Himmler had taken command in 1929, the SS was a tiny subsidiary of the SA tasked with guarding Hitler. Inspired by murky visions of a future Teutonic-Nordic warrior community, Himmler expanded the SS and recast it as a racial and ideological elite, a quasi-religious order bound in personal fealty to himself and Hitler, and dedicated to values of loyalty and—Himmler's repeated watchword—'decency'. His own unimpressive persona, his insecurity and bizarre beliefs were compensated for by an obsessive attention to bureaucratic detail that gave him the edge over less meticulous rivals. His indispensable right-hand man from 1931 was the coldly ambitious Reinhard Heydrich, who took charge of what became the SS surveillance and security arm, the