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Imperfect Mobility: Analyzing the Waffen SS as a Means of Social
Mobility in Nazi Germany

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of
Honors Studies in History

by

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Spring 2024

History

J William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

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Acknowledgments

The list of people for me to thank is far too long for immense detail, however, there are several people whom I must thank. First, my thanks to Dr. Laurence Hare for being a valued advisor who has prepared me for my future research and endeavors with timely and sound advice. Thank you to the members of the committee who have spent their time analyzing my work and providing valuable feedback. My friends deserve their share of acknowledgment as well for providing welcome breaks from the monotony and camaraderie through times when college was not fun. Finally, thank you to my parents who have given me the greatest gift of all by believing in me in all that I do.

NOTE: The term Waffen SS will be used as an umbrella term to describe the combat branch of the Nazi party. Other terms were used in the early-mid 1930s, however, for clarity's sake Waffen SS will be used.

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Abstract

The military arm of the Nazi party, the Waffen SS, is an intense point of study by military historians. The Waffen SS are a well-documented force and are unique in their dual role as both a military and political elite. That dual role deserves analysis to better understand the dynamics of Nazi Germany and the evolution of its war machine. In this evolution the Waffen SS greatly expanded and as a result recruitment and volunteer numbers rose. The goal of this thesis is to examine how the Waffen SS who were known for their brutality could attract so many people for voluntary recruitment. The explanation of the ability of the SS to recruit was through an imperfect form of social mobility offered due to their elite status. The memoirs of SS veterans both German and non-German show a life of hardship as payment for their place in society. The hardship these veterans faced is supported by analyzing the combat records of various SS divisions and post-war analysis of the SS's performance. These memoirs and historians' analysis of the reasons why men joined the SS suggest that the SS sold itself as social mobility to young men in exchange for service in Hitler's elite order. SS volunteers all had something to gain either through educational means, social status, employment, job security, or family benefits. All these gains impacted how the SS was able to recruit and the experience of their recruits.

Introduction

As the National Socialist Party (NSDAP) in Germany grew in power in the 1930s, so too did the SS, the elite guard, police force, and shock troopers of the regime. Far removed from their original role as bodyguards for top officials within Nazi leadership, the SS took on a more prominent role with an increased array of new responsibilities. After 1933, The SS became responsible for new administrative and police functions. Crucially, these changes also included a

new set of military responsibilities, which led to the creation of troop formations independent from the regular German army.¹ By the end of the Second World War, the Waffen SS, the name given to the combat arm of the SS, would field 38 divisions.² This expansion naturally led to increased recruitment needs, and the organization found itself reaching out to people from a wider range of class backgrounds. These recruits would go on to be rank-and-file members of the SS or in some cases travel to various cadet or officer candidate schools designed to train the Nazi elite.

The purpose of this thesis is to study the ways that Waffen SS leaders attempted to recruit individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds into their elite unit between the so-called *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power) in 1933 and the end of the war in 1945. It considers the promises that recruiters made to attract suitable candidates and also the ways that the candidates themselves responded to these appeals. The fact that the SS swelled in size so drastically in roughly a decade owed a great deal to its propaganda and recruitment efforts, which emphasized the SS's position as a political and military elite within Nazi Germany. As is evident in the memoirs of a number of SS recruits, the Waffen SS sold itself as a unique means of swift social mobility within the emerging Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*, the so-called community of the people. This unique culture is evident in first-hand accounts of both German and non-German volunteers. Postwar recollections of the combat and conduct of the Waffen SS indicate the price paid by SS men for their membership in the organization. I contend that the Waffen SS was its own subculture in Nazi Germany that offered the enticement of social mobility, and that promise,

¹Charles W. Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction: The SS Death's Head Division, 1933-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), xvii.

²George H. Stein, *The Waffen SS: Hitler's Elite Guard at War, 1939-1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 135.

even when it proved illusory, shaped the experiences of the men who participated in the organization.

While these SS men all sought to be part of an elite fascist force, they had their own reasons for joining the SS.³ It is easy in historical analysis to relegate the Waffen SS to the stereotype for Nazi war crimes or as fascist thugs. However, simply focusing on acts of evil does not necessarily create a nuanced view of the organization, nor does it fully explain the motives of its agents. Some SS veterans, such as Erwin Bartmann (1923-2012), fought for the SS while not being members of the Nazi Party. Bartmann joined the SS despite not formally being a party member and would go on to serve on the Eastern Front.⁴ Many other Germans and even some foreigners would also volunteer for the SS, and though some were Nazis or from far-right parties, this was not the case for all. The SS sold itself as a unique facet of German society that appealed to people who were not registered Nazis or German nationals. Bartmann and other volunteers did not want to join another branch; they wanted to join the SS. Propaganda was a large factor in this, as the group convinced young men that the SS was special and that they would join a unique strata of society that was separated from the rest. Bartmann and others' accounts combined with what the SS told them indicate that there was an appeal to joining the SS. This non-fascist appeal came from the idea that the SS was a special group of men. The SS was a method of social mobility based upon notions of eliteness that gave these men privileges for membership. By joining the SS, these men ascended into an elite brotherhood within Third Reich.

³Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy: The SS Leadership, 1925-1939* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 38-40.

⁴Erwin Bartmann and Derik Hammond, *Für Volk and Führer the Memoir of a Veteran of the 1St SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler* (Solihull, West Midlands: Helion & Company, 2013), 341-43.

The growth of the Waffen SS is linked to the Nazi revolution and its ideals that complicated notions of class in the Nazi regime. The revolution, as David Schoenbaum described in his work, *Hitler's Social Revolution*, was a “dual revolution” that created a “world of general perplexity” regarding class.⁵ He describes this dual revolution as one of both “means and ends,” that both depended on yet also waged war against bourgeois and industrial society.⁶ Tim Mason’s work builds on this and suggests that the political and social structure of Weimar Germany fell apart due to the Republic’s failure to create meaningful social and class compromises that meant the regime fell short in its goal of rising above class conflict.⁷ Both authors grapple with the fact that the promise of transcending social class was vital to the rise of Nazism and key to their vision of the future of Germany. Their utopian aspect of *Volksgemeinschaft* hinged on escaping the contrasts of social classes.⁸ There is debate over the specifics of *Volksgemeinschaft* and its true goals within a Nazi context.⁹ The general conclusion is that the Nazis failed at creating their classless utopia. Mason viewed *Volksgemeinschaft* as propaganda that concealed the reality of class relations in Nazi Germany.¹⁰ Schoenbaum described the campaign as a means to show a veneer of an equal society.¹¹

These conclusions of general failure are correct, but the example of Waffen SS recruitment suggests that such ideals had a powerful appeal, even if they also illustrate its contradictions. The SS is difficult to situate in a societal structure that used a utopian ideal seeking, as Konrad Jarausch argues, to “create a true people’s community, erasing class

⁵David Schoenbaum, *Hitlers Social Revolution* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 284.

⁶Schoenbaum, *Hitlers Social Revolution*, XXII.

⁷Timothy Mason, *Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class*, ed. Jane Caplan (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 56.

⁸Konrad H. Jarausch, *Out of Ashes: A New History of Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2015), 262, 274.

⁹See Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto, *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany: Social Engineering and Private Lives* (Oxford: Oxford university press, 2018).

¹⁰Mason, *Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class*, 72, 81.

¹¹Schoenbaum, *Hitlers Social Revolution*, 55.

distinctions, religious differences, and regional divergences.”¹² The SS and its specific military arm, the Waffen SS, had the privileges and internal dynamics that mirrored the experience of belonging to an upper-class echelon. This means that there were essentially two parallel social hierarchies in Nazi Germany. There was the already established upper middle and lower class coexisting alongside a new Nazi hierarchy with the Waffen SS as an elite. According to Konrad Jarausch, *Volksgemeinschaft* would “treat all members equally, while respecting a hierarchy of achievement.”¹³

Using Jarausch’s analysis as a template, we can see how the SS operated within *Volksgemeinschaft* atop this alleged “hierarchy of achievement.” It offered a means of moving within Nazi social structures from multiple strata of society. This hybrid society of *Volksgemeinschaft* ideals combined with the reality of the hierarchy of achievement created what Schoenbaum referred to as “a world that defied the laws of social gravity without replacing them.”¹⁴ The SS grew and thrived in the Nazi regime precisely because it embodied the principles and the social aspirations of the *Volksgemeinschaft*.

Though the SS grew during the 1930s, it was notable that someone would join the SS as opposed to a standard German military formation such as the Luftwaffe (Airforce), Heer (Army), or Kriegsmarine (Navy). SS training was brutal and so was their experience in combat. The validity of SS promises regarding job training and family benefits was questionable. The reasons why people chose the SS combined with thoughts about society in Nazi society suggest a more complex picture. Entry to the SS meant societal mobility in some capacity and was a feature that the Waffen SS used to sell itself to a generation of young men.

¹²Jarausch, *Out of Ashes*, 262.

¹³Jarausch, *Out of Ashes*, 273-74.

¹⁴Schoenbaum, *Hitlers Social Revolution*, 283-84.

The Waffen SS: Growing and Becoming Elite

The Waffen SS themselves are a unique formation within history. Many entities in history had honor guards, which was the original purpose of the SS. However, no other formation was able to go from a small honor guard to a military formation numbering slightly under one million personnel.¹⁵ With this in mind, it is necessary to look at the overall origins, growth, and role of the Waffen SS in Nazi Germany before an analysis of why the SS was so appealing is possible. In this tracking of growth and the general history of the organization, there must also be an analysis of the term elite. The concept of the SS as an elite had multiple facets which included the actions they performed, their cultural significance, and their physical or athletic prowess. By tracking various aspects of the organization's growth, the three different notions of eliteness establish a baseline of where the SS stood within Nazi society.

The Waffen SS was a subsection of the greater SS organization which served at the behest of the Nazi party. The SS in general had a multitude of duties that included but were not limited to police work, honor guard roles, concentration camp duties, and eventually combat operations. The Waffen SS fulfilled the personal guard and army aspect of what the SS would be to the Nazis but could also be considered the elite within the elite. If the SS were to be the Third Reich's general elite then the Waffen SS was the method through which the SS could use an elite group for extreme force. John Steiner stated SS members across all sections were encouraged to think of themselves with an "*Elitebewusstsein* (elite consciousness) as a group."¹⁶ This quote is important when looking specifically at the Waffen SS regarding statements that gave the Waffen SS the title of the Imperial Guard of the National-Socialist regime.¹⁷ It was very clear that the

¹⁵Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 290.

¹⁶Steiner quoted in Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy*, 37.

¹⁷Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's S.S.*, trans. Richard Barry (London: Secker & Warburg, 1970), 493.

Waffen SS was designed to be Adolf Hitler's and by extension, the Nazi party's personal army, police force, and political enforcers. Moreover, the Waffen SS was encouraged to take their imperial guard idea beyond the confines of Germany. Historian Evertjan van Roekel stated that the SS had to think of themselves as "the advocate and protector of the Germanic or Nordic race."¹⁸ This quote shows that the SS assumed a peculiar hybrid role in society. They were intended to serve as a Nazi praetorian guard while also serving as the military will of the Germanic race according to Nazi ideology. This created a fusion of both military and political status that is noteworthy when thinking about how the SS fit within Nazi society and was able to recruit.

In many ways, the SS was a return to older definitions and methods of elite castes of various societies. This aspect of SS status is what established them as a cultural elite. SS member Richard Darré noted that regarding the *Volk* (people) there was a need to form "a new nobility in order to lead the Volk."¹⁹ He was referring to the old ideas of Germanic/Nordic aristocracy which he felt had been instrumental in the health of the Germanic people. Darré's opinion on the matter is important because he was a high-ranking member of the SS who specialized in racial matters.²⁰ When Darré was experimenting with his ideas regarding Germanic consciousness and the need for a new aristocracy, Darré found the SS suitable for the job. This idea played perfectly into the idea of the SS as the guardians and elite men of the Third Reich. To further this return to the old ways, a large theme of the Waffen SS was to harken back not only to ancient nobility but specifically to warrior classes of old. It may seem oxymoronic to use old warrior classes as references for a new nobility. However, the use of old warrior classes to help create a new one

¹⁸Evertjan Van Roekel, *As Political Soldiers We Face Moscows Hordes Dutch Volunteers in the Waffen-SS* (Wilmington, De: Vernon Press, 2022), 13.

¹⁹Jay Hatheway, *In Perfect Formation: SS Ideology and the SS-Junkerschule-Tölz* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Pub. 1999), 21.

²⁰Hatheway, *In Perfect Formation*, 24.

was not oxymoronic. The new aristocracy was not new in the sense that it had never been done before. It was new in its combination of elite warriors with a modern fascist regime and the fact that many Nazis thought the nobility of old was lost and had to be reintroduced. There were many references to ancient knights, Vikings, and Prussian imperial guards all of which were respectively considered elite in their native cultures. The naming conventions of certain SS units were indicative of these references. Eventually, the 5th SS division would be known by its nickname *Wiking* (Viking) and the 33rd division would go by the name Charlemagne.²¹ The reference to ancient elite classes of warriors in the events preceding the Second World War explains why the SS as a cultural elite was appealing on an intangible level. A key component of the Waffen SS's growth was a byproduct of intense propaganda regarding military elites of old to romanticize being in the Waffen SS and try and equate them to past warriors. The impact of this language used, specifically references to ancient warriors, to establish a cultural elite was combined with the psyche of Germans during the interwar era for maximum effect.

During the interwar period, Germany was dealing with the consequences of being the losers of the First World War. Rampant inflation, the shame of the Treaty of Versailles, the treaty's War Guilt Clause, and reparations to the Allies of World War One had collectively wreaked havoc on German Society. Due to this during the 1930s youth were disillusioned with the state of Germany due to the perceived materialism and passivity of the Weimar Republic.²² Felix Steiner, an SS officer who served as the commander of the III SS Panzer Corps, agreed, and he felt that the conditions of the 1930s impacted the youth of Europe which in turn contributed to SS recruitment. In his essay, Steiner states that the volunteer movement was "a

²¹Stein, *The Waffen SS*, Appendix 4.

²²P. D. Stachura, "The Ideology of the Hitler Youth in the Kampfzeit," *Journal of Contemporary History* 8, no. 3 (1973): 157-58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260285>.

result of deeper 'psychological' factors related to the intellectual despair of Europe's youth."²³ Steiner is a controversial figure amongst SS apologists, historians such as George Stein do admit that this specific claim of Steiner's does "possess some validity; certainly merits further investigation."²⁴ Stein is correct in his analysis that Steiner had a point for his thesis. For many young Germans, there was a need for some way out, something greater than lives of bearing war guilt for the First World War or as victims of the Great Depression. National Socialism and the organizations that would come from it, like the SS, "offered a fresh beginning, unlimited prospects and reward."²⁵ With the callbacks to knights, Vikings, and Prussian imperial guards, young German males had something to look back on with pride. When the SS began looking for more men, it was easy to sell the SS as the "new" imperial guard of Germany. The ease of this recruitment angle came from Darré's ideas. There was a new elite aristocracy being formed by the Nazis for the betterment of the Germanic peoples and cultures that needed to recruit young men. This ties back to the SS as a method of societal mobility as the SS was an aspect of the new path to undertake to change one's status. When joining an organization like the SS one could move from victim to actor in Germanic culture and therefore the world. This movement was into a group that the German people had deemed culturally elite and powerful for the goal of supporting the health of Germanic and Nordic Peoples.

The Waffen SS as an elite group had a difficult selection process. Waffen SS requirements were stringent regarding aspects like height, race, and health. Here is where physical aspects played a part in the general notion of SS elite status. Before the start of the Second World War height requirements for the SS was a minimum of five feet, ten inches which

²³Quoted in Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 140-41.

²⁴Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 141.

²⁵Stachura, "The Ideology of Hitler Youth," 158.

was noticeably taller than the average German man of military age in the 1930s.²⁶ Furthermore, the leader of the SS, Heinrich Himmler stated “Until 1936 we did not accept a man in the *Leibstandarte* (1st SS division) or the *Verfügungstruppe* (2nd SS division) if he had even one filled tooth.”²⁷ These strict physical requirements established the SS as a physical elite. This naturally made the SS appealing to the physically fit in Germany or young men who saw tall and active men who boxed, ran, rode horses, or competed in other sports. The reputation of being tall, strong, and racially pure was just one part of what made the SS achieve its own place in the Nazi regime. The SS being physically larger and more fit on average made them seem better than other groups in society due to their participation in major athletic events and the publicity that followed. For example, the SS was involved in the 1936 Olympic Games which shows a certain degree of elevation above normal people.²⁸ Hans Woellke broke the Olympic record in the shot put.²⁹ Woellke served as a police captain in an SS regiment and was killed on the Eastern Front in 1943.³⁰ When not competing, the SS provided event security and were near most of the athletes.³¹ The 1936 Olympics was the Third Reich’s way of showing off their progress under fascism and the SS played their part in the spectacle.

The fact that the SS supported the Olympics combined with their own necessary physical qualifications made the SS seem extremely selective in their requirements. These requirements may seem to be counterintuitive to the idea of the SS as social mobility, but that was not the case. To young Germans who were tall, athletic, and could prove their ancestry, the SS was a viable

²⁶Sophia Twarog, “Heights and Living Standards in Germany, 1850-1939: The Case of Wurttemberg,” in *National Bureau of Economic Research: Health and Welfare During Industrialization* ed. Richard H Steckel and Roderick Floud (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, January 1997), 305.

²⁷Himmler Quoted in Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 12.

²⁸Per Anders Rudling, “The Khatyn Massacre in Belorussia: A Historical Controversy Revisited,” in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Volume 26, Issue 1 (2012): 37.

²⁹Richard Donald Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 168.

³⁰International Olympic Committee, “Hans Woellke,” Olympics.com, accessed March 13, 2024, <https://olympics.com/en/athletes/hans-woellke>.

³¹Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics*, 97.

option to obtain status. The opportunity for those eligible to go to an organization that emphasized the cultivation of physical fitness and sporting events made the SS extremely appealing.

The final aspect of elite status shown in the rise of the Waffen SS was the most tangible and that was the actions the SS took to establish their eliteness. The growth and perceptions of the Waffen SS were no accident, German journalist and historian Konrad Heiden recalled his time observing the rise of National Socialism and stated that “The guard of the new Germany will be the SS.”³² To accomplish that lofty task, the SS had to thrive despite the existence of rivals. The elimination of rivals is a necessary aspect of SS analysis as it provided more resources and recruits for the SS to grow and thrive. Their primary rival was the SA (Sturmabteilung) who were the original paramilitary organization within the Nazi party and initially were in command of the early SS.³³ However, as the SS took on more difficult jobs and became bodyguards for high-profile party members a rivalry grew that would eventually be forced to a head. The rivalry with the SA was settled in 1934 when the SS executed the SA's leadership during the Night of the Long Knives with support from Hitler and the German military proper.³⁴ The SA did survive on paper after the purge, they were downsized and were never a legitimate threat politically or militarily. For their actions in the elimination of their rivals whom the Nazis deemed a problem, the SS was given independence as an organization within Nazi society.³⁵

With the SS cleansing themselves of their rivals and gaining independence, they could now begin the affair of growing into the military formation they would be by 1945. This growth

³²Konrad Heiden, *Der Führer: Hitler's Rise to Power*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1944), 307.

³³Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy*, 43.

³⁴Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 8-9.

³⁵Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy*, 45.

process came from the newfound independence of the SS as Ziegler notes in “a few years the SS achieved a virtual monopoly in the area of security.”³⁶ The SS having a degree of independence in the Nazi hierarchy combined with their security monopoly show how they were institutionally recognized as an elite. There were no rivals, the SA was essentially gone, and since they answered directly to Hitler and the Nazi elite, the SS was the most well-equipped and trusted force standing at Hitler’s disposal. Historians like Herbert Ziegler stated that “After achieving its formal independence Himmler's Black Order enlarged its sphere of influence...which enhanced its image as the elite of the new regime.”³⁷

Despite logistical struggles and competition for recruits, the SS steadily grew throughout the 1930s. The aforementioned SS monopoly on the internal security of Germany was achieved through a process that involved some training and basic armed formations. However, that was a small step in the growth and growing elite status of the SS. Eventually, the *SS-Vefügungstruppe* (SSVT) was established in 1934 with the formation being “intended to serve as the nucleus of an SS division.”³⁸ The SSVT were among the first combat troops of the Nazi party. They served as the nucleus for an SS division because they originally only had enough trained personnel for two regiments codenamed, *Deutschland* and *Germania*, respectively.³⁹ While originally small, they grew from the SSVT into the group they are more commonly known as, the 2nd SS Panzer Division, or *Das Reich* much to the irritation of the *Wehrmacht* or German military proper.⁴⁰ The German General Staff acknowledged an armed SS for political purposes, although they did fear that further militarization of the SS would lead to competition and the SS would challenge the army. This was avoided through compromise in late 1934 when the SS negotiated with the

³⁶Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy*, 45-6.

³⁷Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy*, 45.

³⁸Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 9.

³⁹Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 11.

⁴⁰Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 104.

Wehrmacht's general staff. This agreement let the SS begin setting up military schools and armed formations with the *Wehrmacht* being able to set forth certain guidelines for said schools. Guidelines were set by the *Wehrmacht* due to early SS schools receiving instructors from the Army.⁴¹

The only reason for these issues and the subsequent ability of the SS to successfully participate in these negotiations was their elite status. With the sense of elite status gained from their actions, they had a base of power to negotiate from. The cultural and physical eliteness gave the SS part of their initial appeal for recruits which was a component of the *Wehrmacht's* fear of the SS becoming too large and powerful. This competition for manpower encapsulated the unique position of the SS within the Nazi regime.

The Waffen SS was able to use its elite status to overcome prior stated challenges in the Waffen SS's growth like rivalries with the SA or *Wehrmacht*. For many young men this elite status and the subsequent adventure that came with it was a very large selling point. Historian George H. Stein believes this as well, citing elitism as a factor for many SS volunteers. However, elitism and the intangible factors were not the only factors that made the Waffen SS appealing.

The “Perks” of Joining the SS

With the Waffen SS established as the new warrior elite during the period there had to be boons for joining. Why would someone join the SS with its strict requirements and violent hazards? If the Waffen SS were a recreation of an old elite class or aristocracy, then it is too simple to just say that these young men wanted to simply go on a violent adventure just to be known as an elite for the sake of being elite. In any elite section of society, there are tangible rewards or material benefits to being within the elite. The SS offered a return to an old Germanic

⁴¹Hatheway, *In Perfect Formation*, 90.

idea of old warriors or aristocrats for cultural health. The alternative path offered by national socialism and the prescribed elite status of the SS appealed to some on a less tangible level. However, there were other more tangible offerings that the SS could make as a class of its own that further explains how the Waffen SS represented an opportunity for societal movement. The chance at social mobility is what allowed the SS to recruit and grow to the size it did. When the status and psychological gains are put in conversation with each other and what the SS as an organization could offer tangibly, the SS as an appealing group becomes a clearer picture.

The Nazis failed to create a truly classless society, but in some ways, organizations like the SS blurred the lines. SS commander Heinrich Himmler believed that the SS was elite to the outside world but within the organization, there was less social hierarchy. Even though there were ranks within the SS above all else, everyone in the organization was an SS member regardless of rank.⁴² This idea was seen in practice with an example from a veteran. Erwin Bartmann remembers that in the Leibstandarte, the 1st SS Panzer Division, officers were not referred to by the title Herr or Mr. During an inspection by an officer Bartmann referred to him only by his rank, remarking “In the Leibstandarte, we never addressed anyone of higher rank as Herr.”⁴³ This was common practice in the rest of the German military as Herr was a title or sign of respect. This was notable because this dropping of one title shows more parity in the SS between officers and enlisted. When one would address an officer with their actual rank nothing more was needed because, at the end of the day, they were all SS men and worthy of some level of mutual respect. One did not need to be wealthy enough to afford equipment or have a lineage that gave them SS membership. Herbert Ziegler sums up this notion best with his analysis stating “Men did not need to come from a family of high status or income in order to embark on a career

⁴²Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy*, 58.

⁴³Bartmann and Hammond, *Für Volk and Führer*, 47.

in the SS.⁴⁴ Blurred social lines show the SS trying to fit in ideas of *Volksgemeinschaft*. Specifically, the idea of the hierarchy of achievement, being an SS member was an achievement and gave people movement in a *Volksgemeinschaft* notion of hierarchy.

The use of old warrior classes for propaganda and its fit within *Volksgemeinschaft* ideals is complicated. Many of the warrior classes referenced by the SS were not known as beacons of societal mobility and operated in hierarchical structures. However, in the SS there was less difficulty in moving into this elite group as opposed to knightly titles. The SS was the modern-day Teutonic knight or Prussian Imperial guard, and they would be elite warriors like the past entities they partially emulated. But the adjective modern is where the distinction is. The SS would use modern technology, but they would also adapt to modern notions of status and societal standings. It is wrong to assume the SS tried to perfectly copy old warrior classes. They used said warrior groups' images and the mythos of these people to provide a cultural link and encourage people to join. Overall, why the SS's use of references to older groups with less social mobility may seem odd they must be contextualized. The SS only partially took from these groups and did have to adapt to their own time somewhat. The SS's attempt at being an elite group combined with their blurring of class lines made the group appear as one with significant opportunities for advancement in life.

Job security and future career prospects were a large component of volunteering for the SS both domestically and outside of Germany. The long service requirements while a disadvantage for some did provide the potential for years of steady employment. For the volunteers who were not from Germany proper, there was a hope that in their nation of origin, there would be some level of autonomy or favorable job placement in a post-war context. A case of study for favorable post-war status is the case of Leon Degrelle, the commander of the

⁴⁴Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy*, 58.

Walloon Legion of Belgian SS collaborators.⁴⁵ Degrelle is problematic because he was a member of Belgium's far-right Rexist party and was an SS apologist. However, in his memoir, there were potentially good outcomes for Belgium to Degrelle and his fellow Belgian SS men. When Germany declared war on the Soviet Union there was a need for more men. Degrelle and many Rexist viewed this as the opportunity "to command respect of the Reich" and a chance to win a position of prestige that would be favorable for them after the war when Europe would be reorganized under the Third Reich.⁴⁶ These men under Degrelle's command were eventually deployed to the Ardennes forest in Belgium in 1944 where they were given the task of recognizing Belgium.⁴⁷ Despite Degrelle's complicated past, he and his Belgian SS men believed that for their service they would gain something for Belgium.

The logic that encouraged Belgians to join the SS also applied to the Dutch. According to historian Evertjan van Roekel, the Waffen SS made membership appealing. Rationing was common during the period due to the war and the need for supplies but "SS soldiers and their families received supplies as a matter of priority."⁴⁸ Dutch SS volunteers were also promised that they could receive job training and civil jobs whenever they returned home like their Belgian counterparts. Diary entries from a Dutch SS volunteer named Mr. Luiken states, "They are conscripted into the SS for 6 months. On their return to the Netherlands, they are placed in a secretarial office and, after a longer period of study, may also qualify for higher-level jobs. My interest has been piqued."⁴⁹ He wrote this when describing friends who were about to depart for Munich for their SS training. Belgian and Dutch volunteers were told that they would be rewarded for SS service.

⁴⁵Léon Degrelle, *The Eastern Front: Memoirs of a Waffen SS Volunteer, 1941-1945* (Newport Beach, CA: Institute for Historical Review, 2014), 3.

⁴⁶Degrelle, *The Eastern Front*, 3-4.

⁴⁷Degrelle, *The Eastern Front*, 302.

⁴⁸Van Roekel, *As Political Soldiers We Face Moscow's Hordes*, 15.

⁴⁹Van Roekel, *As Political Soldiers We Face Moscow's Hordes*, 16.

Aside from jobs, education was a large perk that the SS could offer. In many countries, different classes have different levels of education. Historians acknowledge this and bring up examples of attempts at “elite” education throughout the rest of the world.⁵⁰ One would think of the stereotypical delineation between public and private schools or finishing academies as a certain barrier that is difficult to cross. While the lines are not always strict, they do represent a distinction in education among class lines. The Waffen SS provided a partial bypass on the notion of an educated versus uneducated distinction amongst the classes. The SS created officer cadet schools and worked with the Nazi idea of education to foster institutions that would fuel the SS. Despite the demanding racial and physical requirements, educational requirements were less stringent. Due to a different set of standards, roughly 40% of officer candidates pre-1938 had an elementary school education.⁵¹ While this appears as though the SS was watering down the quality of their officers, this was not the case due to the SS being a form of social mobility. For those who were racially worthy, it did not matter how educated one was. One could be molded by the schooling that the SS said was a “holistic approach to individual development.”⁵² If a farmer’s son could prove that he was Aryan, not communist, and physically fit, he could go and be educated to move into the new breed of Germany’s elite men. Upon acceptance to an SS officer school a candidate would learn sports, basic military history, and tactics along with other “elite” activities like fencing and sailing.⁵³

Another potential boon of SS membership was the family aspect through financial support for large Aryan families and maternal support. Though the Nazis were well-known eugenicists, the SS took part in eugenics in a way that provided the potential for significant gain.

⁵⁰Lisa Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 73.

⁵¹Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 14.

⁵²Hatheway, *In Perfect Formation*, 103.

⁵³Hatheway, *In Perfect Formation*, 102-3.

The Lebensborn program attempted to increase the Aryan race's population by encouraging racially pure marriages and the birth of more Aryan children. Where the SS benefitted from this was in the "welfare assistance to SS families having a large number of racially valuable children" and "maternity and child-care facilities to expectant mothers."⁵⁴ Furthermore, marriage laws stipulated racially poor marriages to purify the SS and overall increase birth and marriage rates. This was an attempt to solve a problem within Germany at the time. Post-World War One Germany exhibited the sharpest birthrate decline in Europe, reaching an unprecedented low in 1933.⁵⁵ The Lebensborn program was very problematic since it focused on racial purity and bureaucracy before marriage could occur along with child abduction.⁵⁶ The program also facilitated violence towards women and children. Due to these issues, family programs were a smaller aspect of the perks of joining the Waffen SS since their status as a perk of SS membership is debatable. Despite its disadvantages though, the Lebensborn program on paper showed an attempt at familial support and fostering greater birth rates. To a non-Nazi audience, this program was disgusting, but in the context of the SS and Nazi Germany, this was a benefit that the SS could offer to recruits.

Protection from arrest was the most unsavory perk the SS could provide. Herbert Maeger (1922-present) is the case study for this benefit of SS membership. Maeger was born in Belgium but had German parents. His father was a German veteran of World War One and Maeger considers himself as having two fatherlands in Germany and Belgium.⁵⁷ Despite being ethnically German, his parents were not fans of Adolf Hitler, and this caused tensions when the Nazis occupied Belgium. Maeger's mother openly called Hitler a criminal and a local official pointed

⁵⁴Larry V. Thompson "Lebensborn and the Eugenics Policy of the Reichsführer-SS." *Central European History* 4, no. 1 (1971): 54 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4545592>.

⁵⁵Thompson, "Lebensborn and the Eugenics Policy of the Reichsführer-SS," 56.

⁵⁶Thompson, "Lebensborn and the Eugenics Policy of the Reichsführer-SS," 54-55.

⁵⁷Herbert Maeger, *Lost Honour, Betrayed Loyalty* (Barnsley, UK: Frontline Books, 2019), 1-4.

out this was “ a very grave matter, and serious consequences could only be avoided by a very broad-minded course of action.”⁵⁸ Maeger recalled that given his situation, “It would be extremely helpful in this respect if I volunteered for the Waffen SS and my father agreed.”⁵⁹ He joined the SS as a teenager and was assigned to the 1st SS division in exchange for his mother not being arrested. Maeger did not sound pleased with this and in his memoir closes his statements about “volunteering” for the SS with “And I did not feel all that good about it either.”⁶⁰ In his memoir, Maeger asserts that he was pressured into joining the SS but regardless of pressure or not the SS did provide him and his family protection from arrest.

Overall, there were tangible benefits to joining the Waffen SS. There was potential for education, job security or opportunities, and potential support in either starting a family or assistance for already established families. All this material gain must be tied back to the elite status, specifically institutionalized eliteness. Without the growth of the SS through its elimination of rivals and the governmental sponsoring of SS entry into the elite none of the benefits would be possible. This ties back into societal mobility by showing the physical ways in which the SS offers mobility in society be it through education, family, or employment. When combined with the elite status of the SS the material gain may make for little surprise that the SS expanded to 38 divisions.

The Imperfections and Failures of the SS

While the benefits of fighting for the SS could potentially offer many things, the drawbacks must also be analyzed to create a more holistic view of the SS. There were factors such as the initial

⁵⁸Maeger, *Lost Honour, Betrayed Loyalty*, 13-14.

⁵⁹Maeger, *Lost Honour, Betrayed Loyalty*, 14.

⁶⁰Maeger, *Lost Honour, Betrayed Loyalty*, 14.

racial requirements that made SS life difficult. The main flaws in Waffen SS life became apparent upon signing up for the organization and beginning training. There were plenty of compounding factors that made the Waffen SS a form of societal mobility. However, this mobility was radically flawed for reasons that relate to many of the benefits of joining the SS. These issues included recruitment requirements, difficult training, difficult combat assignments, and questionable effectiveness of welfare benefits. The imperfections of being in the SS were a bargain made by volunteers with the hopes that they would be elite, become members of the new aristocracy, or receive material gain in the postwar world.

The SS did offer a modicum of job security, yet the service requirements were considered long. When the SS compromise with the *Wehrmacht* was negotiated, it then became necessary to acquire more manpower under strict service requirements. Said requirements were long service terms which for officers went up to twenty years with Non-commissioned officers serving twelve years and enlisted serving a four-year commitment.⁶¹ The aforementioned eliteness of the Waffen SS did help draw men in; however, this was still a rather long commitment that was perceived as a negative of SS service by some.

For officers, the SS would set up several academies for the training of SS cadets. SS *Junkerschulen* (Junker Schools) were instituted in Bad Tölz and Braunschweig to cultivate an officer corps for the now-growing SS. Life in these cadet schools was exceedingly difficult. Along with 47 hours of classes a week, “all cadets were required to ski, swim, sail, fence, box and partake in organized track and field events.”⁶² The whole point of these schools was to weed out the weak who were not worthy of being members of the new breed of the elite that the Waffen SS was to take in society. The attrition rate at these schools would peak around 40%

⁶¹Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 12.

⁶²Hatheway, *In Perfect Formation*, 102-3.

which shows the difficulty and brutality of the curriculum at these schools.⁶³ This fuels the idea of the Waffen SS as a class within society as these schools were not necessarily doing anything new. The Junkerschule was specifically designed to create a “modern descendant of the Teutonic Knight.”⁶⁴ Overall, this brutality was calculated and served the purpose of furthering the elite reputation of the SS by creating tough and capable men to lead the SS.

The growing officer corps was also fueled by other institutions such as the Napolas which were secondary schools designed to cultivate “top-ranking government and army personnel” according to Lisa Pine.⁶⁵ While not specifically built for the SS, it was only natural that the SS would gravitate towards the Reich’s secondary schools like the Napolas. The SS would eventually go on to be a primary influence on these schools with the hope of encouraging its cadets to join the Waffen SS. The experience of preparation for life in the new elite shows the other side of the mobility given by the Waffen SS. In his autobiography, Peter Neumann who would become an officer within the SS referred to his time in the Napolas as “gloomy, icy, and horrid.”⁶⁶ Napola cadets recalled having to wrestle dogs, being pushed to their extreme limits physically, having to box each other, and competing in simulations to prepare for eventual wargames.⁶⁷ Complaint or weakness was also not allowed as cadet Hans Müncheberg described his experience as difficult since any sign of weakness was frowned upon and showing it would lead to accusations of cowardice.⁶⁸ Through institutions like the Junkerschule and the Napolas is the SS fulfilling its promise of education. The rough experiences did not represent deceit on the SS’s part, these men did receive an education. However, these conditions do indicate that in

⁶³Hatheway, *In Perfect Formation*, 130.

⁶⁴Hatheway, *In Perfect Formation*, 132.

⁶⁵Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 75.

⁶⁶Quoted in Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 77.

⁶⁷Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 75-77.

⁶⁸Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 75.

exchange for the education that the SS provided, life would be difficult and that there was a price to pay.

Personal accounts of Waffen SS training for enlisted troopers expound upon the experiences of those who went to officer or Nazi educational programs with the intent to serve in the Waffen SS. Like their officer counterparts, enlisted men were required to go through intense training in boxing, track and field, and other sports. This served to lessen the disparity between officers and enlisted and also showed an enhanced degree of difficulty compared to standard military training of the time. For the enlisted who received a less personal training curriculum, accidents were more common and resulted in injury. Erwin Bartmann's account of SS basic training for the enlisted indicates that it was rather dangerous. An accident occurred in training that Bartmann remembers as "a loud crack echoed through the room... Max, a blond-haired recruit from around Kiel, clasped his knee with both hands."⁶⁹ This accident was due to a unique quirk during maintenance of the standard German pistol that led to a negligent discharge when not cleaned properly.⁷⁰ Another incident occurred when right after graduation a man named Becker was accidentally shot by an on-duty sentry and while not killed would be hospitalized.⁷¹ The enlisted training program indicates that the SS was trying to cultivate elite men and give these men status, just in a rather difficult way. All in all, this may not seem very different from the officer's experience. Truth be told, the enlisted versus officer training experience is not different concerning danger. However, it is important to establish that the two most basic components of a fighting force, the leaders and the rank and file, suffered through extraordinary difficulty before they even went into combat. Where the import of highlighting the officer and enlisted experiences separately is to provide the background for what would happen when officer

⁶⁹Bartmann and Hammond, *Für Volk and Führer*, 44.

⁷⁰Bartmann and Hammond, *Für Volk and Führer*, 43-4.

⁷¹Bartmann and Hammond, *Für Volk and Führer*, 50.

and enlisted would finally meet during the major preparations for combat in the Second World War.

The difficulties faced by both enlisted and officers increased when the two entities combined and formed official units for war games. These difficulties had extremely fatal consequences furthering the danger of joining the Waffen SS. As war grew nearer, the SS were permitted the right to use Army land for war games. Safety practices were not followed with Himmler stating that the SS must be used to “being within 50 to 70 meters of the explosions of his own artillery fire.”⁷² For context, in standard military practice “the method of engagement when the target is (rounds will impact) within 600 meters of friendly troops” is considered “danger close” which indicates a certain degree of risk for friendly personnel.⁷³ Himmler noted that it was sad that prime German youth must sadly be cut down in training accidents, but there was a method behind the idea to ignore safety in war games.⁷⁴ This came from an idea that suggested that the pain endured during training would ensure that when war came the Waffen SS would be ready to perform at their highest possible level and save lives in the long run.

The casualty rates of the SS did not support the notion that the dangerous training methods were effective. Tim Ripley’s analysis of combat on the Eastern Front suggests that some units suffered somewhere “in the region of 75 percent casualty rates.”⁷⁵ These casualty rates are supported by where the SS divisions found themselves in combat. When combat started the Waffen SS commonly found themselves at the tip of the proverbial spear for German assaults. The 3rd SS division would be part of the vanguard during Fall Gelb, the German invasion of Western Europe. Despite enduring over 1,000 casualties the SS proved they could be capable

⁷²Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 15.

⁷³Headquarters, Department of the Army, FM 6-30 Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Observed Fire (1991), 35.

⁷⁴Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 16.

⁷⁵Tim Ripley, *Waffen-SS Panzers: Eastern Front* (London, UK: Windmill Military, 2015), 7.

fighters.⁷⁶ This led to the SS in general being given more difficult assignments. For the German invasion of the Soviet Union, SS divisions would be part of the vanguard advancing toward Leningrad.⁷⁷ Despite any material gain, glory won, or ideology upheld, the Waffen SS would endure the horrid conditions of the Second World War as the price for joining the new aristocracy of the Third Reich.

Memoirs provide the bulk of information for terrifying conditions in combat. Leon Degrelle (1906-1994) remembered the 3rd company of his brigade that “threw itself into the hand-to-hand fighting with such impetuosity that it promptly lost contact with the rest of the brigade.”⁷⁸ Close quarter fighting with modern weapons suggests brutality that supports high casualty rates. Building on this, the amount of dead and wounded was astounding to Degrelle. His view from a command post contained a full field ambulance with “Dozens of wretches, stretched out on the snow shivering and half-naked, their blood caked by the cold...”⁷⁹ Degrelle’s officer account coincides with enlisted accounts of combat. Herbert Maeger looks back on the war with horror. Upon finding dead soldiers Maeger remarked, “It was a nightmarish scene, and I was overwhelmed with despair that I could do nothing but experience each death stricken with horror.”⁸⁰ He vividly remembered the bodies that “were squashed to a bloody pulp.”⁸¹ These men were foreign volunteers both being from Belgium. However, their experiences do not indicate favoritism. Erwin Bartmann, who was German, served in the same division as Maeger. He remembers the death of one of his officers in his account of the war where he states “I stayed there for a moment, helplessly watching the last movements of his lips.”⁸² These quotes from

⁷⁶Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 119.

⁷⁷Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 152.

⁷⁸Degrelle, *The Eastern Front*, 177.

⁷⁹Degrelle, *The Eastern Front*, 177.

⁸⁰Maeger, *Lost Honour; Betrayed Loyalty*, 119.

⁸¹Maeger, *Lost Honour; Betrayed Loyalty*, 119.

⁸²Bartmann and Hammond, *Für Volk and Führer*, 82.

various memoirs of both German and non-German SS veterans indicate the savagery of the combat experience of Waffen SS soldiers. The brutality of the SS combat experience shows the large flaw of the deal made between the SS and its volunteers. The men received all the benefits of being in the SS at the price of a 75% chance they would be maimed or killed.

These men fought in barbaric situations and lost many friends and fellow servicemen. High casualty rates should be expected for elite shock troopers, however, the elite status of the SS meant that these tasks and battles being referred to were particularly bloody and estimates of 75% casualties are high for any unit regardless of eliteness. For context over the course of their deployment to continental Europe, the US Army's 101st airborne took 11,548 casualties.⁸³ This figure includes replenishment and covers multiple major battles. The 12th SS division's first batch of recruits numbered 10,000 men.⁸⁴ In the battle for the Falaise pocket, the 12th SS Panzer Division "lost 80 percent of the combat troops with which it had gone into action."⁸⁵ In one battle a singular SS division took over half the casualties one US division took over a whole campaign of combat. Even if soldiers, especially elite ones, are expected to fight in the worst areas and fight vigorously casualty rates like those of the SS are abhorrent and show a disregard for human life.

What further shows the horrors of war are not only the casualty reports or memoirs but also German citizens themselves and their perception of the SS. 1st SS division veteran Erwin Bartmann recalled his father being worried that he would join the SS since the 1st SS division was "always in the thick of the fighting."⁸⁶ The nickname given to the SS divisions also is indicative of how difficult combat was. As the war drew on a common moniker for the SS

⁸³War Department Historical Division, "101st Airborne Division," 101st Airborne Division - Order of Battle of the United States Army - WWII - ETO | U.S. Army Center of Military History, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://history.army.mil/documents/eto-ob/101ABN-ETO.htm#>.

⁸⁴Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 205.

⁸⁵Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 227.

⁸⁶Bartmann and Hammond, *Für Volk and Führer*, 36.

became either the Führer's fireman or fire brigade. The SS were described by Tim Ripley as appearing "wherever the situation was the most serious and the prospects of German recovery seemed least likely."⁸⁷ This shows the understanding amongst common people that SS life is hard and unrelenting and that they routinely drew the difficult tasks on the field of battle. Where this shows the flawed notion of societal mobility is that why all the benefits of SS membership were true, the chances of reaping all the benefits were not encouraging.

The final and perhaps most damning imperfection of the SS was that they could not efficiently provide some of the benefits they used for recruitment purposes. Additionally, the failed promises of societal gain were also indicative of a watering down in perceived eliteness. It could be said that all the imperfections of the SS like stringent entry requirements, training, and combat conditions were the price to pay for the boons and status of being an SS member or veteran. However, the fact that the SS could not fulfill its promises combined with the other drawbacks shows that the SS was a violently flawed method of societal mobility that was worthless overall.

The family benefits from the SS-authored Lebensborn program did not operate as intended. By 1939 roughly 8% of SS families with 5-12 children received financial support.⁸⁸ While the Lebensborn program was supposed to increase marriage rates and childbirth rates, roughly 61% of SS men were bachelors in 1939 when the Second World War started.⁸⁹ Considering these figures show the whole SS and not specifically the Waffen SS it is still indicative that the Lebensborn program was not working. Over the course of the war, the program changed, becoming more radically eugenic. Program changes included orders that served the purpose of encouraging SS men to actively take part in adultery. Regardless of

⁸⁷Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction*, 257.

⁸⁸Thompson, "Lebensborn and the Eugenics Policy of the Reichsführer-SS," 62.

⁸⁹Thompson, "Lebensborn and the Eugenics Policy of the Reichsführer-SS," 63.

intention, the family and eugenics programs implemented by the SS either did not serve as intended or had alterations that were not part of the original plan. This distinction is important, though the Lebensborn program was abhorrent and had many violations of human rights it does represent a negative to being in the Waffen SS.

Furthering the point of the SS failing to honor all that it was supposed to be, the SS notion of eliteness also eventually came into question. A large aspect of the appeal of the SS was its elite status, eventually, the SS had to “water down” in some Nazi schools of thought. Some of this came naturally as the Waffen SS expanded to an organization of almost 1 million personnel. It would be foolish to believe that the SS could maintain some of its standards as the war started and dragged on for years. This is by no means an indictment for the men who did not meet its original standards and who found their way into the SS. However, when put into the context that the SS was a cultural, physical, and institutional elite within the Nazi apparatus it does mean that the SS became less pure compared to the prior stringent requirement.

The idea that the SS was to be the protector of the Germanic and Nordic race became complicated with the introduction of non-Germanic or Nordic peoples. This shows the watering down of the idea of the SS as a cultural elite. Ukrainian Slavs who joined the SS and Muslim members from Bosnia very clearly did not fit the original requirements of the SS and therefore required a shift in doctrine.⁹⁰ It must also be acknowledged that these foreign members of the SS were not all volunteers and indeed there were conscription efforts to forcibly replenish ranks. Despite this, the volunteers deserve analysis as to why they went willingly. The mixture of ethnic Germans and non-ethnic Germans did not go well and shows how in the circles of racially influenced people like Nazis this led to the “watering down” of the SS. By the end of the Second World War, it can be argued that the SS was not even a Germanic organization. This is due to the

⁹⁰Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 143.

admittance of non-Germanic or Nordic peoples. Towards the end, there were more foreigners than native Germans indicated by the fact that in 1945 nineteen of thirty-eight Waffen SS divisions were composed of mostly foreign members.⁹¹ This represents a failure of the SS as a cultural elite in Nazi eyes. They were supposed to be the guardians of a very specific group of people. When they began admitting people who fell outside of their idea of racial purity the SS as a cultural elite became dubious. Historian Robert Ziegler supports this in his analysis discussing “that racial purity could not be made the elite principle within the SS.”⁹² This was due to combat and its attrition requiring replenishment. Disregarding why those who were originally considered impure were eventually allowed to join, this shows the SS becoming an organization not following its original mission in twisted hypocrisy.

The mixing of the SS was not only problematic from the perspective of the most racial purity-focused members of the SS but also the foreign volunteers who joined the SS. Many foreign SS volunteers reported issues with different nationalities and races mixing. This is an important aspect of the SS as a failure of societal mobility for men like Leon Degrelle or the Dutch volunteers van Roekel discusses. Leon Degrelle stated that when the Belgians volunteered for the SS in 1941 it was a “chance to become the comrades and equals of our conquerors.”⁹³ Even fighting for the Axis powers Degrelle and his Belgians were still foreigners. The Fleming volunteers reported abuse from German training personnel including but not limited to beating and verbal abuse.⁹⁴ It was a similar case for the Dutch as van Roekel notes that even though the Dutch were considered a good race and therefore fairly well off in the hierarchy, the German SS men did view the Dutch as “somewhat inferior.”⁹⁵ The SS failed in its promises to these men as

⁹¹Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 135.

⁹²Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy*, 55.

⁹³Degrelle, *The Eastern Front*, 3.

⁹⁴Stein, *The Waffen SS*, 154.

⁹⁵Van Roekel, *As Political Soldiers We Face Moscow's Hordes*, 107.

there was a large goal of the SS. That goal was to be the protectors of the Germanic and Nordic races, and to allow non-Germanic or Nordic races entry was a problem. This led to the perception of impure people joining the organization that originally had specific racial requirements. This may seem like naivete on the part of the volunteers to assume they could fit within the idea of the SS as racial guardians. However, they did get a bad deal from the SS that led to their direct involvement in the organization regardless of their perceived level of racial purity.

The bad deal these men took stems from the deliberate campaign to recruit and deceive them. This deception in recruitment shows that in some cases the SS's failure was not due to accident or lack of resources, the SS recruited these men under false pretenses for the sake of rapid expansion. These claims of lying or untruthful pretenses indicate a large flaw in the SS as a means of societal mobility. When the SS engaged in deceit in any capacity to encourage more recruitment they left behind the guise of societal mobility and became a group of troopers looking for more bodies. This deceit would especially be the case for volunteers from outside of Germany. For some volunteers it was not coercion that got them to join, it was falsehoods. Some Dutch volunteers were told that they would receive political training and work as civil servants.⁹⁶ As highlighted, Dutch SS volunteers were part of frontline units and would fight in the 34th SS division "*Landstorm Nederland*."⁹⁷ Service in an SS division was a far step away from working as a civil servant, and the political training would have to have been very violent in the curriculum. While some of these Dutch volunteers knew what they were signing up for, the disconnect between what some people were promised versus where they ended up was notable.

⁹⁶Van Roekel, *As Political Soldiers We Face Moscow's Hordes*, 15.

⁹⁷Stein, *The Waffen SS*, Appendix 4.

The deceit did not apply only to the Dutch volunteers, the Belgians were told that their recruitment was to combat communism and that they would be sent to the Eastern front.⁹⁸ Many SS units were sent East to fight the Soviet Union, but many of these men would be redeployed to southern or western Europe such as when the Belgians were sent home to take place in the Ardennes campaign⁹⁹. This may seem trivial since these men were a military unit and could be ordered to different regions against different foes. However, these men and many other volunteers were told their volunteer service would be in an anti-communist crusade not having to fight the British or Americans. The suggestion that these men would be in an anti-communist war may not have been false but not complete. While it is speculation that the European volunteers only wanted to fight communists, what is known is that these men took part in much more than a war against the Soviets. The SS was deployed to every theater of war the *Wehrmacht* went with North Africa being the mild exception. That would mean the people told they were fighting communism fought partisans, French, British, American, Canadian, and many more non-communist entities. It is difficult to know how many SS volunteers wanted to fight other Western European powers as there were fewer ideological components in those battles compared to the Eastern Front. Regardless, these men were told they were going to fight against the terrors of communism, and they did much more than that. From the perspective of foreigners specifically, the SS either outright lied or created an incomplete picture to get these men to join. This shows that the SS was flawed as a method of societal mobility in general, but for foreign volunteers, these flaws were to a certain extent enhanced due to deceitful recruiting methods.

The SS's hypocrisy regarding entry and service did not end at the racial level. While it has been said that the SS originally were the physical elite of Germany, being tall and athletic,

⁹⁸Degrelle, *The Eastern Front*, 4.

⁹⁹Degrelle, *The Eastern Front*, 302.

this too did not last. Eventually, those requiring glasses were permitted entry along with people outside of the original height and stature requirements.¹⁰⁰ This worked similarly to the racial watering down of the SS. This drawback may be the smallest regarding significance on a generalized scale such as overall German manpower in the Second World War. Not everyone can be extremely tall and naturally athletic which furthers the potential insignificance of this watering down. However, in an organization such as the SS which was known for its emphasis on physical fitness and being tall and broad men, this was not a small issue. The status of the SS as an elite organization was erroneous when like racial standards, physical standards became relaxed over time.

In the analysis of the difficulties of SS life and the organization's overall failure to deliver what they had promised, the crux of the SS as flawed societal mobility is. The SS was able to in some capacity fulfill much of what they promised to volunteers and that cannot be argued. There were SS men who did receive education, technical training, some family support, and the elite status of being in the SS. However, the SS failed because of issues in the organization. All the perks of joining the SS had more insidious sides that manifested in the inefficiency of benefit distribution or some benefits relying on victory and survival which was not the case for the Third Reich. Overall, these drawbacks represent an exorbitant price for things that either could never be guaranteed or fulfilled.

Research Problems and Conclusions

¹⁰⁰Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy*, 56.

This research and some of the people discussed were problematic and therefore present some issues with this research. The idea of the SS as societal mobility was complicated with an example being what happened to Erwin Bartmann. Bartmann began his career as a baker, joined the SS, and after the war fell back into his life as a baker.¹⁰¹ If he ended up where he started regarding his career then it would be logical to question how effective the SS was at granting mobility. However, this logic is also a method to explain why the SS failed as a means of societal mobility. Bartmann was considered elite for a time but the fact that the power structure that gave him his eliteness was destroyed. Using the idea that the eliteness of the SS had several facets to their eliteness, Bartmann returned to his old life is clear. With the war being over the eliteness of the SS was gone as they had no administrative power anymore. The cultural eliteness was gone as denazification was underway and the SS being the armed wing of the Nazi party took that away. Bartmann's experience was indicative that in the end the SS only provided a temporary form of eliteness that amounted to nothing when the Axis lost the Second World War.

Bartmann and other sources such as Leon Degrelle and the analysis of non-German volunteers are problematic as despite political affiliations and background they do represent the accounts of Nazi collaborators. This leads to biased perspectives that are problematic due to SS apologist movements and a natural desire to shift blame for the atrocities of the Second World War. However, the perspectives of these men while problematic show how effective the SS was at attracting collaborators and volunteers. Men like Degrelle and Mr. Luiken perceived service in the SS as a method of gain in some capacity be it tangible or intangible. Therefore, while these men are problematic from an ethical standpoint, they fit within the goal of this research. To these men, the SS represented a method for societal mobility either status-wise or through material

¹⁰¹Bartmann and Hammond, *Für Volk and Führer*, 339.

gain. Despite how problematic these men were, they did not get what the SS said they would and their perception of the SS versus the reality of their situation indicates this.

Overall, the Waffen-SS was indeed a class of its own. They were able to sell themselves as a different breed of humanity that was martially capable and racially pure. Though it is known the SS took part in many war crimes it is more constructive to look at the dynamics that persuaded these men to join. When looking at what the SS could offer regarding status and even material gain shows a form of class mobility. For those who were worthy, a price could be paid for the chance to be part of the Imperial Guard of the Third Reich. However, this price manifested itself in a hard life of combat and the fact that the SS could not fulfill its promises is damning.

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