

HITLER'S MISFIT TERROR CHIEF

A new book reveals he was a physical weakling, who read cheap romantic novels and his old love letters – but as SS boss, Heinrich Himmler ordered the murder of millions



Picture: CORBIS, GETTY

on account of her unreasonableness, and who is protected and taken care of because one loves her. Then as wife and as a loyal, understanding comrade, who fights through life with one, who stands faithfully at one's side without hemming in or chaining the man and his spirit.

"And as a goddess whose feet one must kiss, who gives one strength through her feminine wisdom and childlike, pure sanctity that does not weaken in the hardest struggles and in the ideal hours gives one heavenly peace."

HIMMLER met his wife-to-be in the 1920s at a time when the Nazi party was still regarded as nothing more than a tiny group of political cranks. Margarete Siegroth was blonde and blue-eyed, seven years his senior and divorced. Physically she was the epitome of the Nordic ideal.

In one love letter discovered for the book, she tells Himmler or "Heini" as she called him: "Do you doubt my love? I can say softly that there is no other woman who can love you like I can." As

unattractive physically as were his political views, Himmler had found his partner.

The couple were married in July 1928, and their only child, a daughter called Gudrun, was born a year later. She lives today in Munich, a still controversial figure in modern Germany because of the help she gives to a clandestine group that aids former SS men, many of them suspected war criminals. They also later adopted a son, but Himmler showed no interest in him and by 1940 at the height of the war, the couple separated.

By this time Himmler had become friendly with his secretary, Hedwig Potthast, who left her job in 1941 and became his mistress. He fathered two children with her – a son, Helge, born in 1942, and a daughter, Nanette Dorothea, born in 1944.

But according to his new biographer, Himmler was tormented by his inability to have a stable family life. And just as he had an affair and children by another woman, so he exhorted his SS troops to bring as many children into the world as possible, and outbreed those the Nazis regarded as less racially pure.

"He could not achieve his concept of family life with his wife. But

he had, however, hundreds of thousands under him who again and again he admonished to marry and bring as many children as possible into the world.

"When his marriage broke up and he took a mistress, he then advised them to have as many illegitimate children as possible. Throughout Himmler's life there are some astonishing similarities between

'He saw himself as the father figure of the SS'

the private person and the political functionary." Professor Longerich shows that Himmler's personality was also shaped by not having seen service in the First World War. Without that direct experience of the terror of warfare, he glamorised it and revelled in elaborate military uniforms.

"He stylised himself as a soldierly man," says Longerich. "But this was a fantasy. He needed symbols and insignias, myths and cult locations. He saw himself as the father figure of the SS, teaching his men,

deciding when they should marry, when to have children. Above everything, however, he saw in the National Socialist state the chance to fulfil his dreams and ambitions that had escaped him as a private individual. This was most chillingly illustrated by his masterminding of the Final Solution."

Yet as Longerich points out: "The systematic murder of the Jews, with which Himmler's name will forever be linked, was for him only the starting point for many more comprehensive plans for the bloody 'New Order' he envisaged for the European continent."

DESPITE being known as "Faithful Heinrich" by Hitler, Himmler ultimately betrayed his master in the closing days of the war. He contacted Count Folke Bernadotte of Sweden at Lübeck, near the Danish border, and began negotiations to achieve a peace treaty with the Allies.

Himmler hoped the British and Americans would fight their Soviet allies alongside what was left of the German forces. In his deluded mind he also thought that his SS security

apparatus would remain intact and that the Allies would call upon him to maintain law and order in a devastated Germany.

When Hitler discovered this, he declared him to be a traitor and stripped Himmler of his titles and ranks the day before committing suicide in the Berlin bunker on April 30, 1945.

Himmler's inability to form relationships now left him friendless. Neither Germany's conquerors nor the surviving Nazis wanted anything to do with him. He also knew that the mountain of corpses he had created would demand justice, which he sought to cheat in the days after the end of the war by using the name Heinrich Hitzinger and pretending to be an ordinary soldier.

But soon after being arrested he was recognised as the former SS leader. Himmler was scheduled to stand trial with other leading Nazis at Nuremberg, but committed suicide on May 23, 1945, with a potassium cyanide capsule before interrogation could begin. He was buried in an unmarked grave, the location of which remains unknown today.

The misfit who rose to become the second most powerful Nazi after Hitler had cheated justice.



from **Allan Hall**
in Berlin

THE BODIES dropped one by one into the pit as the echo of the gunshots that dispatched them faded on the air. Watching from a nearby grassy hillock, from behind the delicate glasses poised on the end of his nose, was a man who might have been mistaken for a country parson or schoolmaster, were it not for the black leather coat with the familiar lightning flashes on the collar.

Suddenly there was a faint movement from among the corpses piled up in the freshly dug grave. One of the victims evidently still lived. "There, there, he's still alive. Shoot him! Shoot him!" screamed the witness. Another shot rang out and all was still again. Satisfied that the job was now complete, Heinrich Himmler repaired to take afternoon tea.

By August 1941 at that mass murder scene near the Russian city of Minsk, the leader of Adolf Hitler's feared and hated elite Schutzstaffel (SS) was the second-most powerful man in occupied Europe after the Nazi tyrant. Previous portraits of Himmler have suggested he was a squeamish individual who shrank from the sight of blood and was physically sick when he witnessed the execution of prisoners of war. But his account by an eye witness is just one of the new insights in a just-released biography of the terror chief of the Third Reich.

It reveals a Himmler who was on the one hand an arbiter of life and death and builder of the Nazis' death camp system, overseeing murder on an industrial scale, yet who also revelled in turgid romantic literature, and kept his love letters with him throughout the war.

The author, Professor Peter Longerich, professor of Modern German History and Director of the Holocaust Research Centre at Royal Holloway College, University of London, also explores how a man who had a misty-eyed ideal about women and children would be responsible for the murder of millions of them during the Holocaust.

He reveals how Himmler went about building up the mumbo-jumbo cult of the SS, with his own "Black Camelot" at an imposing medieval castle, and regarded his SS legions as a new band of Teutonic Knights, locked in a life-or-death struggle with the "lesser races" from Asia and, above all, the Jewish people.

LONGERICH asks: "How could the son of a well-off Bavarian-Catholic family of civil servants come to command a system of mass-murder across Europe? An important point in Himmler's personality was indeed his coldness. He had huge difficulty in developing social contacts.

"Nothing in his childhood or youth, his upbringing in a good bourgeois Catholic household, suggested that here was a man with obvious character defects." He adds that there is "no evidence as to problems with his teachers, no anti-authority problems or



RIGHT-HAND MAN: One of Heinrich Himmler's many titles was official Successor to Adolf Hitler as Reich Chancellor

father-son strains to blame". But the future SS leader's physical weakness - from his early days he was a weedy individual, which was how he managed to dodge the First World War trenches - was the "key to Himmler's personality," says Longerich. Desperate though the German army was by 1918, he was denied entry to the services. Finally his

'Nothing in his youth suggested such defects'

father pulled strings to get him into a cavalry regiment where instructors were unimpressed with his military prowess. He was still a cadet when the Armistice came and never saw a shot fired in anger.

Born in 1900 (he would take his own life with a suicide pill 45 years later as Nazi Germany collapsed in defeat), Himmler personified the evil of the Hitler regime. Imbued with a fierce capacity for tedious work, he was eager to join the Nazis soon after

the party's creation by Hitler. It was within the ranks of Hitler's followers, through whom he soon rose, that Himmler became a calculating exponent of mass murder and racial division, driving the policies of the Nazi state by the sheer force of his authority.

He gathered titles like confetti - Supreme Commander of the SS, Successor to Adolf Hitler as Reich Chancellor, Chief of the German police, Reich Commissioner of German Nationhood, Reich Minister of the Interior, Supreme Commander of the Home Army - and with them influenced the course of the war.

But while the portrait which emerges is of a consummate schemer within the hierarchy of the Nazi party, Himmler was a man awkward with individuals in general and women in particular - including his wife. In his relationships with women as a young man he got nowhere, says Professor Longerich.

Himmler idealised women, as he would later idealise his "pure" SS soldiers. In his diary as a young man he wrote: "A proper man loves a woman on three levels: as a dear child who is to be chided, perhaps even punished