From late 1939 until mid-1941, the SS cavalry units underwent the most drastic change since their formation. Not only did a comparatively small group of men separate from the Reiterstandarten in Germany to build up a new unit, they also became members of an executive organ of German occupation in Poland. Their frame of reference changed from peace to war, which meant that the men not only shared radical views which formed the background to discrimination and exclusion of certain groups of people, but openly committed acts of violence against various sections of the Polish population. The two years in the General Government can be divided into three phases: the initial stage, from September 1939 until the summer of 1940, during which new recruits were integrated and trained continuously; a transitional period from mid-1940 until spring 1941, which saw a massive turnover of personnel; and the final phase, from February until June 1941, when the two regiments assumed a structure similar to that of their Wehrmacht equivalents. Fully working military units and comradely bonds amongst the men could only be formed in the last months before their departure into the Soviet Union.

Although the SS cavalry did not have to face a military threat and was involved in anti-partisan operations only on a few occasions whilst based in Poland, the men were to be trained, hardened, and readied for future combat missions. This task put the regiments under pressure, especially after half the personnel had to be replaced in 1940. What would have been a standard procedure in an established military unit was perverted by the criminal ambitions of the officers and some of the men; it was also obstructed by the participation in the first phase of a war of annihilation. The effect of war in shaping the minds of men and ultimately resulting in crimes against humanity has also been observed with other SS units and was described by Harald Welzer and Sönke
Neitzel in a study of tapping protocols of German prisoners of war. They found that a special set of conditions was created during wartime which made soldiers do things they would not have normally done. This set, which made up the war frame of reference, consisted of a strict military framework and hierarchy and the incorporation of men into a system of formal obligations and time-specific as well as group-specific perceptions of their environment, which made them kill Jews or fanatically defend their country even when they were not convinced of National Socialist ideology. Regarding the SS cavalry, it can be assumed that the changed frame of reference, together with a different composition of the units and a habituation to violence, served as a preparation of what was to come from mid-1941 onwards. Three factors determined the process which turned members of mounted SS units into cavalry soldiers of the Waffen-SS: military drill, indoctrination, and participation in anti-Jewish and anti-Polish measures. In order to assess the personal and ideological motivation of the soldiers, it is necessary to analyse and balance the three above-mentioned elements in the context of the SS cavalry's deployment in Poland from 1939 to 1941.

From the outset, the war against Poland was fought not only for military, but also for ideological aims. Adolf Hitler had ordered the SS to eliminate the ruling classes of the country. For this mission, which received the code name ‘Tannenberg’, six killing squads, the so-called Einsatzgruppen, were assembled from various branches of the police and SS during the summer of 1939. Responsible for this was SS-Gruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the SS security police and security service. But this was not an operation of the SS alone: Heydrich also consulted with the quartermaster-general of the Wehrmacht, General Eduard Wagner, ‘to construct a system of mutual assistance and support in matters of security behind German lines’. From the crossing of the Polish border, this cooperation resulted in mass murder: units of the SS and police, the army, and other formations not only executed people who were considered to be part of the Polish elites, but also suspected insurgents (often innocents who were mistaken for partisans by inexperienced German soldiers), prisoners of war, and Jews. Until the end of the year, about 50,000 Poles fell victim to the Germans; at least 7,000 of them were Jews.

Historical researchers long held the view that the Wehrmacht had been ‘tragically entangled’ in the killing of civilians in Poland: whereas the soldiers fought bravely and honourably, the SS committed atrocities. More recent works, however, have shed new light on the role of the German armed forces during and after this campaign. Numerous