

German war crimes in Italy: part one

Sixty years since the massacre at Sant' Anna di Stazzema

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This three-part series of articles is based on two books that appeared in the 1990s: Friedrich Andrae's Auch Gegen Frauen und Kinder—Der Krieg der Deutschen Wehrmacht Gegen die Zivilbevölkerung in Italien 1943-1945 [Against Women and Children—the German Wehrmacht's War Against the Civilian Population in Italy, 1943-45] (Piper Verlag München, Zürich, 1994); and Gerhard Schreiber's Deutsche Kriegsverbrechen in Italien—Täter, Opfer, Strafverfolgung [German War Crimes in Italy—Perpetrators, Victims, Punishment] (Becksche Reihe, Verlag C.H. Beck, München, 1996).

Last month marked the 60th anniversary of one of the most brutal war crimes committed by German soldiers and SS troops during the Nazi occupation of Italy. Over the course of a few hours, at Sant' Anna di Stazzema, 560 women, children and men, unable to flee, were murdered in a bestial manner.

On August 12, 1944, as part of a so-called “cleansing operation,” the intelligence unit of the 16th tank division Reichsführer SS, led by SS leader Walter Reder, invaded the Stazzema region of Lucca province, leaving behind a trail of devastation.

The German army had ordered the evacuation of the city of Sant' Anna a week earlier, but only part of the population followed the order. Moreover, after the initial evacuation, many women and children returned to their homes. Also residing in the city were refugees from other regions, whose evacuation had previously been ordered on August 8.

German Army and SS troops, along with Italian SS troops, moved in four columns towards Sant' Anna, committing several massacres along the way. In Vaccareccia, the troops trapped 70 captured people in a stable, decimated them with hand grenades and machineguns, and finished up with flame-throwers, virtually cremating the entire site. They followed the same procedure in Franchi and Pero. Whoever could not flee in time was butchered.

Gerhard Schreiber describes these events: “In Sant' Anna, Himmler's tank grenadiers forced the residents and refugees into a walled-in area in front of the church. The people found themselves in a trap, since there was only a single exit. The murderers began their work, and afterwards formed a mountain of corpses from the remains of 132 men, women, children, and infants. Once more the flame-throwers were used, so that the

dead could not be identified. When the unit later proceeded into the valley beyond Valdicastello, the SS troops left behind 560 murder victims, including 14 in Mulino Rosso and 6 in Capezzano di Pietrasanta. Afterwards, the authorities could identify only 390 of the dead, among whom they found children up to 10 years old. The youngest victim was 3 months old, the oldest was 86 years old.”

As bad as it was, the massacre at Sant' Anna di Stazzema was by no means exceptional. It was only one of numerous war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the German Army, SS troops, and other German units in Eastern Europe and other territories occupied during the campaign against the Soviet Union in the Second World War. This massacre was just one of countless other war crimes, which became more brutal and gruesome as German troops faced increased danger from the Allied advance and partisan resistance.

After the end of the Second World War, silence shrouded the rampages carried out by German troops in Italy. Hardly any of those responsible for these gruesome war crimes were brought to account, including those who bore responsibility for the massacre at Sant' Anna di Stazzema.

The reason was the Cold War against the Soviet Union. Processing German war crimes could not be allowed to interfere with the rearmament of Germany and the admission of the Federal Republic (West Germany) into NATO. The Italian judiciary quickly put an end to any investigation of the crimes, while the German side showed no interest in the issue.

Only over the past ten years have these events received wider publicity. Independently of one another, in 1994 and 1996, the historians Friedrich Andrae and Gerhard Schreiber published studies supported by military archives, war diaries, and witness descriptions. Various journalists and survivors have also undertaken investigations in an attempt to identify and prosecute those responsible.

On April 20 of this year, the La Spezia military tribunal brought a case against three members of the SS: Gerhard Sommer, Ludwig Sonntag and Alfred Schönenberg. The trial dealt with officers of the 16th tank division Reichsführer SS who were responsible for the massacre at Sant' Anna di Stazzema. However, the elderly defendants never appeared before the court, and it is highly unlikely that they will be

extradited to Italy or be brought to trial in Germany.

The question remains as to why these gruesome war crimes and massacres were committed against the civil population?

Fascist Italy, under its leader Mussolini, was closely allied with Nazi Germany. Together with Japan, Italy and Germany formed the Axis Powers. By the summer of 1943, it was already apparent that the Axis powers were confronting defeat. Allied troops began an attack on German and Italian positions in North Africa in October of 1942. On November 2, 1942, they broke through Axis lines at El Alamein.

A short time later, British and American troops landed in French-occupied North Africa. After facing initial resistance, they overcame the troops of the pro-German Vichy government. By the end of January 1943, they had Morocco and Algeria under their control. On May 13, the Axis Powers' last resistance in North Africa was broken. General von Arnim capitulated at Tunis, and 250,000 German and Italians were taken prisoners of war.

At about the same time, the Red Army's counteroffensive began to the south of Stalingrad, and the German 6th army was surrounded on all sides. On February 2, 1943 Field Marshall Paulus capitulated with the rest of his army in the destroyed city.

In the summer of 1943, British troops landed in the southeast of Sicily. American troops landed further to the west in the Gulf of Gela. The Italian elite tried to save their skins by deposing and arresting Mussolini on July 25, 1943, ending his 20-year dictatorship. King Vittorio Emanuele III named Marschall Badoglio as the successor to the office of minister president. General Castellano signed Italy's capitulation on September 3, 1943.

However, the German command was not ready to withdraw from the Italian front. It reacted furiously to the Italian capitulation, which it viewed as a betrayal. On the evening of September 8, 1943, following directions from Hitler via an adjutant, the head of the German Army staff, General Jodl, issued the codeword for operation Axe. Italy, which had wanted to withdraw from the fighting, now became a theatre of war.

In the ensuing days, Hitler discovered Mussolini's place of imprisonment and engineered his spectacular escape. However, it was made clear to Mussolini that he was under the surveillance of the SS. On September 22, 1943 Mussolini founded the new Italian Social Republic, although it controlled only the northern part of Italy occupied by German troops.

In the region controlled by Mussolini, the German troops and SS units were free to perpetrate their terror against the civilian population. Amongst their war crimes was the arrest and deportation of Jews from Rome. In his book, Friedrich Andrae describes the actions that took place under the cover of darkness in October 1943:

“At about 4 o'clock in the morning on October 16, the Jewish Feast of the Tabernacle had just begun. One of three companies of German special forces secretly and quietly

surrounded the ghetto in Rome, closed all exit points, and then combed through the ghetto house by house for ten hours. Of about 8,000 Jews in Rome, not all of them from the ghetto, 1,259 were arrested. Of these, 1,007 were deported to Auschwitz, where they arrived on October 23.”

Operation Axe included the demobilization and disarmament of the Italian Army. Because of widespread war fatigue, these actions met little resistance at first. Then came the enormously brutal actions of the German forces. “The high German command, as well as Field Marshals Rommel and Kesselring in Italy” wrote Friedrich Andrae, roused the troops with “viciously violent orders which contravened international law.”

The German high command issued an order on September 15, 1943 explaining what should be done with disarmed Italian soldiers. The motto was simply: “Whoever is not with us is against us.” Three groups were distinguished: first, those who were loyal to the alliance and continued to fight alongside Germany; second, those who no longer wanted to fight; third, soldiers who aided the resistance or had entered into a pact with the enemy. The officers of the last group were to be shot, and the rest were to be used as workers, or else deported to the Eastern Front.

A particularly brutal war crime was committed when Italian soldiers were disarmed on the Greek island of Kefalonia. On September 18, 1943, the German high command overrode the order of September 15, and ordered that no more prisoners be taken on Kefalonia. As a result, 5,170 Italian soldiers were slaughtered, even though they had not resisted. Other prisoners were transferred to the mainland in overcrowded ships that were not marked as prisoner of war transports. Another 13,288 Italians died when enemy fire sunk the ships, and the Germans refused to initiate any rescue procedures.

In their retreat from Allied forces in Italy, German units adopted a scorched earth policy. On September 12, 1943, a few days after the Italian capitulation, Hitler ordered that the Allied advance be delayed so as to allow time for mass deportations, killings and destruction. The goal was to leave a wasteland behind for the enemy.

To be continued



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