German war crimes in Italy: part two

Nazi terror and the resistance in Italy

Elisabeth Zimmermann
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This is the second article in a three-part series 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). The* first part *was posted on October 7.*

German troops adopted a scorched-earth policy during their retreat from Allied forces. As early as September 12, 1943, just a few days after the capitulation of the Italian government, Hitler ordered that the Allied advance be held back to allow time for razing and destruction, which was ruthlessly prosecuted. The enemy was to be left with a devastated landscape.

This brutal and reckless action came up against resistance from the Italian population, especially in the war zones in central Italy, where the German Army (*Wehrmacht*) had a larger presence compared to northern Italy. In the beginning, the resistance reacted to various encroachments by the German soldiers: arrests, deportations and forced labour. However, resistance was also fuelled by opposition to the continuation of a war that the majority of people believed was completely senseless, and had brought nothing but sorrow, death and destruction.

The resistance grew and became increasingly organised as the repressive actions of the German occupying forces became more brutal.

The arrest of men and their deportation to northern Italy for forced labour or to work in the German armaments industry was especially feared. Thousands defied "voluntary" conscription into forced labour. Friedrich Andrae wrote:

"There were local strikes against deportations for forced labour, and the stripping of factories and the removal of machines, raw materials and goods to Germany. When these measures intensified at the beginning of 1944, 1.2 million workers went out on a general strike on March 1 that was centred in the industrial centres in northern Italy, Turin and Milan. The strike ended a week later on March 8. Strikes also occurred in industrial areas in central Italy and other places where businesses had already been dismantled."

It is not possible in the confines of this article to look more closely into the courageous resistance undertaken by many residents in other areas of Italy, including the insurrection in Naples in September 1943, which opposed the brutal methods of the Nazi forces. Suffice it to say that the consequence of each action of resistance was revenge and so-called "atonement." Residents in neighbouring towns often felt the brunt of these actions, as Wehrmacht and SS units made their retreat to the north.

March 23, 1944, the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Fasci, the fascist shock troops, was celebrated in the major cities in Mussolini's Repubblica Sociale Italiana. In Rome, a commemoration ceremony was held, in which Wehrmacht and SS leaders also participated. In the afternoon, like every other, the second company of the third battalion of the German police regiment Bozen marched through the Via Rasella. They were hit by a bomb attack that immediately killed 32 German military police and badly injured double that number, one of whom later died. Two civilians were also killed in the attack. The perpetrators were able to escape.

The German reaction was swift and merciless. Hitler, who was immediately informed of the attack, was fuming. He wanted to blow up an entire city quarter and for each dead police officer shoot 30 or 50 Italians.

Deliberations and telegram dispatches followed about what to do. Group Commander Herbert Kappler, chief of the Security Police and the Security Service in Rome, conferred with Colonel General von Mackensen, the commander in chief of the 14th Army, to whom the commander of Rome was answerable.

Kappler suggested as reprisal the shooting of 10 Italians for each police officer killed, a proposal that corresponded to the usual practice of Kesselring, the German officer who commanded the region. Kappler further suggested selecting persons who were already in custody and had been sentenced to death. Kesselring supported this idea.

In the late evening, they received orders from Hitler via Colonel General Jodl, the chief of the High Command of the

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Armed Forces. Hitler ordered the shooting of 10 people for every police death, to be carried out by the Security Service within 24 hours.

Due to the fact that not enough detainees were available, it was stipulated that the victims could include those who would probably be sentenced to death. The required number of victims still fell short, however, requiring the Italian police chief to round up a further 50 to 60 people, which included Jews. In the end, Kappler located 335 individuals.

They were loaded into trucks and transported to the Adriatic Caves, southeast of Rome. Here they were, as Andrae describes, "brought into the caves dimly lit by torches and shot, man by man, in the neck. Because the pile of dead bodies became too high, victims were made to lie on top of their dead comrades before receiving the bullet. The mass execution lasted several hours and into the next day. Kappler had to give his people alcohol to keep them working. [A total of] 335 men died, five more than Hitler had ordered. Immediately afterward, Kappler blew up the caves with explosives."

The victims of the massacre had nothing to do with the bombing in Via Rasella. The overwhelming majority were political prisoners, predominantly anti-fascists on the periphery of the Partito d'Azione, the Action Party.

Andrae provides a detailed description of the social origins of the victims:

"The largest social group were workers and craftsmen (77), followed by officials and public service employees (57) and those from sales occupations (54); 38 officers of the Italian armed forces were also included, of which five were generals and 13 field officers; apart from that were lawyers (12), peasants and farmers (12), students (9) and professors (5), engineers and architects (6), artists (8), industrialists (5), doctors (3), bank employees, various tradesmen, one priest and other people of different social and occupational origins. Foreigners were also included, including refugees from Russia and at least two German Jews. One fifth, that is, 62, were younger than 25 years of age. The youngest, born in 1929, was just 15 years old, a further eight were not yet eighteen, and 11 were older than 60."

German units in Tuscany went after partisans and their real or suspected supporters in the civil population with extreme brutality and ferociousness.

Many of these horrendous crimes were carried out by the Brandenburg Division, often called the Brandenburgers. This was a special force, originally trained for assault operations and raids, including behind enemy lines. It was under the High Command of the Security Service of the Armed Forces, which was led by Admiral Canaris. As the Wehrmacht had to change from attack to defence, the division was deployed to fight against partisans. In the month of April 1944 alone, in the course of their operations in Italy, 4,000 people were killed, according to the official war diary of the German Wehrmacht.

The studies of Friedrich Andrae and Gerhard Schreiber show that the orders, directives and ideological preparation for the crimes of the Wehrmacht against Italian civilians emanated from the highest levels and can be traced back to the propaganda preparations made for the invasion of the Soviet Union.

For the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the official line was *Weltanschauungskrieg* (ideological war), or *Vernichtungskrieg* (war of destruction). Not a few of the divisions operating in Italy between 1943 and 1945 gained war experience on the Eastern Front. Defeated there, they were either re-formed and positioned anew in Italy, or sent directly to their new posts. They brought with them to Italy the ideological content of the *Führererlasse* (decrees of the leader) from the Eastern Front of 1941-1942.

Among these decrees were the infamous commissar orders of June 6, 1941, which were strengthened three months later on September 16 in the decree of the High Command of the Armed Forces to fight "communist insurgency movements in the occupied territories." It contained the recommendation "that the sharpest measures have to be used everywhere in order to defeat the movement in the shortest space of time.... In general, in these cases, atonement for the life of one German soldier must equate to death sentences for 50-100 communists. The method of enforcing death sentences should serve as an additional deterrent."

Hitler's orders completely contravened international laws, which he scorned. Operation Barbarossa—the code name for the attack against the Soviet Union—constituted a blatant violation of international law, which explicitly prohibited wars of aggression. All of these actions were carried out with the help and understanding of the military leadership. High-ranking officers and Wehrmacht lawyers participated in drawing up the decrees.

The orders explicitly demanded and approved crimes against civilians. This was spelled out in Hitler's so-called "gangs order" of September 16, 1942: "Troops are accordingly authorised and obliged to employ every kind of measure in this war, even against women and children."

It was repeatedly made clear that soldiers who were brutal would not have to worry about facing consequences. This was conveyed to troops in Italy in an order of April 7, 1944: "Drastic measures will never be a reason for punishment in the current situation."

To be continued

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