

German President Steinmeier and the Nazi massacre at Fivizzano

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German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democrats, SPD) participated alongside Italian head of state Sergio Mattarella last Sunday in the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Fivizzano massacres.

Between the beginning of May and mid September 1944, the Fivizzano district in northern Italy with its six villages, Sassalbo, Mommio, San Terenzo, Bardine di San Terenzo, Vinca and Tenerano, was the scene of a number of massacres, during which members of the Waffen-SS, Wehrmacht, and air force slaughtered some 400 residents, including pregnant women and children.

The atrocities committed in Vinca between 24 and 27 August, 1944, which cost the lives of more than 160 people, were carried out by the 16th Armoured Reconnaissance Division of the Waffen-SS and units of the Italian fascist Black Brigades. In the name of “combatting banditry and partisans”, the military units killed everyone they came across on their way to Vinca. In the village itself, the troops literally exterminated the residents with handguns, bayonets, and flamethrowers.

The killings in Fivizzano were part of a larger series of massacres by the Nazis across northern Italy. Just a few weeks after the destruction of Vinca, the 16th Armoured Division of the Waffen-SS under the command of Sturmbannführer Walter Reder murdered 1,836 residents, above all elderly men, women and children, in the Apennine community of Marzabotto near Bologna. Further massacres with more than 100 victims took place in Sant’Anna di Stazzema and Civitella, where Steinmeier delivered a speech five years ago.

At the time, we remarked that there is hardly anything more repulsive “than representatives of the German ruling class recalling their past crimes even as they are in the process of preparing the next catastrophe.” In his

speech in Vinca, Steinmeier stated that it was “an incredibly difficult journey for me as a German and as German President to come here and speak to you.” He added that he “cannot comprehend the hatred that drove the Germans here in Fivizzano 75 years ago.”

The reality is that there is a clear explanation for the horrific crimes perpetrated by the Nazi regime, the Wehrmacht, and the Waffen-SS in Italy and many other countries. In the final analysis, they arose out of the striving of the ruling class to subordinate Europe and the world to its leadership and satiate German imperialism’s appetite for markets and raw materials. In order to put Germany on the path of war after the mass slaughter of the First World War and suppress all opposition, the ruling elite brought Adolf Hitler to power in 1933 and established the Nazi terror regime.

Steinmeier cannot and does not want to speak about this issue, because the ruling class is in the process of returning to an aggressive and imperialist foreign policy, and rehabilitating its fascist traditions.

In this, Steinmeier is playing a key role. Addressing the Munich Security Conference five years ago as foreign minister, Steinmeier—together with his predecessor as president, Joachim Gauck, and Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen—demanded, “Germany must be ready to engage in foreign and security policy earlier, more decisively and more substantially.” He railed against a “culture of restraint,” and declared, “Germany is too big just to comment on world politics from the sidelines.”

Only a few weeks later, Steinmeier aligned with fascist forces in Ukraine to put this programme into practice with a coup sponsored by Berlin in Kiev. He welcomed to the German embassy in Kiev Oleh Tyahnybok, the leader of the fascist Svoboda Party, who until then had maintained ties with the German

neo-Nazi NPD. Tyahnybok is notorious for his anti-Semitic tirades, during which he rages against “Jewish swine and other vermin.” His heroes include Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych, who participated in massacres that claimed the lives of thousands of Jews and Poles.

Since then, the ruling class in Germany has begun openly drawing upon its fascist traditions. With the Alternative for Germany (AfD), they are building up a right-wing extremist party, whose leader, former Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician Alexander Gauland, has glorified the Wehrmacht and described the Nazi regime as “bird poop in over a thousand years of successful German history.”

The grand coalition of the CDU and SPD not only made the AfD the official opposition party in parliament, but is also implementing its policies with the full support of all of the established parties. This is shown above all in the mass deportations of refugees, the toleration and encouragement of right-wing extremist terrorist networks in the police, army, and intelligence services, and the whitewashing of German imperialist crimes at the universities.

Significantly, the federal government recently backed right-wing extremist Professor Jörg Baberowski in an official statement. The Humboldt University professor has trivialised the Nazi regime (“Hitler was not vicious”), and advocated the use of methods like those employed by the Wehrmacht and SS in Fivizzano to combat terrorism. “If one is not willing to take hostages, burn villages, hang people and spread fear and terror, as the terrorists do, if one is not prepared to do such things, then one can never win such a conflict and it is better to keep out altogether,” stated Baberowski during a panel discussion entitled “Germany: an interventionist power?” at the German Historical Museum in October 2014.

Steinmeier’s appearance in Vinca, which was featured prominently in the media, was aimed at concealing the extremely concerning and dangerous implications of the return of German and European militarism and fascism. “Our united Europe [is] founded on a promise, never again unrestrained nationalism, never again war on our continent, never again racism, agitation and violence,” he claimed. “We have to remember this at a time when the poison of nationalism is once again seeping into Europe.”

Coming from the mouth of the German head of state, these statements sound like a cruel joke!

The reality is that the ruling class is actively spreading the poison of nationalism across the continent. It employs racism, agitation, and violence to divide the working class and enforce its policies of militarism, the strengthening of the repressive state apparatus at home and abroad, and social spending cuts in the face of mounting opposition among the population. Right-wing extremist parties are currently part of the government in nine EU member states. Leading European politicians, like French President Emmanuel Macron and outgoing Italian Foreign Minister Matteo Salvini, praise the fascists Philippe Pétain and Benito Mussolini.

As in the 20th century, there is only one way today to prevent the rise of the far-right and a relapse into capitalist barbarism and war: the independent mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist programme.



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