

German war crimes in Italy: part three

A scorched-earth policy

By Elisabeth Zimmermann
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This is the third 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, and the second was posted on October 8.

In the middle of May 1944, after the Allies had broken through the Axis front at Cassino, German troops accelerated their retreat into northern Italy. Their efforts were seriously hindered by increased partisan activities, including the sabotage of infrastructure, the ambush of supply transports, and the destruction of communications networks, transportation routes and vehicles.

Once again, the German Army (*Wehrmacht*) responded in brutal fashion. It issued the following decree, entitled “An Appeal to the Italian Population”: “In the past few days, criminal elements wearing civilian clothes have once again ambushed and shot at German soldiers. In retaliation for these crimes, several towns have been burnt down and a number of the male inhabitants have been shot in accordance with martial law.”

In one community, all of the inhabitants were arrested in an attempt to prevent further ambushes and acts of sabotage against German soldiers.

Not only did all such threats and repressive measures prove ineffective, they had the opposite result. The hostile attitude of the population and its support for the resistance increased. As a result, Field Marshal Kesselring ordered a “Reorganization of the Struggle Against Bandits” on June 17, 1944. This order unambiguously sanctioned the use of terror as a means of retaliation.

Friedrich Andrae comments as follows: “The troop commanders received a practically free hand in the struggle against the partisans, on condition that they used the necessary force. Excesses resulting from the choice of methods were preferable to restraint or negligence.”

The company commander was prepared to cover for any officer who exceeded the usual methods. The gangs were to be “attacked and wiped out.” A few days previously, the head of the local SS and the chief of police gave a virtually identical *carte blanche* to police units.

Andrae emphatically reiterates this point: “The so-called ‘bandit order’ meant that the military was declared immune from the law in a manner similar to [the amnesty given the Nazis after] the Röhm-putsch of 1934, after the anti-Jewish pogroms in November 1938, and following the beginning of Operation Barbarossa [the German invasion of the Soviet Union] in 1941.”

German martial law refused to recognize the Italian partisans as a war party. They were criminalized as “bandits” and denied all rights. According to the leadership’s orders, bandits were to be exterminated and

destroyed.

After the liberation of Rome at the beginning of June 1944, German troops pulled back to the so-called Goten Line, with the aim of reinforcing and holding it for as long as possible. The Goten Line ran along the Apennine ridge, which cuts diagonally across the Italian peninsula.

An extension of the defence emplacements had already been planned since the fall of 1943. However, the German troops encountered significant difficulties in implementing this plan. One of the biggest problems was their inability to draft a sufficient number of forced-labour workers from among the Italian population. More and more forced labourers joined the side of the partisans and disappeared into the forests and mountains, rather than participate in the building of German defences. The defences were never completed, and the line was held for only a few months.

The German troops and SS units hastily left Rome at the beginning of June to retreat to the north. They left a path of devastation behind them. Every day, individuals as well as entire villages and communities fell victim to German revenge and “penance” measures. In Tuscany, more than 80 people were killed on a single day.

Here is a description of the fight put up by the miners from Niccioleta, as documented by Andrae in his book. A pyrite mine was the only employment in the village of Niccioleta, which lies between Siena and the sea.

“The miners,” writes Andrae, “were predominantly anti-fascists with old socialist traditions. The first miners’ strike in the region was organized here in 1894. Already in 1926 and 1932 workers had actively opposed the fascist regime, and now some of them were participating in the resistance. By contrast, the managing engineers were pro-German, and some of them still belonged to the black shirts.”

As the fighting neared Niccioleta, units of the 162nd (Turkmen) infantry division prepared to destroy the mine, in accordance with the policy of “scorched earth.” On June 9, partisans and miners occupied the mine in order to preserve the livelihood of 150 families. Three days later, the partisans withdrew, and SS units stormed the village in cooperation with Italian collaborators. They combed through each house and arrested 150 miners.

Five were shot on the spot and the rest were put before a German firing squad. Seventy-seven were mowed down with machine guns for having cooperated with the partisans, 25 were deported to become forced labourers, and 50, mostly old workers, were released.

A few days later, more terrible massacres took place in the community of Civitella Val di Chiana and the surrounding region, triggered by the June 18 attempt of a partisan group to disarm drunken German soldiers, in which two German soldiers died and the rest fled.

The village inhabitants had left their homes on that night for fear of “penance” measures, but returned after a few days when nothing happened. On June 29, a holiday, heavily armed German troops stormed the village with tanks, occupied the church, and shot all the men,

including the priests, while the women and children watched. In an operation that lasted for hours, the victims were shot in the back of the neck in groups of five.

Another bloodbath took place nearby on the same day, where an altercation had occurred between German troops and partisans two days earlier. In total, 250 males ranging in age from 1 to 84 were murdered in Civitella and its surroundings. This occurred only two weeks before the British Eighth Army liberated the town.

This trail of blood and destruction continued throughout July and August. On August 3, 1944, German troops evacuated Florence. On that night, a unit of German soldiers forced its way into a house that lay somewhat outside of the city. The house belonged to Robert Einstein, the brother of the famous physicist. Robert Einstein had fled Germany for Italy with his family. He was not home at the time of the attack, and the soldiers murdered his wife and his two daughters.

The massacre at Sant' Anna die Stazzema described in the first article in this series was just one of a number of war crimes. The massacres worsened as the situation of the German occupying troops became dire and the defeat of the Nazi regime in Germany approached.

In September/October 1944, the community of Marzobotto was especially hard hit by the savagery of rampaging SS units and German troops under the leadership of the infamous Major Reder. The German side had already faced heavy battles with large bands of partisans, whom they had fragmented and destroyed. Nevertheless, the orgy of revenge by German troops seemed to be without end.

According to a report that the mayor of the city, Vito Nerozzi, wrote for the Allies in fall of 1945, the city listed the following civilian casualties between September 29 and October 1 (the deaths of partisan fighters were not included): "Caprara, 184; Casaglia, 195; Cadotto, 104; Sperticano, 111; Villa Ignano, 95; S. Martino, 560; 1,249 people in total. From what I have heard, 421 dead still lay unburied in the mountains."

The inscription on the memorial in Marzabotto reads: "Here lie buried 771 innocent victims of massacres and other war-related events. They include 315 women, 189 children under the age of 12, 30 young people between the ages of 12 and 18, 161 men between the ages of 18 and 60, 76 old men over the age of 60. The remaining victims lie in the cemeteries at Grizzana, Monzuno und Marzabotto, while others are classified as missing."

German war crimes continued until the last day of the war. Gerhard Schreiber drew up the following balance sheet at the end of his book: "In all, between September 8, 1943, and May 8, 1945, the Germans killed, by direct or indirect means, about 46,000 military internees and prisoners of war, 37,000 political deportees, and 16,600 civilian Italians, including about 7,400 Jews. This means that on average, without counting partisans and regular soldiers who fell in battle, 165 children, women, and men of every age lost their lives every day.

In examining these unspeakable crimes, their underlying ideological motivation, and the orders and instructions given by Nazi and military leaders, undeniable parallels emerge to the practices of the current American administration—i.e., the massacre of hundreds of war prisoners at Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan in November 2001; the unprovoked assault on Iraq last year and the continuing occupation of that country; the siege and bombardment of Fallujah and Najaf, which resulted in hundreds of civilian victims; the systematic torture and degradation of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, Bagram and Guantanamo Bay; and the classification of resistance fighters as "unlawful combatants," to mention only the most well known.

The explicit rejection of the Geneva Conventions and the International Criminal Court, as well as the sanctioning, at the highest levels of the military and the government, of the use of torture in the so-called "war against terror," evoke the worst war crimes of the twentieth century.

After the Second World War, some of the leading members of the Nazi

regime were brought to account before an international court in Nuremberg. However, interest in the further prosecution of Nazi war criminals quickly declined. This loss of interest was bound up with the onset of the Cold War against the Soviet Union, under conditions in which the new German Federal Republic (West Germany) was to play an important role within NATO.

The services of many of those who had dirtied their hands with war crimes in the Army, the government administration, the courts and business were required. Furthermore, any settling of accounts by the working class with the Nazi regime and the capitalist system in which it was rooted had to be prevented at all costs. German judges, in particular, had little interest in prosecuting Nazi crimes, since many of those responsible had been allowed to seamlessly continue their careers in the new Federal Republic.

There was no great interest in prosecuting Nazi and fascist crimes in Italy, outside of some military tribunals that took place directly after the war.

In April of this year, on the occasion of the opening of proceedings in La Spezia, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* wrote: "The wheels of justice turn slowly not only in Germany. In Italy as well, the prosecution of countless massacres on the part of German soldiers against the civilian population at the end of the war was largely allowed to peter out. Despite the fact that in the beginning of the 1950s memories were still fresh and many criminals—German soldiers and Italian fascists—could still be apprehended, many files were closed."

This situation is explained by the fact that the Federal Republic and Italy were both partners in NATO and enjoyed considerable economic links within the European Economic Community, the forerunner of the European Union. Still more decisive were the concerns within ruling circles about social instability, and the need to consolidate bourgeois rule within Italy. There, too, the working class was blocked from settling accounts with fascism and capitalism.

The Stalinist Communist Party, under then-leader Palmiro Togliatti, bears central responsibility for this state of affairs. Togliatti lived for a total of 18 years in exile, most of which he spent in Moscow as a close confidant of Stalin, before he returned to Italy in 1944.

While many members and supporters of the Communist Party had fought in the resistance movement against fascism and the German occupation, Togliatti entered the post-war bourgeois coalition government in Rome as a representative of the Communist Party, with the aim of securing the continuation of capitalism in Italy. Toward this end, he assumed the positions of justice minister and deputy minister president, and was instrumental in organising an amnesty for Italian fascists.

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