

The mountain troops and their victims

How the German army celebrates its past

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Every year during the Whitsun holidays, veterans of the German mountain troops regiment based in Mittenwald (Bavaria) meet with young soldiers and officers to commemorate their comrades killed in action during World War Two.

This year's event was organised for the fiftieth time by the organisation "comrades of the mountain troops," comprising around 8,000 veterans and active soldiers. During last year's meeting, public prosecutors called for an inquiry because veterans of the Wehrmacht proudly displayed their Swastika medals. The proposal was quickly abandoned, however, on the basis of "diminished guilt."

Both the German ministry of defence and the Federal Armed Forces sponsor the annual gathering. The participants are still taken to the event in military buses owned by the German army. In recent years the army even supplied military bands and well-known speakers, such as General Dr. Klaus Reinhardt, commander in chief of NATO forces in central Europe. He was the principal speaker at the memorial meeting held in Mittenwald in 2000.

General Reinhardt, who appeared in many talk shows and interviews during the Gulf War and gives the appearance of being an educated and restrained military strategist, has longstanding connections to the "troops under the edelweiss" (the symbol of the German mountain troops). His career as an officer began as a member of the mountain troops in Mittenwald in 1960. His father, Fritz Reinhardt, was the head of a Nazi administrative district in Bavaria from 1928 till 1930, the period preceding the taking of power by the Nazis. Afterwards, he was in charge of a Nazi training school for orators before becoming under-secretary in the Third Reich's ministry of finance.

Last year, anti-fascist organisations including the "Organisation of those persecuted by the Nazi regime" (VVN), called attention to the atrocious crimes committed by the mountain troops, which constituted one of the Wehrmacht's (German army) elite units. This year, these groups organised their own event to oppose the annual mountain troops ceremony. At a meeting that received much

attention, military historians listed the atrocities that have been definitively proven to have taken place.

Among these atrocities they listed: Kephallonia (6,000 murdered prisoners of war), Kommeno (317 women, men and children), Lyngiades (80 persons), Skines (146 men and two women), Camerino (98 civilians) and many others. Altogether, at least 50 massacres were committed by the mountain troops. Not a single member of the unit has been prosecuted for these crimes by the German judiciary.

For the first time, some of the survivors and victims got the chance to speak in Mittenwald. For instance, the organisers invited Christina Dimou, who, despite terrible injuries, had survived one of the worst atrocities committed by the mountain troops 60 years ago.

On August 16, 1943, regiment 98 of the mountain troops marched into the Greek village Kommeno, as part of an operation to "combat guerrilla groups." Without warning they shot the village priest, massacred everybody taking part in a wedding celebration and threw hand-grenades into the houses. The soldiers killed anybody who moved and then burned down the village.

Her voice shaking, Kristina Dimou outlined what had happened: "I went to my mother, when a soldier with a machine-gun came. He aimed at us. He shot my mother, he shot her in the ear and the bullet went through her head. I was hit by a volley in the back and was badly injured. Then I lost consciousness. My brothers hid in a cornfield, but the German soldiers searched for them, found them and then shot them. They killed two of my brothers and five cousins."

Another survivor who spoke at the event was the 93-year-old Armos Pampalonie, a former officer of the Italian army.

After Mussolini had been toppled in July 1943, the Italian soldiers who had previously fought with the Germans in Greece went over to join the Greek partisans. The Wehrmacht extracted a cruel revenge. On September 13, 1943, the 1st division of the mountain troops shot 4,000 Italian prisoners of war who had surrendered long before on the Greek island of Kephallonia.

As if by miracle, Armos Pampalonie survived being shot

in the neck by a member of the German mountain troops. This Whitsun weekend he was once again confronted with his tormentors and had to witness how they were sponsored by the German army and united with young soldiers to recall their deeds. He told the audience:

“The German captain took one step back and shot me in the neck, I was shot in the neck. But neither my carotid artery nor my backbone were injured so badly that I died, but I was knocked down by the shot. I didn’t know if I was alive or dead. The Germans had machine guns and executed my two officers and the 80 soldiers under my command. Then the German soldiers withdrew singing.”

Many of the murderers of Kephallonia and other massacres made a career in Germany after the war, in the army, the police or in politics. General Hubert Lanz, who was the supreme commander in Kephallonia, became advisor to the FDP (German Liberal Party) on military questions. Reinhold Klebe, the commander of the mountain troops who destroyed Kommemo, became a high-ranking officer within the Federal Armed Forces after the war.

Six months ago, the German TV magazine programme Monitor dealt with the crimes of the mountain troops during the Nazi period and interviewed 90-year-old Alois Eisl, a former commander of the mountain troops. At that time Eisl self confidently declared: “I must stress that the mountain division never shot civilians.”

Monitor made some investigations and proved the opposite. In the autumn of 1943, Alois Eisl was a battalion commander leading a combat group of the mountain troops in the Epirus region in northwest Greece. The defenceless civilian population, which had no involvement in the war, was brutally put down by Eisl’s mountain troops. At the time, Eisl personally reported to his division: “Fleeing civilians, who attempted to reach the Archos-valley, were hit by both pieces of artillery. Losses could be seen.”

The Greek village Akmotopos was almost completely destroyed by the German mountain troops. After Alois Eisl and his men had been there, on October 4th 1943, the 1st division of the mountain troops reported to central command: “Eisl-group completely destroyed Akmotopos as a retaliation measure. All civilians were shot.”

The state prosecutor’s office in Munich brought preliminary proceedings against Alois Eisl, but then abandoned them for “lack of evidence.” But now the prosecuting attorney’s office in Dortmund has begun to investigate the cases of Kommemo and Kephallonia, again after abandoning a prior case over 30 years ago. A trial could mean jail for some of the guests attending the meeting of the mountain troops in Mittenwald, but based on past experience a trial seems to be quite unlikely.

Argyris Sfountouris also spoke in Mittenwald, casting light

on how the Federal Armed Forces and the German government treat the historic crimes of the Nazi regime. He survived an attack carried out by the 2nd company of the 7th SS-armoured infantry regiment on the Greek mountain village of Distomo in June 1944. The soldiers first killed 228 men and women in cold blood and then burned down the entire village.

For years, the surviving dependents of those slaughtered at Distomo have been demanding compensation from the German state. In 2000, the court in the Greek town of Liwadeia passed judgment concerning this question. It called upon the German state to pay 56 million Marks (about 28 million Euros) in compensation. Last month, following lengthy delays, proceedings were initiated at the Federal Supreme Court. The German government invoked legal technicalities to oppose any kind of payment to the surviving dependents. It claims that an all-inclusive payment had already been made to the Greek state. The German government further points out the fact that “states are immune,” meaning that only states and not private individuals may initiate the prosecution of other states.

This is how the German government treats the victims of the German Wehrmacht and of Nazi terror. Instead of compensating the victims, it actively supports the memorial celebrations of the perpetrators.

The minister-president of Bavaria, Edmund Stoiber, has not only been a member of the comrades-organisation for years, but also is the group’s patron and author of speeches for the war veterans’ meetings. During one recent speech to the group, he bluntly declared: “As minister-president of Bavaria, who did his national service with the mountain troops, I am of course especially proud of this specifically Bavarian unit and its achievements both in the past and in the present.”

Today the mountain troops are once again on the front lines when it comes to defending German interests overseas. They fought in Somalia, Croatia, in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Macedonia. Currently 250 members of the unit are stationed in Kabul.



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