



The European Volunteer Movement in World War II

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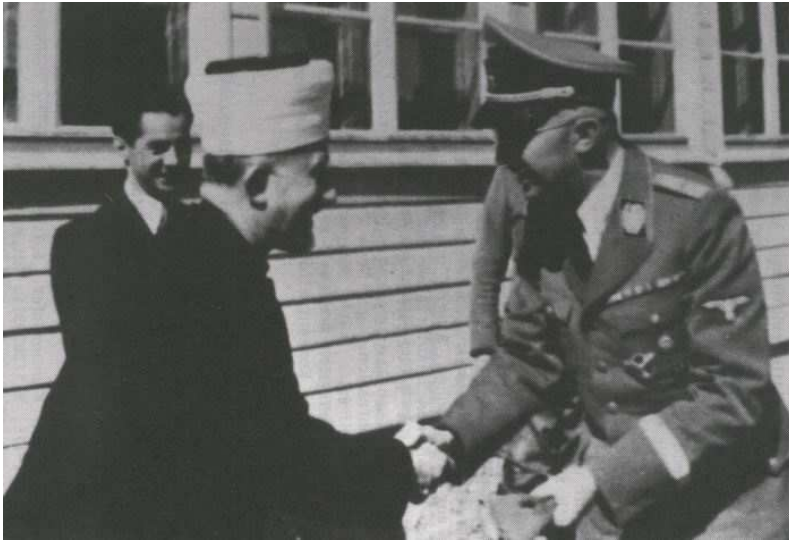


They called themselves the “assault generation” and they had largely been born in the years during and after World War I. Coming from every nation of Europe, they had risen up against the twin hydra of communism and rampant capitalism and banded together under one flag for a common cause. Fully a million of them joined the German Army in World War II, nearly half of them with the Waffen-SS. And it was in the Waffen-SS, the elite fighting force of Germany, where the idea of a united, anti-communist Europe became fully developed.

It was also in the Waffen-SS where a new society emerged from among the “front fighters” of *thirty* different nations. It was a society that had been forged in the sacrifice, sweat and blood of the battlefield and that propagated the concept of “one new race,” the European race, where language and national differences counted for little, and the culture of each nation was taken for granted as a common heritage. Many countries sent more volunteers into the

Waffen-SS than they could raise for their own national armies, so something truly phenomenal was taking place.

The Waffen-SS itself was something unique. It had begun as a small-scale personal bodyguard for Adolf Hitler, but had gradually expanded into a full-scale military force under the guidance of a number of disgruntled former army officers who saw the Waffen-SS as a chance to break out from the conservative mold that the German Army had become mired in. The Waffen-SS was designed from the start to be a highly mobile assault force whose soldiers were well versed in the art of handling modern, close-combat weapons. The training regimen therefore resembled that given to special commandos in



other countries, but it predated U.S. and British commando training by nearly a decade.

The soldiers of the Waffen-SS were also the first to implement the camouflage battle dress that was to later become so common around the world. But in one field, that of internal personnel organization, the Waffen-SS has yet to be imitated, much less surpassed. The

Waffen-SS was probably the most “democratic” armed force in modern times. Rigid formality and class structure between officers and other ranks was strictly forbidden. An officer maintained his position only because he had proven himself a better soldier than his men, not because of any rank in society, family connections or superior academic education. In sports, one of the vital cogs in the Waffen-SS training programs, officers and their men competed as equals in an atmosphere that encouraged team work and mutual respect. Non-German volunteers of whatever nationality were not regarded as inferiors; they were judged on their ability and performance as soldiers.

The idea to actively recruit foreign nationals into the Waffen-SS came shortly after the outcome of the Polish Campaign of 1939, when SS units were being formed and expanded and it was noticed that a great many men (usually of German extraction) from foreign countries were volunteering for service. The fact that Waffen-SS recruitment among Germans was restricted by the Wehrmacht, made these “out country” volunteers all the more desirable. Since Western Europe contained many sympathizers and admirers of Germany and its National Socialist movement, the SS decided to create three new regiments (“Nordland,” “Westland” and “Nordwest”) for Dutch, Flemish, Danish and Norwegian volunteers in the spring of 1940. There was, at this time, little in the way of a cohesive, Pan-European ideal to follow, but thousands of recruits turned up anyway,

primarily out of disgust for the performance of their respective socialist/pacifist governments.

For many there was additional incentive. In Belgium, Holland and France, scores of populist and right-wing political figures had been arrested, incarcerated, beaten and outright murdered. The most famous single incident occurred in Abbeville, France in May 1940, when French police lined up 22 leading Belgian right-wing leaders and executed them in a public park shortly before the arrival of the Germans. It was certainly a “war crime” — one of the first in fact to be committed and documented in World War II — but try to find this event recorded in any standard text book! The establishment historians have shied away from any discussion of this event. Following this massacre, many of the followers of the victims flocked to join the new volunteer regiments of the Waffen-SS.

The war with the Soviet Union, commencing in June 1941, brought a new direction to the effort to attract European volunteers in what can be called “The Legionary Movement.”

The Legionary Movement



ABOVE: The company bugler. The German-Arab 845th Infantry Battalion's effectiveness against the Greek and later, the Yugoslavian guerrillas grew until the unit became known for its effectiveness by the German command. *Museum of Modern History, Ljubljana, Slovenia.*

The “Legionary Movement” was an attempt to attract qualified military personnel from various countries who otherwise would not have considered engagement with the German Armed Forces, by appealing to their national pride and anti-communist convictions. The Waffen-SS undertook the task of forming Legions from “Germanic” countries, while the Wehrmacht, or German Army proper, was given responsibility over Latin and Slavic Legions. The national Legions proved to be a success, but for a number of reasons — primarily “cost efficiency,” redundancy with Waffen-SS elements and size factor — were not worth perpetuating in the same format. The primary West European Legions were as follows:

Volunteer Legion Norwegen: This was an 1,150 man reinforced battalion that

served with distinction on the Leningrad Front and around Lake Ilmen. It later served as the nucleus of the 23rd SS Regiment “Norge.” On the home front it was supported by numerous political figures and celebrities including the famous opera singer Kirsten Flagstad and Nobel-Prize winning author, Knut Hamsun. Hamsun was an honorary

member of the Legion and actually wore a Legion uniform. His son served with the Legion and the Waffen-SS and was decorated with the Iron Cross, second class.

Volunteer Legion Flandern: This was initially a 900 man battalion later increased to 1,116 men that served around Lake Ilmen under the 2nd SS Brigade and at times with the 4th SS Police Division and the Spanish “Blue” Division. It conducted itself splendidly, obtaining favorable mention in the Wehrmacht war bulletin among other honors. Its supreme moment came in March 1943 when it recovered a lost regimental frontline sector from the Soviets in a bold attack and held onto the regained positions for a week against all odds. By the end of the engagement the “Legion Flandern” had been reduced to a net strength of 45 men! Equal numbers of Flemings served with the 5th SS Division “Wiking” and the Volunteer Regiment “Nordwest.” Eventually these contingents were merged with new recruits to form the Storm Brigade “Langemarck.”

Volunteer Legion Niederlande: This was a 2,600 man regiment and component of the 2nd SS Brigade on the Leningrad front. “Niederlande” swiftly obtained a reputation for valor and achievement. In June 1942, Legionnaires succeeded in capturing the commander of the 11th Soviet Army and 3,500 of his soldiers. One enlisted man, Sturmman Gerardus Mooyman became the first West European volunteer to receive the Knight’s Cross decoration after singlehandedly destroying 14 Soviet tanks in one day in February 1943.

The Legion later formed the basis for the “Nederland” Brigade and division.



Freikorps Danmark: This was an 1,164 man reinforced battalion that served with considerable distinction in the Demyansk Pocket alongside the 3rd SS Division “Totenkopf.” For a time it was led by the swashbuckling Christian Frederick von Schalburg, a Ukrainian-Danish count who met a

soldier’s death in the frontlines. The “Freikorps” was authorized and fully supported by the government of Denmark. After the war, however, members of the “Freikorps Danmark” were prosecuted as “traitors” with the Danish government evading responsibility by saying that the volunteers should have known that the government was merely “acting under duress” when it established the “Freikorps” and signed the Anti-

Comintern pact. Later the “Freikorps” formed the nucleus of the 24th SS Regiment “Danmark.”

Finnish Volunteer Battalion of the Waffen-SS: This was a 1,000 man unit that served as a component part of the “Nordland” Regiment of the SS “Wiking” Division. Its greatest moment came in October 1942, when the Finns were able to seize Hill 711 near Malgobek in the south Caucasus in a daring frontal assault. Other German units had repeatedly tried to do the same thing but had failed. The Finns served in the Waffen-SS at the discretion of their government, which in June 1943 thought it would be more discreet to transfer the Battalion from the Waffen-SS to the Finnish Army.

The principal Wehrmacht Legions were the following:

The French Volunteer Legion Against Communism: It served as the 638th Regiment with the 7th German Infantry Division, participated in the drive on Moscow and fought well whenever it was deployed. It was largely transferred to the Waffen-SS in 1944.



Legion Wallonie: This was organized as a mountain-infantry battalion. It was formed by the SS from the French-speaking Belgians (Walloons) and was taken over by the Wehrmacht in late 1941 so as not to offend the “Germanic” Flemings already serving in the Waffen-SS. It

fought exceptionally well in the campaign through the Caucasus Mountains alongside the SS Division “Wiking.” It contained many former Belgian Army Officers and the famous political leader Leon Degrelle, who exhibited a flare for death-defying heroics. It was finally re-transferred back into the Waffen-SS in June 1943 at Degrelle’s request and was reformed as an assault brigade.

Croatian Legion: This was a regiment that fought on the southern region of the eastern front with considerable valor and was completely annihilated in Stalingrad. It was later replaced by three full-scale divisions.

Spanish Legion: This was the independent 250th Infantry Division of the “Spanish Blue” Division that fought with incredible heroism on the Lake Ilmen Front. After it was withdrawn from the eastern front in August 1943 by Franco, survivors carried on in a Spanish SS Legion that fought until the end of the war.

Per Sorensen: Portrait of a Legionary

The 27 year old Danish Army Lieutenant Per Sorensen (formerly Adjutant of the Viborg Battalion) was the ideal model of what the Germans were looking for when they launched the Legionary Movement. On 1 July 1941, Sorensen volunteered for service with the “Freikorps Danmark” motivated by anti-communist feelings and a vague sort of National Socialist attitude. In the autumn months he attended the Waffen-SS Officer School at Bad Toelz and in the spring of 1942, rejoined the “Freikorps” as commander of the 1st Company.



During the summer months he led his company in the tough back-and-forth fighting that raged in the relief corridor to the Demyansk Pocket. After several engagements, the 1st Company had been reduced from over 200 men to only 40. They had to hold a long stretch of front against strong communist forces. On the afternoon of 16 July 1942, Sorensen telephoned

“Freikorp’s” HQ to state that he did not know whether or not his troops could survive another strong attack, but that they would maintain their position no matter what. That night a Red Army infantry battalion attacked with tank support. The communists were soon in the 1st Company’s trenches. From sundown to midnight hand-to-hand fighting raged for possession of the positions. Then suddenly it was all over with the Russians either dead or driven out. Thanks to Sorensen’s leadership, the 1st Company held its ground.

In the years to come, whether in White Russia or Estonia, Latvia or Pomerania, the troops under Sorensen’s command would always meet their duty. Before every action, the tall, slender Dane would make a personal reconnaissance of the terrain and during the battle he was always positioned in the hottest spots with a machine-gun strewn about his neck.

To his soldiers, Sorensen had the uncanny habit of attracting the enemy. They passed around the phrase: “Wherever Sorensen is — the Russians will come!” And they usually were right. For his endless solicitude and patience, he received the nickname “På Sorensen” from his men. Time and time again, Sorensen provided the special qualities so vital in a leader. In January 1944, he took over an entrapped battalion near Vitino in northern Russia and literally led it to safety by remaining at the fore of their formation on a journey through thick, snow-shrouded forests.

After commanding battalions and battle-groups, Sorensen received command of the 24th SS Regiment “Danmark” just to the east of Berlin in April 1945. Finally, the Regiment was reduced to trying to defend a street-car station in the heart of Berlin. While climbing a telephone pole to try and survey the terrain, Sturmabannführer (Major) Sorensen was picked off by an enemy sniper. On the next day, in the midst of the desperate, last battle for the German capitol, Sorensen was given a military funeral in the Ploetzensee cemetery by Germans and Danes from the “Nordland” Division.

With shells detonating all around, the body of Sorensen was taken to the cemetery in an armored troop carrier. Over the open grave, Sturmscharführer (Sgt.) Hermann gave a brief eulogy:



We are standing here by the graveside to take our last departure from a courageous Danish comrade, the foremost officer and leader of the Regiment “Danmark”: Per Sorensen! I must, even in this hour, give the thanks of my people for you and your many Danish comrades who have stood so loyally beside us. I would like

to express from my heart: may you find peace at last in our bleeding city!

As Hermann spoke, the coffin (constructed from ammunition crates by “Nordland” engineers) was lowered into the grave. Two of the Danish officers attending struggled to contain their emotions. Hermann led a last salute and the eight man honor guard fired three salvos over the grave. A woman flak helper tossed flowers into the grave, and each of the Danish and German soldiers attending passed by throwing in a handful of earth. As the great city shook under rumbling artillery fire and great clouds of smoke obscured the sky, the haunting strains of “I had a Comrade” echoed over Sorensen’s grave as the funeral reached its conclusion. The tragic symbolism was complete and fitting: in the very heart of Europe, on its last battlefield, a prototypical representative of the European Volunteer Movement had met his end.

The European Movement takes Shape

In 1943, the European Volunteer Movement which had been individually developing in the Legions and the Waffen-SS was finally amalgamated and consecrated within the ranks of the Waffen-SS. The spiritual citadel of the movement now became the SS Officers' School at Bad Toelz in Bavaria, which in 1943 established its first "class" (or "inspection") exclusively for West European Volunteers. Previously the volunteers had received no specialized treatment but were treated like Germans. Now all of that changed and a sense of European unity with respect for all nationalities and cultures was openly fostered. Within the next two years, SS-JS Toelz would produce more than 1,000 highly motivated European officers from 12 different countries exclusive of Germany.



Bad Toelz was considered the premier officers' training school in World War II and in addition to a thorough training program that featured live ammunition in most field exercises, it offered well-rounded athletic, cultural and educational opportunities. The great opera, musical and theatrical troops of central Europe made frequent visits while the athletic facilities were unsurpassed in Europe. Twelve different coaches, each one either an Olympic or world class champion in his field, supervised a vast sports program that even included golf and tennis. In the academic arena, freedom of speech was not only permitted but encouraged and the writings of such disparate souls as Marx, Hitler, Jefferson and Churchill were openly discussed and debated.

What Bad Toelz produced was literally a "Renaissance man" who was also a top-notch military officer. In early 1945, the staff and students were mobilized into the newly authorized 38th SS Division "Nibelungen," and one of the great ironies of the war took place: a mostly German division was officered by non-German Europeans (the officer cadets) instead of the other way around. Once in action against the Americans in southern Bavaria, the Scandinavians, Lowlanders and Frenchmen found themselves opposing an enemy whom they thought could only have existed on the Eastern Front. Like all of the Waffen-SS units to serve in the west in 1945, "Nibelungen" was soon

victimized by numerous “war crimes.” Entire companies and battalions were bludgeoned and shot to death after going into U.S. captivity. To date this grisly story has only been revealed in bits and pieces and has, naturally enough, been largely suppressed by the Allied side. However, it is interesting to note that some former members of the Waffen-SS consider it likely that more of their comrades were killed in American captivity than on the battlefield itself!

1944-45: A European Army at War

The year 1944 opened with the Flemish SS Storm Brigade “Langemarck” fighting a savage retrograde action near Zhitomir in southern Ukraine. Simultaneously the Scandinavian “Nordland” Division and Dutch “Nederland” Brigade were desperately trying to stem a massive Red Army offensive in the Leningrad sector, and the European “Wiking” Division and Belgian Brigade “Wallonien” were going into the “sack” west of Cherkassy. The breakout from the Cherkassy Pocket on the southern Eastern Front was a true epic of heroism: a sacrificial struggle that bound troops of different nationalities firmly together. In the post-war years the survivors have held annual remembrance gatherings so that to this day “Cherkassy” remains a living symbol of the European Volunteer Movement.



The spring of 1944 saw the three Baltic SS Divisions fighting with steadfast courage on the eastern boundaries of their countries. In Lithuania, the nucleus for a new SS Division began taking shape under the guidance of former Lithuanian Army generals, but the country was overrun by the communists before the project could be brought to fruition. Against the Anzio beachhead in Italy, the first combat ready Italian SS battalion grimly held its ground against all American breakout attempts. All over Europe, manpower was being voluntarily mobilized into the Waffen-SS to participate in what many people saw as the forthcoming, decisive struggle for the freedom of the continent.

The summer of 1944 saw the “battle of the European SS” on the Narva Front in Estonia. Here, nationals from Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Flanders, Holland and Estonia shared the trenches and fought shoulder-to-shoulder to repel the Bolsheviks from “Orphanage Hill” and “Grenadier Hill.” Leon Degrelle personally led a battalion from his “Wallonien” Division in a brilliant defensive action near Tartu on the west shore of Lake Peipus. Near Brody in Ukraine, the 14th Ukrainian SS Division fought a life-or-death

battle to escape Soviet encirclement; only about one-fourth of the Division survived the action, but they had acquitted themselves well.

As the year went on, more and more foreign volunteer divisions were formed. This meant that flexible leadership was needed to handle the different cultural distinctions and surprisingly, the Waffen-SS was equal to the task. Although organized religion was kept separate from the Waffen-SS, volunteers from devout Catholic, Moslem, Greek Catholic and Orthodox countries were given total freedom to practice their religions with their own clergy. For morale purposes, ethnic cultural activities were actively encouraged. It was quite a contrast to the way some minority groups were treated in the Allied armies at the time.



Some of the foreign SS divisions composed of Russian and Moslem volunteers had to be disbanded, since the time and personnel needed to develop these units were lacking. By the autumn of 1944 the Waffen-SS European volunteer tally sheet contained the following elements: 2 Dutch brigades, 2 Belgian brigades, 1 French brigade and 1 Italian brigade, (all being transformed into

divisions), 2 Croat Moslem divisions, 1 Albanian Moslem division, 2 Hungarian divisions with 2 more in the works that never panned out, 2 Scandinavian/German divisions, 2 Latvian divisions, 1 Estonian division, 2 Russian divisions (both of which would later be transferred to the Vlasov Liberation Army), 1 Ukrainian division, 1 Italian/German division, 1 Hungarian/German division, 1 Balkan/German division, 1 Serbian division, numerous ethnic brigades from the Soviet Union, and small detachments of Spaniards, Britons, Greeks, Romanians, Bulgarians, Arabs and Indians. The foreign SS units were all suitably supplied with national badges, insignia and unit distinctions. And while there were many volunteers from such neutral countries as Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland they could not be openly designated as Irish, Swedish or Swiss such so as not to offend their respective governments.

On the Eastern Front, the war raged with unending intensity. In White Russia, part of the French SS Storm Brigade fighting with the 18th Hungarian/German SS Division "Horst Wessel," sacrificed itself completely in hard defensive action, losing two-thirds of its personnel in the process. In Estonia, a regiment of Estonian soldiers who had been serving in the Finnish Army returned home to fight for their country. They were reformed

into a battalion of the 20th Estonian SS Division and in desperate combat on the Latvian frontier, were virtually annihilated. With grim determination the Latvian 15th and 19th SS Divisions fought the communists for every square foot of their homeland, while in the Carpathian Mountains, the Ukrainian Volunteer Division was reassembled.

In Slovenia and Hungary, the brave Moslems of the 13th SS Division “Handschar” performed well against both Tito’s partisans and the Red Army, but in France the 30th White Russian SS Division had virtually collapsed while in action against the Americans and French Maquis. These soldiers had only wished to fight the communists and saw no point in what their activities in the west.

This was not the case with regard to both the 29th Italian SS Division and the 34th Dutch SS Division “Landstorm Nederland.” The Italian SS troops fought both the Americans and the rear area communist partisans, and they distinguished themselves as perhaps the best troops that Italy produced during the war. “Landstorm Nederland” first battled the British at Arnhem as part of a hurriedly organized self-defense brigade, but during the winter of 1944-45 it was enlarged into a full-scale 12,000 man infantry division. In the spring of 1945, the almost exclusively Dutch “LN” SS Division frustrated the British and Canadians as they tried with little success to advance into northwest Holland. None of the Allies could figure out why so many Dutchmen chose to join the “Landstorm” Division, so to avoid embarrassment, the story of this unit has been largely suppressed ever since. For the Dutch volunteers, there was no motivational problem. The Allies had joined with the Bolsheviks against not only their homeland but what they perceived to be European civilization altogether. Like their fellow countrymen on the Eastern Front, the men of “Landstorm Nederland” fought with dedicated resolve.



The Belgian and French SS Divisions were brought up to strength in the fall of 1944 from among the many refugees that had fled to Germany plus veterans of the war with Russia. In Holland, volunteers flocked to the Waffen-SS recruiting offices like never before

and not because they had to. It didn’t take a clairvoyant to see that Germany was virtually finished, but *still* the European volunteers rushed to join the battle.

The establishment historians have never been able to understand this phenomenon, perhaps because it involved an concept alien to most of them: *conscience*. There was a great desire for many people, who had until this point sat out the war, to finally be “true to themselves”; to make the ultimate sacrifice out of loyalty to their beliefs, their

homelands and their fellow countrymen who had already done so much. This was Europe's moment of crisis and many young men made the decision to leap into the crucible. It was a manifestation of spiritual honesty.

The Waffen-SS also managed to generate a certain natural magnetism. Littlejohn, in his book *The Patriotic Traitors* (p123), described the pull of the Waffen-SS as follows: "The Runic Flag evoked a heroic pagan spirit, a swaggering defiant attitude to life equally contemptuous of bourgeois timidity and of communist anarchy." The far-sighted Leon Degrelle, who had almost obtained political power in prewar Belgium also saw a powerful attraction and purpose in the Waffen-SS. In his words: "True elites are formed at the front ... the young leaders are born there ... the emblem of the SS shows Europe where political and social truth is to be found ... We are preparing the political cadres of the post-war world in the Great Seminary of the Front Line." A good many volunteers agreed with him.



The end of 1944 saw Leon Degrelle's 28th SS Division "Wallonien" moving into that part of Belgium that had been retaken in the Ardennes offensive, where it received a hearty welcome and new recruits! But the curtain was rising on the last act on the Eastern Front, and in the weeks ahead most of the European volunteer forces would be in action there. In Kurland, Western

Latvia, three SS divisions — 11th "Nordland," 23rd "Nederland" and 19th Latvian—were caught up in an unequal life-or-death struggle in January 1945. A few extracts from the history of the 49th Dutch SS Regiment, "De Ruyter," gave the sense of the action: (From the series of articles titled "Soldiers of Europe: The 3rd SS Panzer Korps" in *Siegrunen Magazine*)

After a surging, back-and-forth struggle, the southern bastion of Ozoli Hill fell irretrievably to the Russians. The over-powered First Co./SS Rgt. "De Ruyter" fell back to the west. Untersturmführer Schluifelder, the commander, was badly wounded and shot himself rather than fall into enemy hands.

The Red Army infantry was storming forward. Guided entirely by radio reports, Obersturmführer Behler directed the heavy weapons fire of his Dutch gunners at the center of the enemy onslaught. But by mid-day, Behler's positions were entirely surrounded by the enemy. In bloody, close combat, Obersturmführer Behler and a few of his men managed to break out to the west.

In the same battle area, Danish Obersturmführer Johannes Hellmer's company from Second Battalion/"De Ruyter," was fighting for its life ... Using his own initiative, Kanonier Jenschke, a private, led a small battle group to a successful breakout. Jenschke's rank insignia had been obscured by his camouflage jacket so the men that he had been ordering about were unaware that they outranked him!

During these two days of heavy fighting all of the companies in the main battle line were fully extended. There was nothing to fall back on ... only 7 men could be spared to defend the whole town of Kaleti ... This, the defensive struggle of SS Division "Nederland," was the most heroic battle that I have ever lived through. Everyone stayed in position to the finish. The attack came right up to the barrels of our artillery pieces. The firing pits were the main battle line. But although we were weakened and dispersed, we had acquitted

ourselves with honor.

(This extract from the war diary of Untersturmführer Horstmann.)

By the end of the fighting, the SS Regiment "De Ruyter," with a nominal strength of 2,000 men, had been reduced to 80 combatants! The Regiment was rebuilt on the run and thrown into action again on the Pomeranian Front less than two weeks later.



For the first time "De Ruyter" received a Third Battalion, this being composed of Dutch and German war reporters whose jobs had become rather superfluous given recent military reversals.

Remaining in Latvia was the 19th Latvian SS Division, which time and again had proven itself the mainstay of bitter defensive fighting and had received several mentions in the

Wehrmacht war bulletins. The Latvian volunteers received more decorations than any other non-German group in the Waffen-SS, including the award of 13 Knight's Crosses; a clear indication of their contributions on the battlefield. In Poland and Silesia, the Hungarian and Estonian SS Divisions were temporarily able to stop the enemy onslaught, even though the commander of the 26th SS Division, "Hungaria," Oberführer Zoltan von Pisky had been killed in action at Jarotschin.

As the Eastern Front was slowly expanded westward, bits and pieces of the 27th Flemish SS Division "Langemarck" were rushed to the Oder River line from various training camps. Here they served alongside their co-national rivals, the Walloons, in a spirit of unparalleled comradeship. First Battalion of the 66th SS Regiment/Division "Langemarck" picked up the nickname "leaping tiger" for the way its soldiers threw themselves into battle. But even more amazing was the fact that the battalion was composed mostly of teenagers from the Flemish Hitler Youth who had volunteered for service in the Waffen-SS after their country had been overrun by the Allies. If there was one drawback to service in this battalion it was that the regimental quartermaster stubbornly saw that the young troopers received a special ration of Schokolade and Bonbons instead of the schnapps and cigarettes passed out to the older soldiers!



With a deep sense of historical irony, the Eastern Front slowly bent and folded itself around the German capitol city of Berlin, throwing a vast portion of the foreign volunteers into the battle for the city. Regiments

of the 15th Latvian SS Division, battered beyond belief, had naively decided to throw in their lot with the western allies against the communists (which proved to be an unfortunate decision for many of the officers who were forcibly repatriated to the death camps), and made a complete circuit of Berlin traveling in no-man's land all the time, until they saw a chance to make it to the American lines. The Division's reconnaissance battalion went out a little too far on a scout mission and wound up being impressed into the defense of the city.

To the north of Berlin, 500 survivors of the 33rd French SS Division "Charlemagne" which had been decimated in the defense of Pomerania, actually volunteered to go to the defense of the German capital, even though the Divisional commander had absolved them from any further service obligations. In the week of the epic battle that followed,

these Frenchmen constituted the core of defense in the city center, displaying courage and fortitude on a scale seldom seen. When the fighting was over, only a few dozen would still be alive and four of their survivors would be decorated with Knight's Cross. One could call their mission a "*beau geste*," but the French soldiers saw it as a moral obligation — another abstract concept the establishment scholars choke on. The following is a description of these soldiers from the article, "Defeat in the Ruins: France's Last Battle for Europe," by Gustav Juergens (Siegrunen, June 1980):

By this time, the warriors of the "Charlemagne" Division didn't even look like human beings any more. Their eyes were burning and their faces skull-like and covered in dirt and mortar dust. Supplies only came in negligible amounts, the most telling being the lack of water. The young SS men moved like robots through the hell of Berlin. The future was the farthest thing from anyone's mind. The only motivating idea that burned in their consciousness and kept them from collapsing was their flaming desire to come to grips with the Bolsheviks! They had to throw hand grenades, destroy tanks, and hold out against the Reds. That was their only reason for living and for dying.

The SS Divisions "Wallonien," "Nederland" and "Nordland," after spearheading the last successful offensive on the Vistula sector to relieve the trapped garrisons at Arneswalde, had been driven inexorably westward. "Nederland" was split into two segments, one being trapped and destroyed in the Halbe Pocket to the south of Berlin and the other retreating to the north of Berlin. Much of the "Nordland" Division, including the staff elements, wound up in Berlin itself.



At Prenzlau, due north of Berlin, the Flemish "Langemarck" Division led by the "leaping tigers" of its Hitler Youth battalion, made the last relief attack against the communist encirclement on 25 April 1945. In violent, savage fighting "Langemarck" was burnt to a cinder along with the "Wallonien" Division and parts of "Charlemagne" and "Nordland"; the survivors were forced to fall back towards the Elbe River. In Silesia, the 20th Estonian SS Division was surrounded and forced to surrender to the Soviets; beginning what for most, would be a long, final journey toward the Gulags. On the Austrian frontier, the Ukrainian, Moslem and Cossack SS formations fought with skill and valor before retreating to the west. Most of the Moslems and Cossacks would later be forcibly repatriated to their deaths at the hands of the Yugoslav and Soviet communists; the Ukrainians escaped this *real*

"holocaust" by posing as pre-war Polish citizens.

Going with the Cossacks of 15th SS Army Corps to the Gulags, was their beloved commander, Gen. Lt. Helmuth von Pannwitz, the first foreign national ever to be freely elected Ataman of the Cossack tribes. He chose to share the fate of his men although he could have gone into comparatively comfortable Allied internment. In 1947, von Pannwitz, along with the Cossack leaders of the 15th SS Corps, was hanged in Moscow as a “war criminal”; the Cossack soldiers and about one-half million others of their nationality were physically *exterminated* with the assistance of the United States and Great Britain.

In Italy, after putting up a brave fight, the 29th Italian SS Division surrendered either to the Americans or to the Red partisans and almost to a single man, the Italian SS men were put to death. Between 20,000-30,000 of these volunteers were therefore killed outright in captivity. In Yugoslavia another great nightmare unfolded. 10,000 Moslem volunteers from the 13th SS Division “Handschar” were exterminated in a mass execution and their bodies stuffed in an abandoned mine shaft. Many of the soldiers of the 7th SS Mountain Division “Prinz Eugen,” recruited from Yugoslav Germans, met a similar fate. In Kurland, Latvia, where a small German Army Group had courageously held out against vastly superior enemy forces until the end of the war, 14,000 members of the 19th Latvian SS Division marched into captivity and oblivion. They were never heard from again.



In Berlin, members of the Spanish SS Legion attempted to break out of the city wearing pilfered Red Army uniforms; none made it. Those caught by the communists were shot as spies and those intercepted by the Germans were shot as turncoats. When General Krebs went to surrender the Berlin garrison early on the morning of 1 May 1945, he took with him the Latvian Waffen-Obersturmführer (1st Lt.) Nielands as an interpreter. After performing

his duty, Nielands returned to the command of his 80 man company from the 15th SS Recce Battalion. For the Latvians there would be no surrender — they asked for *no quarter* from the Soviets and they gave none themselves. In the ruins of the Air Ministry building the Latvian SS troops made their last stand. In hand-to-hand combat they fought to the death.

A few of the volunteers trapped in Berlin actually escaped. The Danish Obersturmführer Birkedahl-Hansen, suffering from jaundice, led some men from Regiment “Danmark”

successfully out of the city through Spandau to the northwest. They made their way to the seaport of Warnemünde and took a row boat back to Denmark, thus escaping a long trek to Siberia.

The end of the war saw most of the European volunteers frantically trying to make it to the western Allied lines. Surrender, though, only marked the beginning of their problems. The “democratic” governments of the “liberated” countries were determined to exact a terrible vengeance. In each country some of the more prominent volunteers were run through quick “judicial” proceedings and executed, with the others being stripped of their civil rights and sentenced to prison terms of varying lengths. Those that wound up in Soviet hands were either: 1) extradited to their home countries for criminal proceedings or 2) simply shipped to forced labor camps with the Germans. Those that survived up to a decade or so of this treatment were eventually sent home.

The final tally sheet for the European Volunteer Movement ran roughly as follows: (Waffen-SS only)

Western Europe: 162,000 volunteers, ranging from about 55,000 in Holland to 80,000 from Liechtenstein. Out of this total about 50,000 were killed or missing in action.

Included in this figure would be 16,000 Dutchmen and 11,500 Belgians.



Baltic States and Soviet Nationalities: About 250,000 soldiers. Casualties and post-war losses through forced repatriation and execution were enormous.

Balkan and Slavic: About 100,000. Considerable losses. Ethnic Germans not from Germany: About 300,000.

Germans from the Reich: 400,000. For the Germans and ethnic Germans, losses in killed and missing were about one-third.

In some countries like Holland, the “volunteer” problem was so great that censorship was imposed and in most cases remains in place to this day. The Dutch were particularly brutal in treating their military “collaborators”; incarcerating many for long terms in concentration camps that followed the German models faithfully. Many volunteers in the Netherlands subsequently rose to prominence in the political and business fields, but because of their “background” remained vulnerable to a form of blackmail that has seen some of them (including parliamentary leaders) sent into distant oblivion.

Treatment of returning volunteers was equally harsh in other countries. Belgium executed many both legally and illegally while keeping a majority of their “military collaborators” locked up in concentration camps run in the German style. In France, some of the more prominent officers were executed, while the rank-and-file of the “Charlemagne” Division was given the option of serving time in Indo-China with the Foreign Legion. Joining them were numerous Hungarian and German SS men who had wound up in French captivity.

Norway locked up its volunteers in stone fortresses and kept them on near starvation rations for between 4 and 8 years. The Norwegian volunteers had sealed their fate when they had offended a “hanging judge” who had offered them modified clemency for admissions of guilt. The judge was spat upon and pelted with rubbish by the incarcerated soldiers so he threw the book at them. Denmark, which produced a multitude of volunteers (nearly 15,000 including the crown of the Danish officer corps), was relatively lenient to most of their soldiers — only the more prominent ones had to suffer for long. One ex-commander of the “Freikorps Danmark” was executed (a decision officially condemned by the Danish Parliament 30 years later), and the Danish Major-General Kryssing, who had commanded a multi-national *ad hoc* division on the Eastern Front, was kept in prison 5 years and deprived of his civil rights.



When the volunteers were mentioned at all after the war, it was always in a very derogatory manner; they were usually referred to as criminals and mercenaries. The Dutch went so far as to hire a psychiatrist to buttress this theory. He interviewed 400 volunteers and later propounded the thesis that these men had not

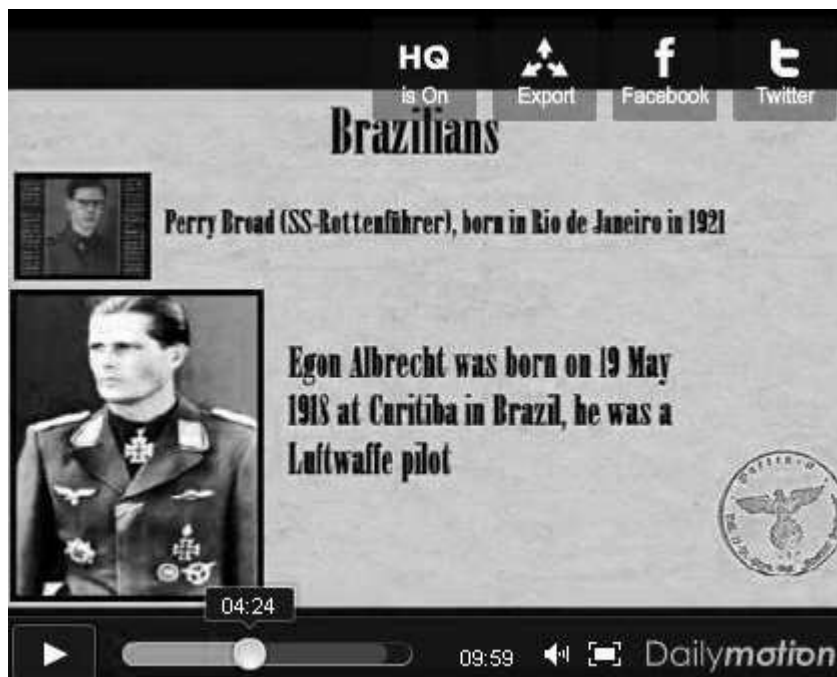
served out of any moral commitment but had “sold their souls” for material inducements and adventure. This has been pretty much the establishment line ever since, although it is never mentioned that those interviewed (constituting one-half of one percent of the total number of Danish military collaborators), were quite willing to say anything to secure release from their brutal internment.

If one looks at the rigorous screening process that the Germans applied to their foreign volunteers, the myth of their being “criminals” and “mercenaries” is rather thoroughly exploded. The basic criteria for acceptance in the Waffen-SS revolved around the applicant’s physical fitness, mental attitude and past record. Anyone with a criminal record was officially *rejected*, although some managed to pass the screening process

deceptively. Utilizing these standards, the Waffen-SS accepted only 3,000 recruits out of about 12,000 who flooded the recruiting offices of the original Dutch Legion. And out of this 3,000 another 400 would be culled out during training for either harboring a criminal past or an incompatible political attitude. Similarly we can look at the Ukrainian volunteers and see that out of 81,999 initial applicants only 29,124 were finally accepted after screening!

If there is any judgment that can be made from this it is that the men who got into the Waffen-SS usually represented the *best* human material that their respective countries had to offer. There is no way to categorize them individually since they came from all different classes and backgrounds sharing only one common denominator: a love of their country and continent.

It is more than fair to say that the European volunteers left a mark on the battlefields of the Eastern Front far out of proportion to their actual numbers, and this paper would not be complete if it did not include a sampling of their achievements.



In the Linden Hills east of the Oder River,

Obersturmführer Capelle's company of Walloon volunteers was in its death struggle. Enemy tanks were swarming all over — many had been knocked out but all of the Panzerfäuste were now exhausted. At this point, Capelle radioed to "Wallonien" Division headquarters that he was going to try and breakout and link-up

with the Division. But escape for the company was no longer possible. Walloon volunteers were crushed to death by tanks running over their foxholes. The badly wounded fired their weapons until their last breath.

Finally all that was left was the company command post. In a heroic stand, the Belgian SS men fought it out until the end. The severely wounded were humanely put out of their misery. The survivors fought on with rifle butts and service revolvers. Incredibly, the command post resisted for the whole day. As it was finally overwhelmed in the early evening, Obersturmführer Capelle went down firing his pistol. Two wounded Walloons reached the German lines during the night to tell of this last battle.

On the next day, 27 February 1945, a supplement to the daily Wehrmacht war bulletin was read over the German radio: “In Pomerania a battle-group from the SS Volunteers Grenadier Division ‘Wallonien’ under the leadership of SS-Obersturmführer Capelle was deployed for flank for flank protection. Displaying exemplary steadfastness and fanatical battle spirit, it was destroyed (in action).” Capelle was recommended for the posthumous award of the Knight’s Cross, but documentation for the decoration was lost in the chaos of the war’s end.

* * *

On the morning of 26 January 1944 a Soviet tank force broke into the town of Gubanizy. The Dutch volunteer Caspar Sporck drove his self-propelled gun right into their midst and began shooting them up right and left, eventually claiming 11 kills. Later, during the last hours of the German retreat to the Narva bridgehead on 31 January 1944, Sporck stayed back alone with his armored vehicle and patrolled far to the east of the main battle lines, seeking out enemy tanks and vehicles and providing protection for stragglers. At dusk, with the enemy close behind, Sporck’s assault gun was the last vehicle to cross into the German lines. For his initiative and valor, Casper Sporck was later awarded the Knight’s Cross.

* * *



On 12 June 1944 at the “Sunshine” outpost to the southeast of the Narva bridgehead, the Danish NCO Egon Christophersen literally saved the main front, when with a small assault troop he counterattacked German trenches that had been seized by the Russians and regained them in hand-to-hand combat. Christophersen and his men then defended the positions against all attackers, enabling the broken German lines to re-consolidate and maintain position. Christophersen was awarded the Knight’s Cross.

* * *

At the Vepskula bridgehead on the west bank of the Narva River in February 1944, the bedraggled German forces were unable to eliminate a dangerous Soviet inroad. Fresh Estonian assault troops were brought in. For a time they, too, were pinned down. Then the young Estonian Sergeant Haralt Nugiseks led a leap-frog attack that broke through the communist lines. In vicious close combat the enemy trenches were cleared all the way to the river's edge. Nugiseks was awarded the Knight's Cross.

* * *

In August 1943 on the Wolchov Front, the Latvian Sergeant Zanis Butkus led a storm troop into the enemy lines and proceeded to capture a string of communist bunkers without loss. He returned to the German lines with many prisoners and much booty. Butkus was given an officer's commission on the spot. Later, after taking part in 59 close combat engagements, Butkus was awarded the Knight's Cross.

* * *

In July 1944, on the north side of "Orphanage Hill" on the Narva Front, the Flemish NCO Remi Schyrnen singlehandedly knocked out more than a dozen enemy tanks while wounded and cut off from his unit. In a 48 hour period he turned back — all by himself — several Soviet tank attacks that would have encircled the Flemish and Estonian volunteer battalions fighting nearby. He even scored a lucky "double kill" when one shot from his anti-tank gun penetrated through two tanks advancing side-by-side. Incredibly, in January 1944, Schyrnen had pulled off a similar feat to save the "Langemarck" Brigade near Zhitomir. Schyrnen was awarded the Knight's Cross.

* * *



Strong Soviet tank forces were attacking along the road south of Dorpat in eastern Estonia in August 1944 with the intention of severing the entire Estonian Front. The only things blocking their way were three anti-tank guns from the "Wallonien" Division under the direct command of the Walloon Lieutenant Leon Gillis. Gillis positioned his guns directly in the road and flung back attack after attack. In furious fighting that raged all day, the anti-tank guns were destroyed and most of the Walloons wounded. The whole front hinged on Gillis' next move. He chose to attack. The Walloon volunteers knocked out three more tanks

with hand grenades and drove back the rest. The enemy was unable to advance. Leon Gillis was awarded the Knight's Cross.

* * *

In February 1945, the communists were closing in on the military training camp at Neuhammer in Silesia. The Hungarian Captain, Georg Hermandy in command of the emergency battalion of the 26th SS Division "Hungaria" led his unit in a valiant counterattack to prevent a breakthrough. Even after being badly wounded, Hermandy insisted upon staying in the front lines and directed a successful defensive battle that saved the Neuhammer sector. After the fighting, the Wehrmacht Colonel in charge of the area visited the Hungarian SS positions, took off his own Knight's Cross and draped it around the neck of Hermandy. Waffenhauptsturmführer George Hermandy was subsequently killed on 23 March 1945 leading his men in yet another counterattack.

* * *



The last bridgehead on the east bank of the Oder River in March 1945 was held by the 1st Battalion/SS Regiment Division "Wallonien," led by the Walloon Major Henri Derriks. Derriks, or "Der Boss," as he was known to his men, deployed his two tanks and his companies of infantrymen with cool decisiveness, enabling the last German soldiers and refugees to make their way to safety. Finally, with the communists closing in from three sides, Derriks calmly pulled back his forces step-by-step and got them safely across the river, destroying the last bridge behind them. It was nothing new for "Der Boss," as he had earlier commanded the last group of "Wallonien"

soldiers to fight their way out of the Cherkassy encirclement in south Ukraine. Later, Derriks led the last assault of the "Wallonien" Division on the Eastern Front. Among his many decorations for bravery, Sturmabführer Henri Derricks received the German Cross in Gold.

* * *

And there were *many, many* more European heroes, most of whom would not have their deeds recorded at all, but would instead find a final resting place in an unmarked grave somewhere in the “East.” We cannot begin to do justice to them in this paper, but we can, hopefully, lift part of the veil that has hidden their exploits for so long a time.

The Reckoning

We are now at the point where it can be asked, what does this discussion of the European Volunteer Movement prove? I think that it has at least validated the following statement by Beadle and Hartmann in their book, *The Waffen-SS: Its Divisional Insignia*: (p4)

By 1945, the Waffen-SS had proved by its combat success that European people could exist together, as long as they recognized and accepted the national differences between one another. It had been in the Waffen-SS that, for the first time, Dutch had been commanded by Germans and Germans by Belgians. It was this idealism, dearly bought on the roads of Russia and later in the gulags, that forged an outstanding spirit of comradeship and combatant ability among all members, regardless of nationality or rank.



Beadle and Hartmann also made one other trenchant statement that I hope is born out in this essay: (p4)

The greatest triumph of the Waffen-SS though, was not on the field of battle. It was in its policy of recruiting non-German volunteers, not as hired mercenaries, but as co-fighters for a European ideal.

After generations of slander, vilification and falsehood

concerning the European volunteers, the first rays of light are beginning to shine through. Slowly, but surely, their story is being told. As for the soldiers themselves, many are of the belief that they were ahead of their time, both militarily and philosophically, and that their legacy is yet to be fulfilled.

For myself, perhaps the most incisive observation was made by the former Waffen-SS Colonel Jochen Peiper in a letter to his comrades while he was being held in American confinement under sentence of death: “Don’t forget that it was in the ranks of the SS that the *first* European died ... “

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