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*Places of shame -
German war crimes in Italy 1943-1945*



Learning from History Nr. 2

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List of massacres carried out by the Nazifascists in
Tuscany from 1943 to 1945 divided by provinces

Introduction

The horror balance of the German occupation

The disastrous extent of the legacy of the German occupation between September 8, 1943, the day of the announcement of the ceasefire between the Western Allied troops and the Badoglio government, and the capitulation of German troops on the Italian front, which came into force on May 2, 1945, will take place on the Dreadful balance of these twenty months clearly.

It lists tens of thousands of Italians killed: those killed in guerrilla warfare, tortured prisoners and interrogators, hostages or massacres of civilians killed in war, in camps, by deportation and in the programmed murder of Jews. If one includes the forty to fifty thousand "military internees" (IMI) who have been forfeited as forced laborers in Germany, then we must assume well over 100,000 Italians who have fallen victim to the brutality of German warfare and German occupying rule (Schreiber 1996, p. 217; Gentile 2010, p. 492).

The plunder of the country

The destruction of many villages and settlements, the ordered destruction of a large part of the infrastructure as well as the systematic robbery of the country by the Wehrmacht, the SS and the occupation administration (Kuby, p. 447 ff .; Andrae, 57 ff.).

The human and material extermination work is not brought about by any anonymous forces - often with the

formula "it was just war" or "the command was trivialized". Those responsible for murder and devastation - from field marshals and generals to soldiers - even though they have not come to light in all cases, have been investigated or even prosecuted.

Memory of the victims

The places of massacres and extermination actions also have names and dates. The memory of the horrors of that period is not only associated with the great national commemorative sites such as Fosse Ardeatine near Rome, Marzabotto near Bologna or Fossoli near Modena. Rather, the memory of innumerable places remains deeply engrained in the collective memory of the population and the affected families. In almost every city, in many localities and in squares outside - whether in the mountains, on roads, whether conspicuous and elaborate or simply designed, sometimes difficult to find - we encounter monuments, tables and street names reminiscent of events and crimes to which women, children and old people, hostages and partisans, indeed often whole villages have fallen victim. At the same time, the commemorative plaques meticulously record the names of those who died.

Memory of resistance and liberation

In Italy, those killed in the resistance against the German occupation, among them many women, are honored in the same way - small villages are reminiscent of the fallen partisans from the home region, larger towns hold the victims from the ranks of the resistance with portrait panels at the central Places in public memory. Many municipalities in Italy promote the memory of resistance and liberation in collaboration with the associations of the former partisans and those returned from deportation by not

only supporting local and regional historical institutions - historical institutes or resistance museums - but also their cooperation, especially with schools and civic public support. Last but not least, April 25, the day of the popular uprising launched by the Resistenza in the major northern Italian cities in the spring of 1945, is celebrated as a national holiday commemorating the liberation of fascism and occupation.

Massacre of the Acqui Division - September 1943

The **Massacre of the Acqui Division**, also known as the **Cephalonia Massacre**, was the mass execution of the men of the Italian 33rd *Acqui* Infantry Division by the Germans on the island of Cephalonia, Greece, in September 1943, following the Italian armistice during the Second World War. About 5,000 soldiers were massacred and others drowned. The Italians launched their invasion of Greece in October 1940, but by November, they were pushed back into Albania, and in April 1941 the Germans had to come to their aid. But following the decision of the Italian government to negotiate a surrender to the Allies in 1943, the German Army tried to disarm the Italians in what they called Operation Achse. Between 13 and 22 September 1943, on the island of Cephalonia, the Italians of the 33rd *Acqui* Infantry Division fought the Germans. A total of 1,315 were killed in battle, 3,000 were drowned when the German ships taking them to concentration camps were sunk by the Allies and 5,155 were executed by 26 September. It was one of the largest prisoner of war massacres of the war, along with the Katyn massacre of approximately 22,000 Poles by Soviets, and it was one of many atrocities committed by the 1st Mountain Division (German: *1. Gebirgs Division*) .

Background

Since the fall of Greece in April-May 1941, the country had been divided in occupation zones, with the Italians getting the bulk of the mainland and most islands. The *Acqui* Division had been the Italian garrison of Cephalonia since May 1943,[9] and consisted of 11,500 soldiers and 525 officers. It was composed of two infantry regiments (the

17th and the 317th), the 33rd artillery regiment, the 27th Blackshirt Legion, the 19th Blackshirt Battalion and support units. Furthermore, its 18th Regiment was detached to garrison duties in Corfu. *Acqui* also had naval coastal batteries, torpedo boats and two aircraft. From 18 June 1943, it was commanded by the 52-year-old General Antonio Gandin, a decorated veteran of the Russian Front where he earned the German Iron Cross.

On the other hand, the Germans decided to reinforce their presence throughout the Balkans, following Allied successes and the possibility that Italy might seek accommodation with the Allies. On 5-6 July Lt Colonel Johannes Barge arrived with 2,000 men of the 966th Fortress Grenadier Regiment, including Fortress-Battalions 810 and 909 and a battery of self-propelled guns and nine tanks.

After Italy's armistice with the Allies in September 1943, General Gandin found himself in a dilemma: one option was surrendering to the Germans - who were already prepared for the eventuality and had begun disarming Italian garrisons elsewhere - or trying to resist. Initially, Gandin requested instructions from his superiors and began negotiations with Barge.

On 8 September 1943, the day the armistice was made public, General Carlo Vecchiarelli (it), commander of the 170,000-strong Italian army occupying Greece, telegraphed Gandin his order, essentially a copy of General Ambrosio's *promemoria* 2 from Headquarters. Vecchiarelli's order instructed that if the Germans did not attack the Italians, the Italians should not attack the Germans. Ambrosio's order stated that the Italians should not "make common cause" with the Greek partisans or even the Allies, should they arrive in Cephalonia.

In the case of a German attack, Vecchiarelli's order was not very specific because it was based on General Pietro Badoglio's directive which stated that the Italians should respond with "maximum decision" to any threat from any side. The order implied that the Italians should defend themselves but did not explicitly state so. At 22:30 hours of the same day Gandin received an order directly from General Ambrosio to send most of his naval and merchant vessels to Brindisi immediately, as demanded by the terms of the armistice. Gandin complied, thus losing a possible means of escape.

To make matters even more complicated Badoglio had agreed, after the overthrow of Mussolini, to the unification of the two armies under German command, in order to appease the Germans. Therefore, technically, both Vecchiarelli and Gandin were under German command, even though Italy had implemented an armistice agreement with the Allies. That gave the Germans a sense of justification in treating any Italians disobeying their orders as mutineers or *franc-tireurs*, which, at that time, the laws of war considered unlawful combatants subject to execution on capture.

At 9:00 hours on 9 September, Barge met with Gandin and misled him by stating that he had received no orders from the German command. The two men liked each other and they had things in common as Gandin was pro-German and liked Goethe. Indeed, Gandin's pro German attitude was the reason he had been sent by General Ambrosio to command the *Acqui* Division: fearing he might side with the Germans against the evolving plot to depose Mussolini, Ambrosio wanted Gandin out of Italy. Both men ended their meeting on good terms, agreeing to wait for orders and also that the situation should be resolved peacefully.

On 11 September, the Italian High Command sent two explicit instructions to Gandin, to the effect that "German troops have to be viewed as hostile" and that "disarmament attempts by German forces must be resisted with weapons". That same day Barge handed Gandin an ultimatum, demanding a decision given the following three options:

1. Continue fighting on the German side
2. Fight against the Germans
3. Hand over arms peacefully

Gandin brought Barge's ultimatum to his senior officers and the seven chaplains of the Acqui for discussion. Six of the chaplains and all of his senior officers advised him to comply with the German demands while one of the chaplains suggested immediate surrender. However, Gandin could not agree to join the Germans because that would be against the King's orders as relayed by Badoglio. He also did not want to fight them because, as he said, "they had fought with us and for us, side by side". On the other hand, surrendering the weapons would violate the spirit of the armistice. Despite the orders from the Italian GHQ, Gandin chose to continue negotiating with Barge.

Gandin finally agreed to withdraw his soldiers from their strategic location on Mount Kardakata, the island's "nerve centre", in return for a German promise not to bring reinforcements from the Greek mainland and on 12 September, he informed Barge that he was prepared to surrender the Acqui's weapons, as Lt Colonel Barge reported to his superiors in the XXII Mountain Corps. However, Gandin was under pressure not to come to an agreement with the Germans from his junior officers who were threatening mutiny. The Acqui's detached regiment on Corfu, not commanded by Gandin, also informed him at around midnight 12-13 September, by radio

communication, that they had rejected an agreement with the Germans. Gandin also heard from credible sources that soldiers who had surrendered were being deported and not repatriated.

On 13 September, a German convoy of five ships approached the island's capital, Argostoli. Italian artillery officers, on their own initiative, ordered the remaining batteries to open fire, sinking two German landing craft and killing five Germans.

Under these circumstances, that same night, Gandin presented his troops with a poll, essentially containing the three options presented to him by Barge:

1. Join the Germans
2. Surrender and be repatriated
3. Resist the German forces

The response from the Italian troops was in favour of the third option by a large majority but there is no available information as to the exact size of the majority, and therefore on 14 September Gandin reneged on the agreement, refusing to surrender anything but the division's heavy artillery and telling the Germans to leave the island, demanding a reply by 9:00 the next day.

Battle with the Germans[edit]

As the negotiations stalled, the Germans prepared to resolve the crisis by force and presented the Italians with an ultimatum which expired at 14:00 hours on 15 September.

On the morning of 15 September, the German Luftwaffe began bombarding the Italian positions with Stuka dive-bombers. On the ground, the Italians initially enjoyed superiority, and took about 400 Germans prisoner. On 17

September however, the Germans landed the "Battle Group Hirschfeld", composed of the III./98 and the 54th Mountain Battalions of the German Army's elite 1st Mountain Division, together with I./724 Battalion of the 104th Jäger Division, under the command of Major Harald von Hirschfeld. The 98th *Gebirgsjäger* Regiment, in particular, had been involved in several atrocities against civilians in Epirus in the months preceding the Acqui massacre.

At the same time, the Germans started dropping propaganda leaflets calling upon the Italians to surrender. The leaflets stated:

"Italian comrades, soldiers and officers, why fight against the Germans? You have been betrayed by your leaders!... LAY DOWN YOUR ARMS!! THE ROAD BACK TO YOUR HOMELAND WILL BE OPENED UP FOR YOU BY YOUR GERMAN COMRADES".

Gandin repeatedly requested help from the Ministry of War in Brindisi, but he did not get any reply. He even went so far as sending a Red Cross emissary to the Ministry, but the mission broke down off the coast of Apulia and when it arrived three days later at the Italian High Command in Brindisi, it was already too late. In addition, 300 planes loyal to Badoglio were located at Lecce, near the southernmost point of Italy, well within range of Cephalonia, and were ready to intervene. But the Allies would not let them go because they feared they could have defected to the German side. Furthermore, two Italian torpedo boats, already on their way to Cephalonia, were ordered back to port by the Allies for the same reasons.

Despite help for the Italians from the local population, including the island's small ELAS partisan detachments, the Germans enjoyed complete air superiority and their troops

had extensive combat experience, in contrast with the conscripts of Acqui, who were no match for the Germans. In addition, Gandin had withdrawn the Acqui from the elevated position on Mount Kardakata and that gave the Germans an additional strategic advantage. After several days of fighting, at 11:00 hours on 22 September, following Gandin's orders, the last Italians surrendered, having run out of ammunition and having lost 1,315 men killed. According to German sources, the losses were 300 Germans and 1,200 Italians. 15 Greek partisans were also killed fighting alongside the *Acqui*.

Massacre

The massacre started on 21 September, and lasted for one week. After the Italian surrender, Hitler had issued an order allowing the Germans to summarily execute any Italian officer who resisted "for treason", and on 18 September, the German High Command issued an order stating that "because of the perfidious and treacherous behaviour [of the Italians] on Cephalonia, no prisoners are to be taken." The *Gebirgsjäger* soldiers began executing their Italian prisoners in groups of four to ten. The Germans first killed the surrendering Italians, where they stood, using machine-guns. When a group of Bavarian soldiers objected to this practice they were threatened with summary execution themselves. After this stage was over, the Germans marched the remaining soldiers to the San Teodoro town hall and had the prisoners executed by eight member detachments.- General Gandin and 137 of his senior officers were summarily courtmartialled on 24 September and executed, their bodies discarded at sea.

Romualdo Formato, one of *Acqui's* seven chaplains and one of the few survivors, wrote that during the massacre, the Italian officers started to cry, pray and sing. Many were

shouting the names of their mothers, wives and children. According to Formato's account, three officers hugged and stated that they were comrades while alive and now in death they would go together to paradise, while others were digging through the grass as if trying to escape. In one place, Formato recalled, "the Germans went around loudly offering medical help to those wounded. When about 20 men crawled forward, a machinegun salvo finished them off." Officers gave Formato their belongings to take with him and give to their families back in Italy. The Germans, however, confiscated the items and Formato could no longer account for the exact number of the officers killed.

The executions of the Italian officers were continuing when a German officer came and reprieved Italians who could prove they were from South Tyrol as that region had been annexed by Hitler as German province after 8 September. Seeing an opportunity, Formato begged the officer to stop the killings and save the few officers remaining. The German officer responded and told Formato that he would consult with his commanding officer. When the officer returned, after half an hour, he informed Formato that the killings of the officers would stop. The number of Italian surviving officers, including Formato, totaled 37. After the reprieve the Germans congratulated the remaining Italians and offered them cigarettes. The situation remained unstable, however. Following the reprieve, the Germans forced twenty Italian sailors to load the bodies of the dead officers on rafts and take them out to sea. The Germans then blew up the rafts with the Italian sailors on board.

Alfred Richter, an Austrian, and one of the participants in the massacre recounted how a soldier who sang arias for the Germans in the local taverns was forced to sing while his comrades were being executed. The singing soldier's fate remains unknown. Richter stated that he and his