

# Contemporary European History

<http://journals.cambridge.org/CEH>

Additional services for **Contemporary European History**:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## The Danish Volunteers in the Waffen SS and German Warfare at the Eastern Front

Peter Scharff Smith, Niels Bo Poulsen and Claus Bundgård Christensen

Contemporary European History / Volume 8 / Issue 01 / March 1999, pp 73 - 96

DOI: null, Published online: 08 September 2000

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0960777399000144](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0960777399000144)

### How to cite this article:

Peter Scharff Smith, Niels Bo Poulsen and Claus Bundgård Christensen (1999). The Danish Volunteers in the Waffen SS and German Warfare at the Eastern Front. Contemporary European History, 8, pp 73-96

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

---

# The Danish Volunteers in the

---

## Waffen SS and German

---

### Warfare at the Eastern front

---

PETER SCHARFF SMITH, NIELS BO POULSEN AND  
CLAUS BUNDGÅRD CHRISTENSEN

The Waffen SS was the military branch of Heinrich Himmler's notorious SS<sup>1</sup> organisation. In the 1930s the Waffen SS started out as the so-called *Verfügungstruppen*, an SS army supported by Hitler, which in time of war was to cooperate with the German Wehrmacht. The Waffen SS had its baptism of fire when Germany invaded Poland,<sup>2</sup> and it established its reputation as an effective fighting force during the campaign in the west. However, it was in the east that the Waffen SS was to do most of its service, and it was here the SS soldiers were to achieve their greatest victories and suffer their most bitter defeats. During the war the Waffen SS expanded heavily, especially through the admission to its ranks of a considerable number of non-German volunteers from a number of countries. This expansion meant that, by the end of the Second World War, more than half of the approximately 600,000 soldiers in the Waffen SS were of foreign origin. Among them were around 6,000 Danish volunteers, many of whom distinguished themselves as highly devoted defenders of the Third Reich, combining military skills with ideological commitment. In the present article we analyse how these men broke away from the relatively peaceful Danish society to take part in the ravages of the eastern front and note how, after the war, to a large degree they were reintegrated in that society, despite their Nazi past and their violent experiences during the war.

The eastern front was the primary site where the Danish SS soldiers saw action,

<sup>1</sup> SS is an abbreviation of 'Schutzstaffeln' which literally means 'Protection Detachments'. The SS was developed from Hitler's bodyguard.

<sup>2</sup> At that time the name 'Verfügungstruppen' was still used. The title 'Waffen SS' became official during early 1940. Concerning this and the Waffen SS in general, see for example George H. Stein, *The Waffen SS – Hitler's Elite Guard at War 1939–1945*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966); Bernd Wegner, *Hitler's politischen Soldaten. Die Waffen SS 1933–1945. Studien zu Leitbild, Struktur und Funktion einer nationalsozialistischen Elite*, (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1990); and two articles by Wegner 'Die Garde des Führers und die Feuerwehr der Ostfront. Zur neueren Litteratur über die Waffen SS', and 'Auf dem Wege zur pangermanischen Armee. Dokumente zur entstehungsgeschichte des III (germanischen) SS-Panzerkorps', both in *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, no. 23 (1978), 210–36 and no. 28 (1980), 101–36. On the war at the eastern front, see for example: Horst Boog et al., *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion*, (Verlag: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1991); Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg, Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995).

often fighting under very rough conditions indeed. But the extraordinary hardship the men had to endure was not the only hallmark of the eastern front. The soldiers did their service in a unique context – the context of Nazism. They fought in a racial war, and were educated especially for this purpose. How did this affect the men? The last decade has seen a rise in scientific literature concerned with the very interesting question of precisely what the German soldiers were instructed to do at the eastern front, and what motives there were behind their often brutal endeavours.<sup>3</sup> Some feel that even in the Wehrmacht Nazification efforts greatly moulded the individual soldiers, their conception of the war and the society, possibly to a point which can be termed ‘distortion of reality’.<sup>4</sup> This article is based on the first case study of Waffen SS soldiers that, in addition to military archives, incorporates interviews, diaries and especially letters from the front on a grand scale. This is in order to broaden our knowledge of the mental universe of the soldiers. In this article special emphasis has been given to the question of National Socialist commitment and the ideological training of the soldiers.

### **I. Background**

Danish society can without doubt be labelled as one of the most politically stable European societies in the turbulent period between the two world wars. Despite a high level of unemployment and a sharp drop in export revenues, due to the impact of the world crisis in the 1930s, the reaction to the crisis for the majority of the population was to gather around the Social-liberalist model formulated by the four traditional Danish parties rather than to support some of the radical newcomers such as the Communist Party (DKP) or the Danish National Socialist Workers Party (DNSAP). At the election in 1939 the Communists and the National Socialists gained three seats each, out of the 149 seats in the Danish parliament.

A sign of this shared commitment to a politically centrist and peaceable course between the parties was that the German occupation, which began on 9 April 1940, resulted in the four ‘old’ parties, namely the Conservatives, the Venstre (the Peasant Party), the Radikale Venstre (the Social Liberals) and the Social Democratic Party, creating a national coalition government and initiating a policy of collaboration with the German occupiers. In this way several potential problems were overcome. (i) The Danish Nazis had suddenly become a political factor, and it was feared that the Germans would let them establish a government; (ii) The Danish Social Democrats knew the fate of their southern socialist colleagues, during the 1930s. Would the Germans try to destroy the Danish socialist movement, thereby shattering years of hard work that only recently had led to substantial political power? (iii) Probably most important of all, it was felt that cooperation was the best way to save Danish citizens from Nazification and physical harm. The avoidance of

<sup>3</sup> See for example Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and Theo J. Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia*, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> This term is used by Omer Bartov in *Hitler's Army*.

the latter was exemplified by the release in early August 1940 of a number of Danish citizens interned by the Germans during the early days of the occupation. Keeping legislation in Danish hands was thus one of the primary objectives throughout the years of the coalition government.<sup>5</sup>

Although accepted in mainstream historical writings, the policy of cooperation has been criticised quite severely since the war. Many a political cooperative action during the first three- and-a-half years of the German occupation did not fit in well with the picture of Denmark as an Allied nation. No doubt Danish society was kept relatively unharmed and many lives (both Danish and German) were saved by collaboration. However, the popular support for this policy was weakened as the prospect of a quick German victory faded away and as the Danish government followed German wishes in such areas as the banning of the Danish Communist Party and the signing of the German-initiated Anti-Comintern Pact. Furthermore, Danish authorities tried to quell the rising resistance movement. In September 1942, for example, the Danish prime minister broadcast a speech where he called upon citizens to inform against saboteurs.

The official cooperation lasted until 29 August 1943, when the government resigned. The policy of cooperation was to a large degree continued by the officials in the Danish ministerial administration until May 1945. However, the last 20 months of the occupation saw a significant rise in killings and terror on the one hand, and Danish sabotage actions on the other.

## **II. The recruitment of Danish volunteers**

On 23 April 1940, no more than two weeks after the German invasion of Denmark and Norway, Himmler ordered the establishment of a military unit which was to include volunteers from these two countries: the SS Standarte Nordland. The recruitment of Scandinavians to Nordland was designed to overcome the strict limits that were imposed on the growth of the Waffen SS by the Wehrmacht. The Wehrmacht had established a near-monopoly in recruitment in Germany and thus forced the Waffen SS to look outside Germany in its search for manpower. Until mid-1941 the criteria for the admission of the so-called Germanic volunteers into the ranks of the Waffen SS were the same as those for Germans: very good physical shape and a high degree of National Socialist commitment were demanded. Recruitment to Standarte Nordland was conducted in secrecy and confined to members of the DNSAP and the German minority (around 30,000) in southern

<sup>5</sup> For the general situation of Danish society during the German occupation see among others Jørgen Hæstrup, *Til landets bedste*, vols. I & II, (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1966–71). Hans Kirchhoff, *Kamp eller tilpasning*, (Aalborg: Gyldendal, 1987). Henrik S. Nissen, 1940 *Studier i forhandlingspolitiken og samarbejdspolitikken*, (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1963). Non-Danish-speaking readers are recommended to read, Henrik S. Nissen, ed., *Scandinavia during the Second World War* (Oslo & Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). Therkel Stræde, 'Neuere Forschungen zum Zweiten Weltkrieg in Dänemark,' in Jürgen and Müller Rohwer, eds., *Neue Forschungen zum Zweiten Weltkrieg. Literaturberichte und bibliographien* (Koblenz, Stuttgart: Hildegard, Bernhard & Graefe Verlag, 1990).

Jutland, in order not to violate Danish legislation against foreign armies recruiting on Danish ground. Eventually the German minority in Denmark delivered slightly more than one-quarter of the Danish volunteers, but the fate of these approximately 1,500 men,<sup>6</sup> who mainly did their service in division Totenkopf and 1 SS Brigade, is beyond the scope of the present article. Instead this article will focus on the remaining 4,500 volunteers, who were mainly located in three units, namely the Wiking division, the Nordland division and the so-called Frikorps Danmark.

At this early stage the recruits were smuggled across the Danish-German border and sent to various SS schools, usually the SS school in Sennheim in Alsace, where they underwent a basic course in sports and ideological training. After four-five weeks' stay in these schools the recruits could choose either to sign up with the Waffen SS or they could return to their home country. From the writings by some of these potential SS soldiers it is obvious that this recruitment directly from pro-German and pro-Nazi circles secured the ideological strength of the future Waffen SS. Excerpts from letters by Danish and Norwegian recruits at the Waffen SS school in Klagenfurt all show clear signs of ideological commitment. One hopeful volunteer writes a letter in September 1940, assuring his relatives: 'I want you to know that I'm returning packed with a full load of enlightening National Socialism, which will make an impression on my surroundings ...'.<sup>7</sup>

Until late May 1941 some 550 Danish citizens<sup>8</sup> were admitted to the Waffen SS many of them to Standarte Nordland, which in December 1940 became part of a new SS division, the SS Wiking division. But things were not moving fast enough for Himmler. In order to lay their hands on a significant number of foreign volunteers, the SS had to come up with something new.

### **III. Frikorps Danmark – The Danish Legion**

The German assault on the Soviet Union which began on 22 June 1941 made hitherto politically sceptical groups potential volunteers, and thus became a tool in the hands of the SS Hauptamt responsible for the recruiting. The anti-communist theme became dominant in recruitment propaganda, in order to appeal to right-wing nationalist groups, who were not necessarily National Socialist. Furthermore, the nature of the physical requirements for volunteers were relaxed in subsequent years, as the engagement in the east took a heavy toll in human lives. Thus some nationalist, non-National Socialist groups were encouraged to enlist on the grounds that they were fighting, not primarily a National Socialist war, but a protective war: 'Europe against Bolshevism'. A new type of SS formation was created in order to absorb Germanic volunteers of lesser physique and without direct Nazi affiliation:

<sup>6</sup> See *Den parlamentariske kommissions beretning*, Book 14, Vol. 1 (Copenhagen: J. H. Schultz A/S, 1950, 349 onwards).

<sup>7</sup> RA (The Danish) National Archive, Microcopy nr. T-175, nr. 59, p.2/574372-84.

<sup>8</sup> This number excludes Danes from the German minority (650 altogether). See Henning Poulsen, *Besættelsesmagten og de Danske Nazister* (Copenhagen: Udgivelselskab for Danmarks nyeste historie, 1970), 274 onwards.

the legion. In Denmark the so-called 'Frikorps Danmark' was established, in Norway 'Den Norske Legion', and in the Netherlands and in Flanders legions were also set up shortly after the attack on the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> This was arranged in cooperation between the SS and various national National Socialist movements. By supporting such an arrangement the different Nazi parties in occupied Europe hoped to underline their patriotic anti-communist devotion as opposed to the popular belief that they were unconditionally pro-German. Furthermore, the SS soldiers could when they returned become the core of national Nazi armies, which could be used in *Machtergreifung* as portrayed by the NSDAP in the early 1930s. Hence the DNSAP eagerly involved itself in establishing a national Danish unit in the ranks of the SS.

The very active involvement of the DNSAP in the recruitment for Frikorps Danmark was in fact a second choice. It was by now apparent that the party's primary goal, a Danish Nazi government, was not within immediate sight. To promote the Danish Legion and thus impress the SS by the DNSAP's ability to mobilise volunteers for the war on the eastern front, was viewed as an alternative road to power. Later on, as world events started to turn against the Germans and thus the DNSAP, this objective of political power naturally faded away. Paradoxically this in no way lessened the focus on Waffen SS service. In fact volunteering nearly became a requirement among the male DNSAP members, as a sort of semi-religious sacrifice for the National Socialist cause. The more isolated the Danish National Socialists became in Danish society as the war progressed, the more they tended to focus exclusively on the Danish volunteers. The Danish SS soldiers became the heroes of the Nazi movement. This constituted an escape from the increasingly problematic everyday life as a Danish National Socialist. Altogether around 50 per cent of all Danish volunteers in the Waffen SS were organised National Socialists in the Danish DNSAP. A further 25 per cent were non-organised National Socialists.<sup>10</sup>

Up to the creation of the Frikorps Danmark, the Danish government had not been involved in the recruitment of Danish volunteers, though it was aware that Danish citizens were illegally recruited on Danish soil. As the first German units were entering Soviet territory on the morning of 22 June, a number of German demands were delivered to the Danish government, among other things that a number of leading communists should be interned. It was even feared that Germany would demand the contribution of regular soldiers from the Danish army at the eastern front. However, the initial planning of a Danish Legion was handled by the SS, the DNSAP and the German plenipotentiary Renthe Fink, without involving the Danish government. A few days later, just before the public proclamation of Frikorps Danmark on 29 June, the Danish government was informed about the Frikorps plans by its German occupiers, who did not want regular Danish troops,

<sup>9</sup> See for example Stein, *The Waffen SS*.

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Scharff Smith, Niels Bo Poulsen and Claus Bundgård Christensen, *Under hagekors og Dannebrog – danskere i Waffen SS 1940–1945*, (Copenhagen: Aschehoug, 1998). This book covers the complete history of the Danish SS soldiers – an English summary is included.

but public recruitment and official government acceptance of Danish officers joining Frikorps Danmark. Frikorps Danmark never received any clear official recognition, but a government circular granted the right to volunteer to members of the Danish army without losing their position in the army. That members of the Danish armed forces could return to service after having served in the German Waffen SS, was confirmed by the Danish government as late as June 1943.<sup>11</sup> These promises exemplified some of the moral problems concerning the policy of collaboration, since the volunteers were not legally accepted after the war, but instead were imprisoned. Contrary to the claims of Waffen SS veterans, the impression should not be given that in general they acted according to the will of the Danish government when volunteering. In fact the majority, as supporters of the DNSAP or other right-wing minorities, were not at all interested in the attitude of the official Denmark. They wanted to rebel against what they thought of as the 'system'.

One of the main challenges that met the founders of the Frikorps was to find the right leader. After some initial confusion the militarily competent, but politically naive, Lieutenant-Colonel Christian Peter Kryssing, who was not a National Socialist, was asked. After having been granted leave from the Danish army he accepted the appointment. Kryssing's willingness to join the Nazi war efforts grew from the frustration that the conquest of Denmark had created in Danish military circles. Kryssing was a member of 'the army that had not been allowed to fight'. This, combined with the diminishing social status the officers had experienced during the 1930s, released an antidemocratic potential in officer circles. On 9 April – the day of the occupation of Denmark – Kryssing wrote to his mother and told her that he 'saw an enemy in every civilian', since they, with their votes, had supported the disarmament politics of the Danish democracy.<sup>12</sup> On 29 June 1941, Kryssing issued an official statement claiming that Germany was defending Denmark against the 'Bolshevist threat', and this was why Danes had to join the fight against the Soviet Union. Furthermore, he confirmed that Frikorps Danmark was to become a purely Danish formation with Danish officers, fighting under the Danish flag and with Danish as the internal language. This propaganda seemed a success at first, with 700 men volunteering during the first three weeks of July alone; more than 450 of these were accepted into the corps. Expectations thus were high, but soon the number of volunteers dropped sharply, and at the turn of the year around forty men a month volunteered. Still, more than 1,000 Danes were gathered in the Frikorps during 1941.

However, as in Standarte Nordland and elsewhere in the Waffen SS, a great part of the members of Frikorps Danmark were organised National Socialists, and soon political conflicts were unleashed in the corps. This culminated in the winter of 1942 with a situation close to rebellion presumably led by the young Nazi Erling

<sup>11</sup> RA, 'Forsvarets arkiv', 'Besættelsestidens arkiv', package no. 90, Letter from the Danish Ministry of War, 1 June 1943.

<sup>12</sup> See Scharff Smith, Poulsen and Christensen, 'Kryssing og de Østfrontsfrivillige', in *Siden Saxo*, no.1, København (1995).

Hallas, a non-commissioned officer. Hallas was a prolific political agitator in the DNSAP. His writings, such as the book *Racial Struggle* ('Racekamp'), reveals him as an uncompromisingly radical National Socialist and an inflammatory anti-Semite. There can be little doubt that his presence in itself was a problem for Kryssing.<sup>13</sup> One morning the walls at the barracks of Frikorps Danmark near the Polish town Poznan were painted with such (apparently) derogatory slogans as 'Kryssing is a democrat' and 'Captain Schoch (one of Kryssing's closest allies) is a freemason'. Kryssing subsequently had Hallas and a few other officers arrested, only to see them being freed by order of the SS in Berlin. Finally, in February 1942 Kryssing was dismissed by Himmler, who chose the charismatic Christian Frederik von Schalburg as a new leader of the corps. Schalburg, who had previously served in the Wiking division, was well known (and respected) in the Waffen SS and the DNSAP as a wholehearted National Socialist and a convinced anti-Semite. The SS intervened when the military and ideological course of the corps was in doubt, thereby showing who was in charge and making it clear that Frikorps Danmark was by all practical standards a Waffen SS unit.

The German authorities had originally promised that Danish was to be the language of command and additionally stated that the corps was to enjoy a great degree of autonomy and be regarded as a nonpolitical formation.<sup>14</sup> Himmler's decision to expel Kryssing reflected among other things that these promises were not to be believed. The dismissal of Kryssing was the culmination of a very turbulent autumn and winter, during which the unit had been in a deep crisis. In addition to the internal struggles between Nazis and non-Nazis came the machinations of the appointed German education officer, SS Hauptsturmführer Massel. Massel had declared, earlier in 1941, that the Danish volunteers were to be turned into confirmed National Socialists, and during the autumn of 1941 he tried energetically to undermine the independence of the Danish officers and forced through German as the language of command. Kryssing had neglected Massel's political programme entirely, thereby sealing his own fate as commander of the Frikorps, because the SS could not accept a non-political education of their soldiers. It is noteworthy that most members of the corps apparently supported the German stance, as they found Kryssing to be lacking enthusiasm and old-fashioned in his behaviour. A private wrote in his diary as early as October 1941 that: 'There is nothing wrong with the men, in contrast to the leaders. The Danes are self-willed and Kryssing is too old to conduct an undertaking such as this. Instead of him a younger and more enterprising man should take over, such as Hauptsturmführer von Schalburg'.<sup>15</sup>

Von Schalburg was indeed loved by his men who admired his open and egalitarian attitude. By following a policy of both reconciliation and Nazification, he was able to win the hearts of the SS Hauptamt as well as that of most officers.

<sup>13</sup> Erling Hallas, *Racekamp*, DNSAP's forlag, Bovrup 1941.

<sup>14</sup> RA, RP (the National Police), the questioning of Lorenz Lorenzen, 1945.

<sup>15</sup> Frihedsmuseet, FM 20, H.G.'s diary 4 Oct. 1941.



The most sceptical were dealt with in another way. They were removed altogether from the Frikorps in order to serve in other Waffen SS units.

#### **IV. The volunteers in eastern Europe 1941–45**

The upheavals in the corps caused serious delays in its training and it took almost one year before it could be brought into action. In late spring 1942 the corps was ordered to the Demjansk area south of the northern Russian Lake Ilmen, where it was to serve under the SS Totenkopf division.

Despite the fact that Frikorps Danmark was fully equipped as a motorised, enlarged battalion it was not earmarked for the German summer offensive when it was transferred to the eastern front in May 1942. Instead the men were flown into the Demjansk pocket, where six encircled German divisions fought stubbornly to defend an area Hitler saw as vital for resuming his offensive against Moscow. In the Demjansk they did not see very much of the famous German panzer, nor many of Göring's Stukas for that matter. To the Danish soldiers, so far only familiar with the war from newsreels, the Blitzkrieg must have seemed more than a century away. Here, as across large parts of the eastern front, the majority of the German army had become stuck in a trench warfare reminiscent of the Great War.<sup>16</sup> This was indeed the case in Demjansk – an area filled with swamps and scrub. The water was contaminated, the men were living in damp pillboxes and bunkers and the millions of mosquitos spread the malaria-like illness 'swamp fever'. The commander of 1 company, Per Sørensen, wrote to his parents that just a few hours of rain transformed the roads into a bog, and one walked in mud up to the knees. The waterlogged terrain could not absorb the rainfall, a fact that rendered the bunkers and trenches virtually useless: 'Unfortunately,' writes Per Sørensen, '... it has now been raining for two days and nights in a row and most men fled their bunkers last night around one o'clock, because they feared drowning there. If this continues we'll have to live above ground.'

The harsh conditions did not only mean discomfort for the men; they also caused widespread sickness among the soldiers. In reports from the Totenkopf division to which the Frikorps was attached it was stated in August 1942 that there were many cases of malaria and because of constant Soviet attacks even the sick had to take part in front-line duty. It was concluded that 'der Gesundheitsstand der Truppen ... ist durch das lange Liegen im Sumpf sehr schlecht' ('due to the long stay in the swamps, the health of the soldiers is very bad'). That this statement was also valid with regard to the Frikorps can be seen from its war diary. While there was only one case of illness during the period 20 May to 11 June, the daily number of sick increased to around eighty in August. That meant that constantly around 10 per cent of the soldiers were sick.<sup>17</sup> By August 1942, when Frikorps Danmark was

<sup>16</sup> For this kind of comparison between the two world wars, see for example Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, but see also John Ellis, *The Sharp End – The Fighting Man in World War II*, (London: Pimlico, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> BAMA (Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv) RS4/1312, 'Kriegstagebuch Freikorps Danmark'.

pulled out of action, 126 had died and altogether one-third of the men were dead or seriously wounded.<sup>18</sup>

The entire corps was then granted leave in Denmark and it arrived early in September in Copenhagen. Everybody in the corps knew from the letters they received from home that relatives of the Danish volunteers on several occasions had been harassed by Danish civilians. What further added to the heated atmosphere was that many of the soldiers had earlier participated in anti-government activities, and among the soldiers it was soon rumoured that they were supposed to be the core troops in a Nazi coup d'état. Not surprisingly tensions arose from the first minutes they were on Danish soil. In fact just after crossing the border, the Danish SS men felt harassed by the personnel on the train on which they were travelling, and so they hijacked it; the traindriver made the rest of the trip at gunpoint. On a number of occasions Frikorps soldiers provoked or were provoked by Danish civilians. The conflicts revealed facets of the indoctrination and brutalisation the men had undergone in the Waffen SS. For example Frikorps members together with members of the DNSAP were involved in such events as attacking a mulatto, Jewish-looking people, and young zoot suiters. These September days represented a definite turning-point in the relationship between the Danish volunteers and the Danish public. Four weeks later, when the Frikorps was returned to the eastern front, it must have been very clear to the men that little support for their cause could be found among the majority of the Danish population.

Supplied with fresh recruits and recovered wounded, in November 1942 the corps was sent to eastern Belorussia to join the first SS brigade in anti-partisan warfare. However, due to the deteriorating situation at the front, the corps was soon transferred to front-line service at Newel some 400 km west of Moscow. Here the corps had an uncomfortable, but relatively uneventful stay, Christmas Eve excepted. Luckily the corps commander Knud Børge Martinsen had ordered his men not to drink their Christmas spirits that evening, because a Russian surprise attack suddenly erupted, which in the course of a few hours threatened to destroy the entire Frikorps. The attack was repelled, but serious losses were sustained.

As new Danish volunteers were directed to other units by the Hauptamt the corps never reached its original strength of around 1,200 soldiers. As of Christmas Eve the effective fighting strength was down to around 400 men, and in February 1943 the overall strength had only increased to 633 men. In late March the corps was withdrawn from the eastern front to Grafenwöhr in southern Germany<sup>19</sup> and it was disbanded the following May. The soldiers were transferred to a new SS Panzergrenadier division called Nordland, in which they were to serve in 24 SS Panzergrenadierregiment Danmark. The division was part of a new SS armoured corps, III SS Germanische Panzerkorps.

The other legions were also restructured during 1943, partly because the leaders

<sup>18</sup> See BAMA RS4/1312, 'Kriegstagebuch Freikorps Danmark'.

<sup>19</sup> Written report by the commander, K. B. Martinsen, in private custody. See also Records of Reichsführer SS und Chef der deutschen Polizei, National Archives, Microcopy nr. T175, roll 192, p. 2574736: Gottlob Berger to Himmler, 10.1943 'Betr. Eine Germanische Korps'.

of the Waffen SS wanted to reduce the influence of the Nazi leaders of the various homelands of the legions. The latter often had great designs for what they considered their legions. Another reason for dissolving the national units, at least according to the official Waffen SS statements, was that neither the Danish, the Norwegian, nor the Flemish legion were of a size that made them militarily useful. From December 1941 until the dissolution in May 1943 the actual size of Frikorps Danmark had never exceeded 1,300 men.

While Frikorps Danmark was at the northern part of the eastern front, the Wiking division, including a few hundred Danes, had taken part in the German offensive in both 1941 and 1942, taking the division as far south-east as the Caucasus. As a German elite division the unit had achieved great victories, but at the price of a high number of casualties, and the number of Danes in the division had shrunk considerably. Counting the members of the dissolved Frikorps, the transferred Danes from Wiking division and some new recruits, the number of Danes in the III SS armoured corps started out at just below 1,500.

Still lacking equipment and further training the newly created SS corps was sent into service at the beginning of September 1943. The first assignment was to fight partisans in Croatia, and it was supposed that guard duty along the railroads could be combined with additional training. However, III SS corps soon became heavily involved in fighting partisans in an extremely bloody and confused conflict. The Denmark Regiment itself contributed to this brutal war, as members of one of its battalions burned down a Croatian village in late autumn 1943. This was a type of action that, according to a Danish volunteer, was normal procedure.<sup>20</sup>

Typical of the letters and memoirs of the soldiers dating from the following Balkan period, is a combination of stress and fear of partisan attacks with a fascination with the exotic food, the people and the landscape. Better accommodation and climate also characterised the stay. However, the lack of troop training, vehicles and equipment in general constituted problems that could not be solved by easier access to clean linen, good food and wine. Just before the division was transferred to the Leningrad area it was thus stated that: 'The division is not ready for duty at the front. It would lead to the division's breakdown, causing extremely high losses in both soldiers and machinery.'

Despite this warning the division was sent back to the eastern front in December 1944 together with the other units of the III SS Panzer corps to defend the northern part of the German front. On 14 January 1945 superior Soviet forces attacked the corps, pouring out from Leningrad and the so-called Oranienbaum pocket. The attack caused a complete, but temporary breakdown of the German front, mainly due to the collapse of two Luftwaffe divisions assigned to the corps, and this forced the III SS corps to a chaotic retreat to the Estonian border, where the Narva river

<sup>20</sup> Different sources indicate this, among others a diary and a trial protocol, though it is hard to judge whether they refer to the same situation. Furthermore a former volunteer told the authors of this article about his company exterminating a village. See Scharff Smith et al., *Under hagekors og Dannebrog*.

made a excellent defence line. Per Sørensen described the strenuous withdrawal to his parents:

Dear Dad and Mum. Hurriedly, a sign of life. I know that it has been a shamefully long time. This time, however, it is due to the war. We have been involved in heavy fighting and as a matter of fact we have not yet finished. All our efforts went according to plan but the modern 'flexible warfare' is terribly exhausting, both physically and mentally. We had a trip lasting eight days and nights in the open air, getting our feet wet, which of course made the most thin-skinned very dejected.<sup>21</sup>

Facing large Soviet forces the corps successfully managed to defend the strip of land between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Peipus for almost eight months, but whereas there had been relative parity between the opposing forces in 1942, it was now obvious that the Red Army was overwhelmingly strong with regard to both men and equipment. 1944 was the year when the German war production reached its maximum, but as the Allied war production had increased even more, and as the constant formation of new divisions and redesignations of units demanded large quantities of the new equipment, the boost in production did not mean much to the units at the front. Lack of transport facilities and constant partisan attacks also hindered some of the new equipment reaching the front. The supply problems were overwhelming. For example, although the III SS corps was assigned a number of new Panther tanks early in 1944, most of the tanks could not be driven because of technical problems and lack of spare parts. Instead, the majority of the new tanks were dug in and used as anti-tank guns. From this period comes the first evidence that Danish volunteers began to lack enough food, even though this was mainly due to transportation difficulties. As 1944 proceeded a serious lack of manpower also started to affect the Nordland division as companies dropped alarmingly in strength. According to one postwar account the average size of the companies dropped from 100 to around 50 during the first half of 1944.<sup>22</sup>

Finally giving up the defence of Estonia in September 1944, the Nordland division retreated southwards and ended in the so-called Courland pocket in Latvia, from which in January 1945 it was shipped to Pomerania in Germany. Remnants of the division, including a few hundred Danes, took part in the defence of Berlin and remained fighting until 2 May 1945, and were therefore among the very last soldiers fighting for the survival of the Third Reich.

Reaching the end of the Third Reich, and thereby the final chapters of the regimental history of the Danish Waffen SS soldiers, we can conclude that the war they saw and fought was often a relatively primitive infantry war, marked by the very harsh conditions at the front. Sickness and appalling living quarters constituted the everyday life of the soldiers, and diving into cover from Russian artillery was much more common than advancing in the wake of the German panzer. There is one exception though. Turning to the Wiking division, we find the only Danish soldiers who participated in serious Blitzkrieg. Around 200 Danes were constantly

<sup>21</sup> Per Sørensen, letter of 2 Feb. 1944, in private hands.

<sup>22</sup> Wilhelm Tieke, *Tragödie um die Treue*, (Osnabrück :Osnabrück Verlag, 1971), 96.

in action with this division (in all, throughout the war, approximately 500) as it made large advances during the summer of 1941 and again during the summer of 1942. But if we look beyond this relative success, we see that the Wiking division is one example among many illustrating how German units were worn down quickly, losing high quality personnel and experiencing demodernisation. Already in November 1941 the state of the soldiers was so bad, that the combat ability of the division was questioned seriously by the medical staff. In December the Nordland regiment reported 80 per cent of all cars and all armoured reconnaissance vehicles to be out of order. Concerning the entire division it was concluded that 'the division is not capable of duty as a motorised unit'.<sup>23</sup> The reinforcements brought in early in 1942 did not improve the situation much, as some of the newcomers, according to a letter from the commander of Nordland, 'are too weak for service, and some have been crying like children'. The harsh realities of the front compelled two of the fresh recruits, a Dane and a Norwegian, to desert during the night of 12 March.<sup>24</sup>

The few Danes who remained members of the Wiking division after the creation of Nordland division experienced a rough fate indeed. Being trapped in the so-called Tjerkassypocket in December 1943 the division lost most of its equipment and a large number of men, while the remaining 4,500 men of the division managed to fight their way out of the pocket in early 1944.<sup>25</sup> Fully re-equipped after this, Wiking was in early 1945 transferred to Hungary, where it participated in Hitler's last offensive, the German attempt to relieve surrounded Budapest.

## **V. Ideological soldiers**

The story of the Danish volunteers is not only a question of where and when they fought battles. There was a special dimension to the Waffen SS service. Members of the Waffen SS were expected to be 'political soldiers' and for that reason the soldiers were submitted to various forms of political schooling.<sup>26</sup>

The political schooling was in Nazi terminology called 'Weltanschauliche Erziehung' and was supposed to constitute an all-powerful influence on the behaviour of the soldiers. An SS regimental order stated that this political schooling should not be limited to the classroom, but had to be present 'always and everywhere'.<sup>27</sup> To achieve that a host of different media was used: films, pamphlets and books, classroom lessons, military orders, social gatherings (so-called 'comrade evenings'), officers' speeches, and so on.

The officers especially were seen as a valuable tool in bringing about a general Nazification of the men, and therefore ideological training was an integral part of

<sup>23</sup> Berlin Zehlendorf, NS 19, 1520 'Gesundheit der Truppen'.

<sup>24</sup> The desertions resulted in reactions from Himmler. National Archives, Microcopy, T 175, 107, p.631081 onwards.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Strassner, *Europäische Freiwillige Die 5.SS Panzerdivision Wiking*, (Osnabrück: Osnabrück Verlag, 1977), 254.

<sup>26</sup> BP (Bundesarchiv Potsdam), NS 31/357 20/10 1942. From Berger to the Waffen SS Divisions.

<sup>27</sup> Wegner, *Hitlers Politische*, p.191.

the education in the *Waffen SS* officer academies. About 120 Danes became officers and NCOs in the *Waffen SS* and, like their contemporaries from other Germanic countries, most of them attended one of the military academies of the *Waffen SS*. Generally the Germanic officers were trained at the *SS Junkerschule* (officer academy) in Bad Tölz in Bavaria, and the education that the soon-to-be officers received there gives a good understanding of what precisely the *Waffen SS* officer was expected to believe in and thus impose on his subordinates.

Throughout the war Danes attended the officer training at Bad Tölz. They received education in different military subjects, but when it came to grades the subject 'Weltanschauung' was the most important, together with tactics. Quantitatively, lessons in 'Weltanschauung' took up five hours (out of fifty) per week at Bad Tölz in 1944.

An eight week course plan from Bad Tölz in 1944, including very specific directions for the teacher, clearly states the contents of these classes.<sup>28</sup> The course started off featuring the theme 'Lebensgesetzliche Grundlage', ('conditions of life'). giving a thorough schooling in the racist doctrines of National Socialism. Classes included biased teachings in biology, hereditary science, geopolitics, *Lebensraum* and racial policies. The aim was to give a general understanding of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*. After this, racial lectures, labelled 'Reich und Europa' and 'Der Germaner', described the so-called 'Germanic fight in the east'. The latter constituted the launching of a pseudo-historical theme, where the supposed constant racial struggle between the 'Germanic people' and the 'Easterns' was outlined. The course continued with a further historical interpretation of 'Germanic thought', and the teachers sought to illustrate how the 'Third Reich' was the saviour of Europe. Then the history of the NSDAP was reviewed and there were lectures on Hitler and on the ongoing war as a 'racial war'. The volunteers were taught never to doubt the Führer's wisdom and to obey his orders unconditionally. Finally the *SS* organisation was the subject. As explained in the teacher's guidebook, the main point in this respect was that the individual volunteer clearly understood that the *SS* was fighting for National Socialist racial ideals.

These classes were supplemented with numerous ideological speeches, most regularly perhaps during the so-called *Morgenfeier* (morning assembly). The men were also taken out on excursions, for example to the concentration camp in Dachau. Other guided tours for the potential officers went to lunatic asylums, where they were lectured on hereditary science. Such demonstrations were managed in a very skilled manner, here illustrated by a letter from the Danish volunteer and later regimental commander in division Nordland, Per Sørensen, who attended the lectures at Bad Tölz in the winter of 1942. He tells his parents about a field trip to Dachau and an asylum:

The other day we visited a large lunatic asylum near München and attended a lecture on racial science. It was fantastic to watch the mob of human wrecks they'd gathered there, I just wonder why they keep them alive ... Afterwards we visited the famous concentration camp

<sup>28</sup> BAMA, RS 5 320.Kd.Gen.III (germ.) Pz.Ko.

Dachau and saw it from one end to the other. It was a great experience; you all know what one says about concentration camps in Denmark, like the rest it's lies from end to end. You can't imagine how amazing the order and cleanliness is around here and what incredible work is being performed there.<sup>29</sup>

All this was combined with sporting activities, occasional classical concerts and lessons in good manners, in order to promote the SS code and the racial ideal as a highly civilised moral code (the medieval knight being the great ideal). Thus an atmosphere was created where anti-human beliefs were combined with a supposed gentlemanly morality. This was a combination that implied a potential brutality, because through the eyes of the 'ideal' National Socialist the 'Germanic' soldiers could as representatives of the *Herrenvolk* kill the supposed 'subhumans' without the loss of morality or integrity.<sup>30</sup>

This scale of political education was of course not possible when it came to teaching the common soldiers. Instead, the officers were supposed to serve as examples, showing military skills, bravery and ideological firmness. The officers were supposed to serve as 'transmission belts' between the visions of the higher echelons of the SS and the ordinary soldier. Amongst the Danes the knowledge that they constituted a relatively small ethnic group in the Waffen SS led to even closer ties between men and officers and this together with an open admiration of several of the officers, helped spread the Nazi ideology among the men.

But even though the individual officer played a crucial role in preparing the men, ideological papers, pamphlets and so on were also distributed among ordinary soldiers. Most prominent among these were the magazines *Germanische Leithefte* and *Das schwarze Korps*, both packed with SS ideology and widely distributed.

## VI. Ideological training of the ordinary soldiers

The conduct of the political education in the Wiking division prior to the invasion of the Soviet Union is revealing of the character and extent of the ideological training among the men. Shortly after his designation as leader of this new division, General Steiner ordered a department for ideological training to be established for the division's staff. During the spring of 1941 the men were given a broad introduction to the ideology of the Waffen SS, containing more or less 'the essentials' of the earlier mentioned eight week officer course: 'PanGermanism', racial doctrines and the theory of *Lebensraum*. The instructions regarding ideological education show that the large number of Germanic volunteers made it necessary to strike a balance between praising the idea of a future Germanic world order (appealing to the Germanic volunteers) and the concept of a *Grossdeutschland* so familiar to the German volunteers. During May and June the education became more specific; 'Operation Barbarossa' was close at hand. Special orders concerning judicial measures were distributed to the officers, concerning, among other things,

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Per Sørensen, in private hands.

<sup>30</sup> An interpretation brought forward also by Omer Bartov in *Hitler's Army*, see for example p. 68.

terms under which civilians could be shot without trial as partisans. Especially interesting is a nine-page instruction regarding the so-called prevention of enemy 'foul play and viciousness',<sup>31</sup> forwarded on 11 June by the divisional commander Felix Steiner.

This order was in its language reminiscent of orders known from a number of other German units and warned the soldiers that fighting in the east was different, and that all kinds of undercover attacks and hostilities could be expected from enemy civilians and POW's. Therefore caution and 'quick and ruthless use of weapons' was the best way of preventing such events. A number of detailed situations were spelled out and simulated during the actual training: snipers were to be found in trees and bell towers, children and women would be carrying knives and hand grenades, and while passing through villages the soldiers should expect to be ambushed by the locals. Not even an old married couple sitting in front of their house could be free from suspicion: 'An old married couple sits by their house in a village. The window is open. In the room or in the basement – hidden enemy spotters with phone lines to the enemy. Every passing unit is, inconspicuously, reported to the hidden spotters (frequently recurring situation).'

Such orders led the men to suspect deeply enemy civilians and might have caused widespread use of the methods envisaged in the order: the taking of hostages and the use of collective repression. For example it was recommended to 'destroy ruthlessly' villages from which fire had been opened on passing soldiers and already, a few days after Wiking entered Soviet territory, 2 July, members of the units of the Westland regiment had the chance to act on their new knowledge. On that day the regimental commander of Westland, SS Standarteführer Wackerle, was shot dead by a sniper. That event apparently caused reprisals against the village where the sniper had hidden. It was noted in the war diary of Westland's 2 battalion, how the 7th company was deployed against the village in an act of revenge.<sup>32</sup>

The privates and officers of Frikorps Danmark also had ideological training before their transfer to the Demjansk area in May 1942. Formally the volunteers in the legions were not expected to be genuine Nazis, but, as shown earlier, the original conditions concerning the Frikorps were not respected by the SS. The ideological training involved for example the showing of the strongly anti-Semitic German film *Der ewige Jude*. Part of the earlier mentioned conflict in the Frikorps, between Kryssing and the German educational officer Massel, evolved around the question of political training. No doubt the SS saw in von Schalburg a solution to the problem of too little political training. He would be able to accomplish Nazification by the use of different media. Thus for example several of the songs sung during exercise periods by the corps contain violent racism, as in this song from the official Frikorps Danmark songbook from 1942:

<sup>31</sup> BAMA, RS 35/3, part II: 'Betr. Kampf gegen fdl. Heimtücke und Hinterlist'. 11/6 1941.

<sup>32</sup> BAMA, RS 4/1297, II/SS Rgt. Westland. KTB vom 1.4.1941 – 15.5. 1942. See also Strassner, *Europäische Freiwillige*, p. 38.



Now the Jewish swindler gang must go home, we'll see to that  
SA comrades, hang every Jew, put every labour leader against the wall

The machine guns rattle away, decimate the Jewish rabble  
With a hand grenade in the fist, Bolsheviks encounter us

Put an end to the power of gold, now Moses shall be pensioned off  
Behind barbed-wire fence and armed guard Moses gets his exercise.<sup>33</sup>

When the men in the summer of 1943 were transferred to the Nordland division under the III SS armoured corps further political training was initiated. This time members of the corps received a paper, 'What matters in Russia', in which it was stated that the Russian was a mixture of animal and man, and that extreme caution should be shown towards Soviet prisoners. The reason for this was that they were 'capable of committing every possible cruelty'.<sup>34</sup> The internal dealings of the corps shows that the ideological training was not just paying lip service to Himmler's words. When the commander of the corps, Steiner, in early autumn 1943 issued orders regarding a large number of ethnic Germans from Rumania who had been more or less voluntarily drafted to fill the gaps in the Germanic corps, he specifically stated that NCOs among the newcomers should be selected among the 'racially best types'.<sup>35</sup>

There is no doubt that all Danish volunteers were exposed to substantial ideological pressure, either through direct training or 'indirectly' through media such as films, songs and pamphlets. But to what extent did the volunteers believe this kind of propaganda? How, one might wonder, did the Danish soldiers react to the Waffen SS experience?

## VII. Reactions of the men

One might expect that as members of the Waffen SS, and with the above-mentioned background and education, the Danish volunteers would reveal a deep commitment to the National Socialist cause in their letters and diaries. But this is not always the case. There were different ways of handling the soldiering. As far as one can see from letters and diaries the Danish volunteers basically reacted to the war experience in two different ways.

1. Among a significant part of the volunteers one cannot trace any consistent ideological belief that would identify them as convinced National Socialists. Some volunteers initially had some very personal non-political motives for volunteering, some simply lost their previous political beliefs when seeing the political manoeuvring within Frikorps Danmark, or when experiencing the brutality of the fighting and the crudeness of the German treatment of civilians. Even though

<sup>33</sup> The official 'Frikorps Danmark' songbook.

<sup>34</sup> BAMA, RS 3/11-2, 10/6-1943, II/freiw. Pz.Gr.Div. Nordland 'Auf was kommt es in Russland an?'.  
<sup>35</sup> BAMA, RS 2-3/2 Gen Kdo. III (germ) SS-Pz. Korps Iia: Tätigkeitsbericht vom 26.5. bis 31.3.1944 mit anlagen, order of 29.9.1943.

discipline was tightened during the war some of the most dissatisfied chose to desert. It is not possible to give an exact outline of the number of desertions from Frikorps Danmark, the Nordland division and the Wiking division. During autumn and winter 1941, at least nine volunteers deserted from Frikorps Danmark, and in July 1942 twelve Danish deserters from Waffen SS units were awaiting trial by the SS court in Posen.<sup>36</sup> Two other peaks of desertion seem likely: (i) in summer 1943, when Frikorps Danmark was disbanded, and (ii) when the war came near to an end and it was apparent that Germany would lose. Most desertions happened among soldiers on leave, as trying to escape from the front must have seemed nearly hopeless to even the most desperate. Only a few tried this before the last days of the war when everything broke down. The punishment for desertion was often severe and those who were caught risked being sent to a concentration camp or being sentenced to death. In all more than 100 Danes tried to desert from the Waffen SS, many of whom were executed. Lacking the opportunity physically to remove themselves from the Waffen SS, the soldiers had to go along. Therefore most of the dissatisfied and potentially opposing individuals had no other choice than to continue fighting and try to remove themselves mentally from their own situation, for example by concentrating on maintaining the contact to their home and their family. This is exemplified in the letters from the front focusing on domestic matters and other tiny sources of enjoyment in a world away from the harsh realities of daily life on the eastern front. First and foremost these volunteers wrote about things they hoped to receive in their mail, such as butter, cheese, pencils, paper and so on, without telling much about their own situation or inner feelings. Thus hundreds of letters went like this:

Well, I'm still together with my old friends . . . That's a welcome help. I guess I must be among the lucky ones, because there are only four of us from the old Pioneer outfit, who have been here from the start. I will ask you to do what you used to do – include an envelope and a piece of paper in all of your letters. When you send packages again I would like you to send me the following: envelopes, razor blades, a small pocket-light [etc.].<sup>37</sup>

However, even among this relatively apolitical group of volunteers occasional National Socialist remarks pop up. Large parts of this group cannot be portrayed as being in opposition to the Waffen SS as such. It seems more likely that they, perhaps unconsciously, were just unhappy about their situation. Being more or less 'imprisoned' as volunteers, the mentally easiest way of coping with the situation was after all to identify themselves with the cause they were fighting for. This seems even more likely when considering their potential situation back home in Denmark as traitors in the eyes of their fellow citizens. In Denmark they would find only isolation, being personally confined to the ever shrinking group of pro-German elements. While some had their near family and friends in these circles, for many there was no home to return to. All the Germanic volunteers would face after the war was prison (in some cases even a firing squad) and general public disgrace.

<sup>36</sup> RA, Vesterdals nye pakker, Kasse 9, læg 2. Letter from SS Führungshauptamt 30 July 1942.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from a private in 24 Regiment Danmark to his parents, Dec. 1943; in private hands.

Hence we do find a few ideological and spiritual statements in the letters of these volunteers, only they are put forward in a manner that we can interpret as an unconsciously provoked defence. One Danish volunteer thus finds himself doubting the German cause when reading, and partly believing, a Russian propaganda pamphlet. Afterwards he apparently needs to reassure himself ideologically. In order to make his own situation at the front bearable, he ends his confusion by concluding that after all:

‘Russia with the Soviets is a product of the Jews ... they are the threat to Denmark’.<sup>38</sup>

Another example of this type of reaction concerns a Danish volunteer whose brother is seriously wounded. After attending him several times trying to ease his pain, the volunteer in question is on guard duty when his brother finally dies. The shock and sorrow of the loss naturally evokes feelings within the abandoned brother, and suddenly he needs to find a reason for their deeds as *Waffen SS* soldiers, thereby giving meaning to the death. He writes home to his parents: ‘X died as a hero and *SS* soldier, an *SA* man for the Grand-Germanic Kingdom, fighting Bolshevism’.<sup>39</sup>

2. Even though it became more and more obvious that Germany was losing the war, it appears from the letters of several officers and privates that they in no way reacted with resignation or resentment towards the *Waffen SS*. Furthermore a passive acceptance of the *SS* ideals was not enough for these men. Instead they actively and aggressively committed themselves to the National Socialist ‘*Weltanschauung*’. It appears that among these men there was a large number of officers, but also privates, possibly from an educated background. Some might have been more ideologically motivated from the start than the ordinary volunteer, and their commitment was probably further facilitated by the intensive ideological indoctrination in the *Waffen SS*. As mentioned before, being in the *Waffen SS* and having, at best, an uncertain future in Denmark, there was good reason for the volunteers to associate themselves unconditionally with the National Socialist cause. This group of people did this, often committing all their possible resources both mentally and physically. The Danish officer and leader of the *Frikorps*, von Schalburg, writes home describing the atmosphere on 22 June 1941, at the launch of Operation Barbarossa (he served in *Wiking* division during the first year of the German–Soviet war):

Now hundreds of motors run at full blast in the air: our aeroplanes, we all say – Germans, Finns, Dutchmen, Danes – our planes, we all say, instinctively. The course is east. In the distance to the east a dull rumbling. It starts! The Finnish officer next to me has eyes wet with tears – of joy. We shake each other’s hands. The sunrise colours struggle through in the eastern sky. The dawn of the new Europe.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Diary by *Frikorps* member, Dec. 1942. In private hands.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from a volunteer to his parents, 2 Feb. 1942, in private hands.

<sup>40</sup> RA, Bovrup arkivet nr. 269, Schalburg letter to his wife 28/6–1941. Schalburg wanted his wife to send part of the letter to a Danish newspaper.

Von Schalburg was ecstatic over the war, which according to another of his letters was so good that he did not want it to end. The fighting obviously made him feel at home, but there is no doubt that he also was at one with the purpose and ideological goals. Numerous racial statements flowed through his pencil and even a note designated to his son is marked by this – a letter ends: ‘Dear xxx! We now fight the Jews, and Russia will be freed from them! 10,000 regards.’

The sentence also reveals that often soldiers of the Red Army and the east European civilians were viewed by the soldiers with compassion as well as fear. In one interpretation of the Nazi ideology the Russians were basically a good-natured people manipulated by the Jews. Von Schalburg, himself raised in Russia before the revolution, writes home during his stay with Wiking division: ‘Today we’re fighting against the Jews who took the houses, the churches and the food from the Russians and would do the same in Denmark, Germany and Finland. They [the Jews] would tear our flag apart and kill our king’.<sup>41</sup>

Likewise another Danish volunteer who was brought up in Russia recalls, in a postwar account, the Russia he knew before the revolution. He remembers the kind and hospitable Russians from his childhood and explains the shock he experienced when he was caught by Soviet soldiers – their glances were full of hate. This hate though, the writer assures himself, can not be the result of German behaviour, it must be the bitter fruits of the Stalinist propaganda.<sup>42</sup>

In some cases there was a good deal of friendliness and trust toward civilians; for example, the Frikorps ‘adopted’ a Russian boy soldier who followed the unit all the way to Berlin in May 1945. But the indoctrination and the general fear of being caught and mutilated by Soviet troops or partisans also led to a harsh attitude towards POWs or suspicious civilians. A diary from a trooper tells us about a situation where a Russian POW was shot, apparently because he stole cigarettes from the troops.<sup>43</sup> The diary also mentions that a Russian boy soldier who was about twelve was sentenced to death because he attempted to escape from a prison camp. Furthermore, evidence from different sources suggests that in a specific attack including most of the Frikorps several Russian POWs were shot as part of a retaliation after the death of the Frikorps commander von Schalburg. Von Schalburg was killed during the early phase of the assault and this apparently enraged the Danes. A Danish officer writes home that ‘no prisoners were taken that day’.<sup>44</sup>

One especially contemptible description, this time concerning the killing of a civilian Jew, also dates from the Demjansk period of 1942 and comes from the hand

<sup>41</sup> RA, Bovrup arkivet nr.269, letter dated 18/11–1941.

<sup>42</sup> Erik Herløv Nielsen, *Fjendeland* (Aalborg: Modus, 1995), 32.

<sup>43</sup> HG’s diary, Frihedsmuseet, FM 20.

<sup>44</sup> This statement is also found in a memoir by a Danish SS man and was further backed up by an interview with a Frikorps Danmark member. The interviewee was asked whether they took any prisoners that day and he said, ‘But the Russians don’t do it either. The Russians don’t take prisoners’. This negative way of confirming a war crime is normal in connection with oral history (during the few occasions that the interviewee accepted any talk at all about war crimes).

of another diary writing soldier. It is one of the very few clear-cut illustrations of how ideology and war crimes could be directly related:

6/9/1942: A Jew in a greasy kaftan walks up to beg some bread, a couple of comrades get a hold of him and drag him behind a building and a moment later he comes to an end. There isn't any room for Jews in the new Europe, they've brought too much misery to the European people.<sup>45</sup>

On the whole, though, it can not be proven that the ideologically inflamed were more brutal than the rest of the volunteers. If the true Nazis took their beliefs seriously, actions like the above-mentioned could be a natural result, but cruelty could have other causes. When Frikorps Danmark shot Russian POWs following the death of von Schalburg, another incident is relevant. A Danish soldier had been found mutilated, apparently by the Russians, and the commander, K. B. Martinsen, had some of his men walk past the dead body, in order to instigate fear and hatred. The Danish volunteers were indeed terrified of the risk of getting caught by the Russians, as they often regarded this as certain death. For example, when Kryssing, the ex-commander of the Frikorps, received the message in June 1942 that one of his sons had been severely wounded and caught by Soviet forces, he told a close friend how troubled he was by the fact that his son was alive when taken. He felt that it would have been better if the Waffen SS soldiers had shot him before retreating.<sup>46</sup> Indeed when Frikorps Danmark retreated from the attack in which the commander, Schalburg, fell, it has been claimed that all wounded who could not be transported away were shot on the spot.<sup>47</sup> In actions like these, it is difficult to isolate ideological motivation from natural fear.

A specific occasion lets us focus on the different ways of coping with the ideological element of the SS service. Late in October 1943, it was ordered that Danish Jews were to be arrested and brought to concentration camps, an action that hitherto had been postponed or simply left undone, because of the nature of the Danish government. The chief non-military official, Werner Best, instituted the round-up to ingratiate himself with Hitler. Waffen SS volunteers on leave in Denmark in Oktober 1943 were called in to take part in the operation.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> From a diary in private hands.

<sup>46</sup> The Royal Danish Library, Utilgængelig 842 1994/16, C. P. Kryssing, letter from Kryssing to Lorenzen June 23 1942.

<sup>47</sup> RA, Forsvarets arkiv, Besættelsestidens arkiv, kasse 90 D.

<sup>48</sup> All together 472 Danish Jews were arrested and deported to the concentration camp Theresienstadt during the German attempt to round up the Danish Jews in October 1943. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that an unknown number of Danish volunteers (probably around 100 out of 6,000) did service for example in Auschwitz and Mathausen. In 625 court judgments (against Danish volunteers after the war) we find ten volunteers admitting that they had done service in a concentration camp. Concerning the connections between concentration camps and Waffen SS front-line units, see for example: Miroslav Kárny 'Waffen SS und Konzentrationslager', *Jahrbuch für Geschichte*, no. 33 (Berlin: 1987), 231–61 and BAMA, RS 35/3 (concerning transfers in 1941 between Dachau and Division Wiking). In Charles Sydnor's *Totenkopf: A history of Waffen SS Deathhead division, 1939–45* (Nashville: Princeton University Press, 1971), he also shows how men from an 'Einsatzgruppe' were sent to the Totenkopf Division as frontline soldiers.

The description in one Frikorps member's diary shows how this job was done without scruples. At 5 p.m. the diary-writer showed up in his uniform at the Waffen SS volunteer headquarters in Copenhagen, where he had a couple of beers and one or two measures of spirits in the canteen. At 8.30 p.m. the men were grouped in fives (four Germans to one Dane<sup>49</sup>) and given lists of the names and addresses of Jews who were to be arrested. But most of the Jews were gone, and the volunteer writes: 'My team didn't win any. Out of four teams in the car, only one 'scored', bringing back two old Jew-ladies from xxx, a poor tailor from xxx with his wife and 11-12-year-old son.'<sup>50</sup>

The diary-writer further notes that the job did not 'interest' him, and the diary continues with the entry 'Lovely days here at home'. In other words, though this volunteer had a very cynical attitude to the affair, he did not feel ideologically involved. The political schooling was apparently lost on this pupil, who either did not grasp, or did not feel, that the job was necessary for the survival of the Third Reich.

Another Danish volunteer who participated in the action was clearly more emotionally attached to his duties. His memoirs illustrate that he was aware that the job had an ideological reason. The transport he joined actually arrested a Jewish family, and the volunteer could only find resentment in his heart for the fact that the Jewish father tried to bribe him in order to get free. Only the daughter-in-law was shown some respect, because she, according to the memoir writer, was not 100 per cent Jewish. Finally the volunteer follows the Jews all the way to the harbour, where they are to be shipped southwards. His impression of the people gathered at the docks, is found in his memoirs:

It was a mixed company gathered on the vessel. Jews I have never seen run around freely in the streets of Copenhagen. They were bringing religious scrolls and other symbolic ornaments. Half of the crowd undoubtedly originated from some ghetto in Poland.<sup>51</sup>

### **VIII. After the war**

By the turn of the year 1944-1945, 1,165 Danish volunteers were dead or reported missing, 1,265 had been released and 3,207 were still in service (this includes 904 ethnic Germans, mainly in the Totenkopf division).<sup>52</sup> Most of the Danes were in Wiking and Nordland, two divisions that had been used exclusively at the eastern front. As the war came to an end some tried to force their way to British or American lines in order to avoid being caught by Soviet forces, while many others

<sup>49</sup> This way of grouping the men differed from the usual method during the arrests. According to other sources they were grouped in threes. See Rasmus Kreth and Michael Mogensen, *Flugten til Sverige*, (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1995), 29.

<sup>50</sup> HG's diary, Frihedsmuseet, FM 20.

<sup>51</sup> KB (the Royal Library), Håndskriftssamlingen, Brøndums erindring p.122-124.

<sup>52</sup> RA, Danica, AA 231, 'betr. Nordschleswig'. Concerning more statistical information, see also Osobyj arkiv, Fond 1372, Opis 3, Delo 828. 'Fürsorgeoffizier der Waffen SS, Statische Angaben Monat: Juni 1944'.

fought to the bitter end. By May 1945, when the remnants of Nordland division stopped fighting inside Berlin, around 400 Danish volunteers found themselves in Soviet custody, while the majority of the survivors had escaped to the territories of the Western allies or to the Danish border. Some also managed to go underground in various European countries. It is not known how many Danes died during the last frantic months, but it seems likely that the total number of casualties in the Waffen SS among the 6,000 volunteers was around 2,000.

On 1 June 1945 the new Danish government adopted legislation regarding collaboration with the German occupiers. While not criminalising the official cooperation between the Germans and the Danish government or administration the new law prescribed that the Danish volunteers should be imprisoned. The average sentence became two years' imprisonment and around 3,300 former soldiers were sentenced under this law, the majority having been in the Waffen SS. Taking into consideration the profound hate and suspicion with which those who were sentenced were met by Danish society in general, one might expect that most of the former volunteers now would enter a career of criminality or in some other way end up stigmatised, living on the fringe of respectable society.

Five years after the war a Danish scientist made a sociological study of the former 'traitors of the nation' (condemned for collaboration with the German occupiers), and in 1970 he returned to see how many of them, after serving their prison term, had fallen into criminality.<sup>53</sup> Among these were a large number of former Waffen SS volunteers. In fact only a small fraction 'fell back', far fewer than among ordinary criminals. The former collaborators were categorised as 'ethnic Germans', 'Danish Nazis' and 'others' and the conclusion was that the reintegration in society had been most completely achieved by the 'ethnic Germans', secondly by the former 'Danish Nazis' and least by the 'others' group.

One reason for the relatively good reintegration could be that by the time the volunteers left prison or returned from foreign custody in the late 1940s, the high unemployment rate of the 1930s had more or less disappeared and, especially after 1956, an economic boom lasting nearly twenty years gave the majority the opportunity to find a job and a place in society. Other reasons must be found on a psychological level, one concerning the close postwar ties among the volunteers and another the fabrication of 'their own story' concerning the days in the SS. After the war the former volunteers organized themselves both formally and informally, allowing them to help each other economically, getting jobs, and most of all coping with the past. This reworking of the Waffen SS days encountered new opportunities as the Cold War emerged from the ruins of a shattered Europe. The volunteers were able to use this new atmosphere in legitimising their membership of the Waffen SS. In Denmark this was coupled with references to the cooperation between the Danish government and the Germans during the war.

<sup>53</sup> Karl O. Christiansen, *Mandlige landssvigere i Danmark under besættelsen*, (Copenhagen: GADs forlag, Christiansen, 1950), and 'Recidivitet blandt danske landssvigere', in *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Kriminalvidenskab*, no. 58 (1970).

'The Danish solution' during the occupation, namely accommodation and official cooperation with the Third Reich meant that even though the Danish government did not actually promote the German recruitment, its attitude towards the volunteers was rather unclear. This met some criticism after the war, and was a fact the volunteers themselves did not hesitate to point out. The Cold War and the rearmament of the German Bundesrepublik did lead in some circles to a certain public acceptance of the former volunteers. Now it could be stated that the reason for volunteering had been a wish to secure Denmark from the fate of the east European countries. According to this interpretation the rest of the west now appreciated the threat that the volunteers had fought just a few years earlier. As it was expressed it in a postwar account: 'He was sentenced for volunteering for a part of the very country that is now Denmark's close friend. We are enjoying a commodity union with West Germany . . . And the countries are brothers-in-arms in NATO. Once again Denmark joins Germany in fighting bolshevism'.<sup>54</sup>

Although this is far from being a common textbook notion, such claims represented an unspoken attitude among large parts of the Danish right wing. This is also reflected by the fact that books describing Danes in the Waffen SS and containing such statements are frequently published by the former volunteers and sold in considerable numbers. Some of these books are even more elaborate. They base themselves on a mixture of myths and truths regarding the (supposed) questionable behaviour of the Danish government during the war, thereby putting the volunteers in a favourable light. These stories have helped the former volunteers come to terms with their past.

### **IX. Conclusion**

Some 6,000 Danish citizens joined the Waffen SS between 1940 and 1945 as volunteers and fought to secure the ultimate victory of the Third Reich. Around 75 per cent of these men were initially driven by National Socialist motives. The 'anti-bolshevik' – non-Nazi – volunteer suffered defeat, illustrated by the fate of commander Kryssing in the political struggle over the Danish Legion. In the end what the Germans wanted was politicised SS soldiers.

The Danish volunteers served the SS mainly on the eastern front, often living under appalling conditions and fighting under great strain. Still, the front became their proper home, in the sense that during leave in Denmark they experienced a very hostile attitude from Danish civilians.

In the SS the Danish volunteers went through a special kind of training, with an exceptional focus on ideology. At the SS officer academy the Danish cadets experienced a massive National Socialist schooling. But also outside the classrooms ideology was to be found everywhere, as when the men from the Wiking division used cardboard figures portraying Jews for bayonet practice.<sup>55</sup> The training and

<sup>54</sup> Foged Harly, *SS frivillig Sværdborg fortæller*, (Farum: Bogan, 1985), 91.

<sup>55</sup> A Danish volunteer writes home in March 1942 telling his parents this. Letter in private hands.



service of the Danish volunteers is thus the story of Nazi ideology implemented in real life.

During the constant actions and endless retreats at the eastern front, the ideological cause became a refuge for many volunteers: these people fought the war for Nazism. Others chose mental isolation and went along not primarily for ideological reasons, but because deserters risked execution and because they did not feel welcome in Denmark.

After the war the volunteers returned to prison terms and public disgrace in their homeland, and though it seems that in general a social reintegration was achieved as the years passed, many a Waffen SS veteran has to this day kept his story a family secret.