The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 403
"The Resistance II"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In every occupied country, there were collaborators, and as the German manpower shortage became increasingly severe, the Nazis started getting, shall we say, *flexible* regarding their racial categories.

But collaborators were a small minority. Most everyone else hated the Germans.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 403. The Resistance II.

Today, I want to talk some more about the Resistance in Axis-occupied nations, but before we get into that, I want to do a little primer on the SS. I talked a little about the SS back in the pre-war days, but the organization has grown since then and taken on new functions. I've mentioned them from time to time as part of the narrative of the war, but not about how the different branches of the SS fit together. So let's go over some of that.

The letters SS are an abbreviation for *Schutzstaffel*, which literally means "protection squad." It originated within the NSDAP, the Nazi Party, as a unit of Party volunteers responsible for the security of Party meetings. Heinrich Himmler became leader of the SS in 1929, and worked to expand the organization. Beginning with roughly a thousand members, Himmler got that number up to 3,000 by 1930. By the end of 1933, the year Hitler became chancellor, SS membership was over 200,000.

The SS was meant to be the most elite of Nazis. Candidates had to prove Aryan ancestry back to the 18th century and had to have the proper Aryan appearance, that is, tall and blond. Over time and with a need for greater numbers, these strict requirements were gradually relaxed.

The SS was an organization within the Nazi Party, but after Hitler took power, the SS became functionally an arm of the German government. One of its earliest official assignments, you'll

recall, was to oversee and operate German concentration camps. The SS eventually became the chief law enforcement apparatus in the Reich, overseeing local police, the Gestapo, the state police, and the SD, the security service. The SS also took charge of the enforcement of Nazi race laws.

The SS secured Nazi control over Germany. They were trained to be unflinchingly obedient to their superiors and ruthless.

In our time, when people think of Nazis, they usually envision someone dressed in a quasi-military black and silver uniform with a silver eagle, swastika, and skull and crossbones on the cap and a red armband with the Nazi swastika. This was the uniform of the SS, and it was designed to be intimidating.

The SS also developed military, or quasi-military, units with its organization. The first was Hitler's personal bodyguard regiment. By 1939, the SS had the equivalent of a couple of divisions under arms. When the war began, Hitler put those units under Army command. They participated in the invasions of Poland and then of France and developed a reputation for committing war crimes.

After the fall of France, Hitler designated the armed units of the SS as the Waffen-SS, which you could translate as the "armed SS" or maybe "the SS under arms." The Waffen-SS were separate from the SS organization that enforced the law domestically within the Reich, and it is the Waffen-SS specifically that I want to talk about today.

Waffen-SS units were under Army command and in the field they wore field gray uniforms, same as the regular Army. SS divisions were given colorful names with Nazi appeal, such as Das Reich or Viking or Horst Wessel. The division descended from Hitler's bodyguards became the 1st SS Panzer Division and was also known as the "Adolf Hitler Bodyguards."

As the war progressed and the need for manpower became more acute, the Waffen-SS began recruiting outside the borders of the Reich. The first foreign recruits were ethnic Germans living in occupied countries, and I use the word "recruits" loosely; many of them were forced into service. By 1942 and especially 1943, the Waffen-SS was recruiting from occupied countries not only ethnic Germans, but volunteers from other ethnic groups deemed "Germanic," such as Dutch, Norwegian, or Danish. Then came Estonian, Latvian, Hungarian, French, Croatian and Italian units. The Waffen-SS recruited an ethnic Ukrainian division, but called them Galician to avoid the embarrassment of acknowledging that the SS was relying on Slavs now. Eventually they even formed ethnic Belarusian and Russian units.

In the case of occupied Belgium, Hitler decreed that the Flemish people of that country should be treated well, as he regarded them as Germanic and may have been considering incorporating Flanders into the Reich someday. Germany actually did annex Eupen-Malmedy, a sliver of land that had been taken from Germany and transferred to Belgium by the Treaty of Versailles.

Germany also annexed Luxembourg, and *voilá,* newly minted German citizens who could be drafted into the Wehrmacht. Some Flemish citizens of Belgium signed on to a Flemish SS division and some Walloon citizens of Belgium formed their own Walloon SS division.

They were the minority. The majority of Belgian citizens felt nothing but revulsion at the sight of German soldiers occupying their country for the second time this century, but this also meant the Belgians were experienced at living under German occupation. Underground newsletters began circulating almost at once, and young Belgians resorted to anti-German graffiti to express their opposition. After Rudolf Hess made his flight to Scotland, graffiti declaring *"Heil Hess"* appeared across the country.

Likewise, the letter V appeared on walls everywhere. Remember that the V-for-Victory campaign was begun by a Belgian and adopted first in Belgium.

As in France, armed attacks on the German occupation force were out of the question, but the Belgian resistance provided intelligence information to the Allies and helped hide Jewish Belgians and helped downed Allied pilots and aircrew to escape. The Belgian resistance helped smuggle some 700 Allied aircrew to Spain, at the cost of 140 Belgians caught and executed by the Germans.

The Belgians had their own "Secret Army," which, like its French counterpart, prepared for the day of the Allied invasion. And they had their Communist resistance groups who encouraged strikes. In Belgium, the Germans chose to placate strikers with wage increases rather than crack down on them, which was probably a smart move.

The Netherlands had *not* been occupied or invaded by the Germans during the last war. The country had close and longstanding ties with Germany. Kaiser Wilhelm II was living in exile in the Netherlands, under the protection of the Dutch government. These were all good reasons for the Dutch to hope their nation could remain neutral in this war as well, but no such luck. Some Dutch volunteered to serve in the Waffen-SS Nederland Division, but the vast majority of the country was outraged by Germany's unprovoked attack.

Resistance groups formed here, groups similar to what I described in Belgium and France, but the Netherlands is not friendly terrain for guerilla fighters. The country is flat and densely populated, and lacks the forests and mountains that would make the natural places for resistance fighters to hide.

In early 1941, when the Nazis began rounding up Dutch Jews, the Dutch Communist Party called a general strike to protest the arrests. This is the only instance in all Europe of citizens of an occupied country publicly protesting the deportation their Jewish neighbors. Alas, the Germans responded harshly, shooting at unarmed protesters and imprisoning strikers. The strike collapsed after one day.

Despite this setback, much of the Dutch resistance focused their efforts on hiding and protecting members of the country's relatively large Jewish community, Anne Frank and her family among them. A resistance group set fire to the archived birth records in Amsterdam, to make it more difficult for the Germans to identify who was Jewish.

Over a thousand Dutch escaped the occupation by boat and made it to England, where many of them offered their services to the Dutch government-in-exile and the British SOE. As was the case with other occupied countries, the SOE trained these Dutch volunteers to return to the Netherlands and assist the Dutch resistance movement.

Unfortunately for the Dutch resistance, SOE operations in the Netherlands were compromised by what probably amounts to the biggest German intelligence coup of the war. In summer 1941, the Germans captured a British MI6 agent in the Netherlands, who was carrying a number of coded messages. From these, a German cryptographer was able to work out the MI6 cipher, which was also used by the SOE. In November 1941, the SOE parachuted two Dutch radio operators into the Netherlands. They were to serve as a communication channel between the SOE and the Dutch resistance, but in March 1942, the Germans captured one of them and the Abwehr, German military intelligence, set into motion what the Germans called *das Englandspiel*, the "England play."

The Germans had the MI6 code, so they forced their prisoner to send radio messages of their own devising to the SOE. Now, the SOE had a procedure that was supposed to protect against this eventuality. These radio operators were given special code words, called security checks, to be added to the beginning and end of every message they sent to authenticate the message by demonstrating that it was sent by a legitimate agent and not under duress. But in this case, though the hapless radio operator omitted the security checks as he was supposed to do, in Britain, the SOE concluded that he had simply forgotten the procedure and accepted his messages as authentic.

SOE replied with information about another Dutch agent they were parachuting into the country and when and where to find him. When he landed, he was greeted by the German Army and taken into custody. He in turn was forced to send a message. He also omitted the security checks. SOE again ignored the lack of authentication.

This went on for many iterations for over two years. Agents landing in the Netherlands were arrested and interrogated; they were shocked to discover the Germans already knew their names and their orders. They were forced to send back messages reporting fictitious accomplishments of the Dutch resistance and asking for more agents and supplies.

In early 1943, the head cryptographer for the SOE noticed something peculiar. Coded messages from resistance groups in other countries frequently contained encryption errors that had to be tracked down and corrected before the message could be properly decrypted. This is natural; resistance fighters aren't encryption experts, and they can be expected to have been working

under difficult conditions: outdoors at night, or in hiding, or tired, or in fear, or hungry, or lacking sleep, or a combination of those things. Of course they made mistakes. But the Dutch messages were letter perfect. They didn't read as if they'd been encrypted by a harried, exhausted amateur Dutch resistance fighter. They read as if they'd been encrypted by a calm, collected professional German cryptographer. This British cryptographer reported his concerns to the SOE, but still no action was taken.

In the fall of 1943, two of these captured Dutch agents escaped German custody and made their way to neutral Switzerland, where they reported what had happened to them to Dutch and British officials in that country. But the Abwehr anticipated this and sent SOE a faked message claiming the two were double agents who had been turned by the Germans and sent to Britain to collect information on the SOE. When the two arrived in London, they were imprisoned.

By that time, the RAF had gotten suspicious and suspended espionage flights into the Netherlands. It seemed their flights always got to their destination without any trouble, but the planes encountered unusually heavy flak on the return flight. The RAF lost twelve planes that way before they called it quits.

The end of the flights meant the end of the England Play. On April 1, 1944, the Germans, realizing that the game was finally over, sent one last taunting message to the SOE that read in part: "Whenever you will come to pay a visit to the Continent, you may be assured that you will be received with the same care and result as all those you sent us before. So long."

The Germans were able to capture 54 Dutch agents who landed by parachute and hundreds of tons of weapons, ammunition, and explosives, crippling the Dutch resistance. Only four of the 54 captured agents survived the war; the other fifty were either executed by the Germans or died in a German concentration camp.

When this disastrous mistake finally came to light, it caused a rift in relations between the British and the Dutch government-in-exile. Later in 1944, when the Allies executed Operation Market-Garden, the British did not involve the Dutch resistance out of fear the resistance was totally compromised. Had the English Play never happened and had the Dutch resistance been able to operate more freely, they might have provided valuable intelligence in the planning for Market-Garden. Would that have led to a better outcome? Perhaps, although no one can say.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

[music: "Ja, Vi Elsker Dette Landet."]

The Norwegian government-in-exile was the strongest of the many governments-in-exile in Britain during the war. The Storting, the Norwegian parliament, had had the opportunity, while it was on the run from the Germans, see episode 320, to pass an emergency authorization vesting all its powers in the King and the Cabinet for the duration of the occupation. This meant that the

government-in-exile had a clear and unambiguous legal standing as the legitimate government of Norway, something no government installed by the Germans could ever claim.

Also, Norway had a large merchant navy, which was loaned to the British for the war. The British badly needed merchant shipping, so that was a valuable contribution. Norwegian merchant ships participated in the Atlantic and Arctic convoys throughout the war.

Resistance groups formed in Norway during the occupation and aided the Allies with intelligence and sabotage missions, and arranging passage for fugitives from the German occupation overland to Sweden or by sea to Britain, but again, direct attacks on the German occupation forces were out of the question.

Norway had significant value to Germany as a conduit through which German naval forces could slip from the Baltic Sea into the Atlantic. An Allied invasion of Norway was one of Churchill's pet projects, though few other Allied military or civilian leaders thought that was practical, but one person who did take seriously the possibility of an Allied invasion was Adolf Hitler, who insisted on an occupation force of 400,000 German soldiers in Norway, much to the frustration of his generals, who felt those troops could be put to much better use on the Eastern Front.

That's also quite a large force to occupy a nation of three million people, and a good reason why it would have been unwise for the resistance to attempt to take them on directly. Inevitably, it also meant a large number of children of German fathers born to Norwegian mothers during the occupation.

Many Norwegians resorted to small acts of solidarity to express their opposition to the German occupation. One was to wear a paper clip on the lapel as a symbol of solidarity, since paper clips hold things together. Another was to wear a pre-war Norwegian coin as an item of jewelry, since those coins bore the H7 monogram of the King, Haakon VII. Another was to wear a knitted cap with a pom-pom on top, embraced because it was a typically Norwegian bit of outdoor wear and for its resemblance to the Phrygian cap, a symbol of liberty.

Norwegian civilians also adopted a campaign of refusal to speak to any German, if possible. Many Norwegians spoke and understood German, but feigned incomprehension when addressed in that language. Norwegians also refused to sit next to a German on buses.

The German occupation authorities banned each of these symbols as they were introduced. They even made it an offense to stand up on the bus when there were empty seats.

Norway had only a small Jewish community a little more than 2,000. Some 700 of them were deported to the death camps. More than double that many escaped the country, mostly to Sweden, and many with the aid of the Norwegian resistance.

The most famous underground campaign of the Norwegian occupation targeted that Norsk Hydro plant I've mentioned several times now. You'll remember it was a Norwegian

hydroelectric plant that produced heavy water as a sideline. It was the only commercial source of heavy water in the world when the war began, and the fact that it was in German hands was a source of great concern to the Allied leadership.

You know and I know that the Germans gave up on building an atom bomb, but they did proceed with work on atomic power as a means to generate electricity. They'd experimented with graphite as a neutron moderator, but found it unsatisfactory. They didn't know what American researchers had figured out: that the graphite used in an atomic reactor had to be much purer than ordinary commercial grade.

Since graphite seemed not to work, German researchers turned to heavy water as an alternative. This German interest in heavy water became known to British intelligence. The RAF deemed bombing the Norsk Hydro plant infeasible, so the British began planning a commando operation to destroy it.

The resistance identified a Norwegian engineer who was familiar with the plant and willing to cooperate and arranged for him to be sent by boat to Britain. There, the SOE gave him a crash course in the skills he would need to work with them—sending clandestine coded messages and such—and sent him back to Norway by parachute before he was missed. On his return, he contacted people he knew who were working at the plant and collected information about the security arrangements there.

Meanwhile, in Britain, the SOE spent the summer training a team of four Norwegian volunteers who had outdoor skills and were familiar with the area around the plant. They would serve as an advance team for British commandos. In October, this team parachuted into Norway, made their way to the plant, and contacted the engineer. He reported that there were no more than 70 German soldiers stationed in the area, and they were older men who'd been assigned guard duty because they weren't fit for combat.

In November, the British sent a team of combat engineers from the British First Airborne Division to Norway aboard two gliders, with orders to link up with the advance team and use demolition charges to destroy the Norsk Hydro plant. Unfortunately for them, the weather was poor and the planes got lost. Both gliders crashed, as did one of the tow planes. The other returned safely to Scotland.

There were no survivors from the tow plane crash. The crash of the first glider killed three of the twelve on board and injured four others. Local farmers took in the survivors and attempted to hide them, but the Germans were alerted by the glider crash. They searched the area and found the commandos. The injured were tortured, interrogated, and killed by the Gestapo. The others were executed a few weeks later.

Three were killed in the crash of the second glider and several more were seriously injured. The uninjured were not willing to leave their wounded comrades behind, so they chose to contact the

Germans and surrender. They were in uniform and expected to be treated as prisoners of war, but pursuant to Hitler's recently issued Commando Order, they were all executed.

Back in Britain, they knew nothing of the fates of those aboard the three crashed planes until they intercepted a German Engima message describing the incident. Later, SOE received confirmation in a message from the resistance.

The four Norwegian agents who had been placed to assist the commandos spent the winter of 1942-43 in the wilderness, living off moss and reindeer, which is all you can expect to find during a Norwegian winter.

The failed raid warned the Germans that the British were attempting to sabotage the Norsk Hydro plant, so over the winter they stationed extra guards at the plant, as well as installing searchlights and placing land mines, but as weeks passed with no further sign of commandos, security grew lax once again.

In February 1943, six more Norwegian volunteers were dropped by parachute into the area, along with supplies and weapons. These six linked up with the four from the earlier team. On the night of February 27, 1943, the team was able to enter the plant and place explosives, which destroyed the equipment used to separate heavy water and the entire supply of heavy water on site, about 500 kg. All of the commandos escaped. They deliberately left behind a British submachine gun to make this appear to have been a British commando raid, in order to avoid German reprisals against Norwegian civilians.

This second attack was just about perfect; one of the most successful resistance operations of the war. But the Germans were able to repair the plant and put it back into operation in just two months. They also beefed up security; SOE gave up on any thought of another raid.

The US Army Air Forces began bombing the plant in 1943. In November, a series of raids involving nearly 200 US B-17 and B-24 bombers damaged the plant again. The Germans feared that more bombing raids were coming and decided to move what heavy water they had in stock, about half a ton, to Germany.

But one of the Norwegian commandos the SOE had trained and sent back to Norway got wind of the German plan to move the heavy water stockpile and informed the British. A direct attack on the plant was out of the question, but when it came time to transfer the heavy water, it would be loaded onto railway cars, which would then have to be ferried across a lake before they could ride the railway to a port.

The resistance made contact with two sympathetic crew members aboard the ferry, who helped them board the ferry the night before and plant eight and a half kilograms of plastic explosive timed to detonate the following day, just as the ferry was crossing the lake. It was known that the lives of Norwegian civilians aboard the ferry would be placed in jeopardy, but the SOE and the

Norwegian government-in-exile agreed it was imperative to stop the German atom bomb project, and that justified the risk.

The mission was a success. The bomb exploded as the ferry was crossing; it sank into one of the deepest parts of the lake. Eighteen people died in the sinking: fourteen Norwegian civilians and four German soldiers.

[music: "Ὕμνος εἰς τὴν Ἐλευθερίαν."]

When the Axis occupied Greece, King George II and his government escaped to Britain, where they acted as a government in exile. The Germans set up a collaborationist government in Athens, but that government held little if any support among the Greek public. Most Greeks were infuriated by the cession of parts of Greek Macedonia and Thrace to Bulgaria. The Bulgarians quickly imposed their language and culture on the ceded parts of Greece, which triggered armed opposition, the beginning of the resistance movement in Greece.

If that wasn't provocation enough, the Germans plundered the country; by September 1941, food was already in short supply. There was no relief in sight and winter was coming.

The winter of 1941-42 saw Greece struck by the worst famine since ancient times. The suffering was immense. No reliable numbers exist, but the number of Greeks who died of starvation that winter had to have run into the hundreds of thousands.

As elsewhere, a Communist resistance movement emerged. It became the largest such movement in Greece. The Communists did not recognize the Greek government-in-exile, and by 1942, they were beginning armed resistance to the occupation through what they called the Greek People's Liberation Army. There were also smaller non-Communist resistance movements, both monarchist and republican groups. The Communists and non-Communists didn't get along very well, but the one thing most of them agreed on was the abolition of the monarchy, as did most of the Greek public. Greeks tended to blame the monarchy for allowing the Greek government to slide into a military dictatorship prior to the Axis invasions.

The Communists called for a post-war plebiscite to ratify the monarchy before the King should be permitted to return. The Churchill government rejected the call. The King was a great-grandson of Britain's Queen Victoria, which made abandoning him unthinkable, as far as Churchill was concerned.

Greece is a mountainous country, making it well-suited to guerilla warfare, and the Greeks had a lot of experience with it, dating back to the days when the country was under Ottoman rule. Conversely, the Axis military and the government in Athens had difficulty exerting control over the remoter parts of the country.

Supplies and equipment meant for Rommel's forces in North Africa passed through Greece on the country's main north-south rail line before being transferred to ships to be ferried across the

Mediterranean. In the summer of 1942, two British SOE agents parachuted into Greece and made contact with both the Communist and non-Communist resistance groups. The agents persuaded the two groups to work together on a dramatic sabotage mission: to destroy the Gorgopotamos Viaduct, a crucial part of the route which carried the rail line over a river valley. In September, ten more British commandos and supplies were dropped in the area.

Early in the morning of November 25, 1942, these British commandos and a force of 140 members of the Greek resistance planted and detonated charges that destroyed two of the piers and brought down the bridge, one of the most dramatic resistance operations of the war. The resistance suffered just four fighters wounded; no one was killed in the operation.

It was one of the most spectacular sabotage missions of the war. The British were so pleased with the results that they ordered their twelve commandos in Greece to remain there and work with the Greek resistance as a sort of British military mission. Unfortunately for the cause, the destruction of the Gorgopotamus Viaduct represented the exception, not the rule, and the SOE found themselves having to navigate the complex politics of Greece.

When 1943 came, the Italian war effort was collapsing and British disinformation campaigns were leading the Germans to believe that the coming invasion of Sicily would actually be an invasion of Greece. The Germans responded by increasing the size of the occupation force in Greece. This was good news for the Allied forces invading Sicily, but it was bad news for Greece and for the Greek resistance.

The German military buildup in Greece at least had the virtue of giving Greek guerilla fighters and saboteurs more targets, but the schism between the Communist and anti-Communist resistance movements only got wider as the Allies gained the upper hand in the war, and victory was within sight. The German occupation force found itself in the awkward position of administering a land fighting a civil war, and this Greek civil war would last longer than the war war.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank Kathleen for her kind donation, and thank you to Aden for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Kathleen and Aden help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a look at other kinds of resistance to the Nazis. It's not all about commandos and sabotage; sometimes all it takes is determination. The Other Resistance, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In 1965, a British film was released titled *The Heroes of Telemark*, which was based on the operations to sabotage Norsk Hydro's heavy water production. It was directed by Anthony Mann and starred Kirk Douglas, Richard Harris, and Michael Redgrave. Much of the filming was done on location where the original events occurred.

The Heroes of Telemark was in fact the second film dramatization of the sabotage operations. The first was a 1948 Franco-Norwegian production titled *The Battle for Heavy Water*. Some of the real-life Norwegians who were part of these operations appeared in the film as themselves.

British TV presenter Ray Mears hosted a 2003 British documentary called *The Real Heroes of Telemark*, which sticks closer to the true story than its namesake film. In 2015, NRK, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, produced a six-episode television series titled *The Heavy Water War*, which was broadcast that year. The premiere broadcast of the final episode drew an audience of more than 1.3 million viewers, which is an enormous number for Norway, representing about two-thirds of everyone in the country who was watching TV at the time.

[music: Closing War Theme]