

Go East, Old Man: The Ritual Spaces of SS Veterans' Memory Work

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Abstract

This article uses social-movement analysis to understand the rituals, memory-work and spatialities of Waffen-SS veterans and their sympathizers. Most social-movement analysis focuses on left-wing protesters; our concern is with the marginalized counter-narratives, rituals and -spaces produced by the self-proclaimed misunderstood “heroes” of World War Two. This counter-hegemonic self-definition is essential to these former world-war soldiers who, despite an internal mythology of idealistic self-sacrifice, are vilified in West-European master narratives. We discuss how, during the 1990s, veterans and their sympathizers sought to re-place rituals of memory-work in the newly-opened East. We look at how the Waffen-SS's ritual memory-work is “replaced” in alternative settings, including – perhaps surprisingly – Russia itself. Here, Waffen-SS veterans use new, official, semi-sacred places to anchor both an alternative identity and an alternative definition of the central meanings of modern European history.

Keywords: Waffen-SS, veterans, memory work, ritual, place, commemoration, European master narratives, World War Two, Estonia, Ukraine, Russia.

Introduction

This article uses insights furnished by social-movement analysis to understand how a group of ostracized World War Two veterans uses ritual places to challenge hegemonic understandings of European identity. Our subject is the memory work done by European Waffen-SS (W-SS) veterans, with particular focus on ritual and place.¹ Memory work is, of course, particularly important to a group of former world-war soldiers who, despite an internal mythology of idealistic self-sacrifice, are vilified in West-European master narratives. The legitimacy of their own community is tied to the search for public acknowledgement of their role as heroic fighters.² European W-SS veterans' organizations have done much, since the war, to gain this – lobbying politicians, publishing self-justifying memoirs, sponsoring commemorative services, and organizing battle-ground pilgrimages. They have, scholars agree, also re-written W-SS history, so as to fit the W-SS neatly into the European master story of the heroic battle against Bolshevism. If this revision of W-SS history is accepted, the veterans may be allowed to join the ranks of selfless, suffering heroes who, according to the EU's own myth, made possible the triumph of the West. They may even find a place to be – a public space to call their own.

For W-SS veterans suffer a side-effect of their exclusion from Europe's hero/victim World War Two master narrative: they are unwelcome in significant public spaces. Such places, we argue, are important. All other veterans have public-space ceremonies, memorials, battlefields and graveyards where they can legitimately appear. There, they can publicly acclaim the eternal meaningfulness of their battle. They can establish continuity with those who made the "ultimate" sacrifice, dying so that a people and an ideal might live. Not so the Waffen SS. The ability of the W-SS veterans to find and sanctify a public place, and hold, there, some sort of public communal ritual, is narrowly circumscribed. It is also closely linked to their ability to emerge into the sunshine of hegemonic World War Two discourses.

The W-SS veterans do attempt to emplace their narrative memory. This article examines, in some detail, how they go about this – that is, how they redefine both external and external discourses of World War Two and the Cold War, and how they seek to "place" this re-making through the performance of rituals at specially designated public sites.

Space and Ritual

Space matters to communal identity, especially if the community is defined as volunteers, idealistic heroes who fought Europe's most dangerous and terrible enemy. Veterans' rituals are an important part of celebrating the meaningfulness of their self-sacrifice. Commemorative rituals have performative power because

(as Durkheimian scholars of ritual argue) they give a direct emotional, embodied and spatial experience of shared moral ideals. Songs, slogans, flags, marches and speeches sacralise both place and participants; they heighten the bodily sensation and thus the “reality” of both ceremony and community.

Bodies are, moreover, sanctified by moving through significant *places*; to see what their predecessors have seen, to tread the same ground, to perform proper rituals at the traditional places. And these places are, preferably, public. Veterans (more than many others, one might argue) value public affirmation of the truths presented in their ceremonies. After all, soldiers kill and die in order to protect others. If those others do not acknowledge this, veterans might find themselves reduced to communal criminals. Therefore, to hold their ceremonies in significant public spaces, at a memorial dedicated to themselves, and to be acclaimed by national or local dignitaries and by audiences, means a good deal. It is one way of affirming the group’s participation in the pre-eminent moral legitimacy enjoyed by soldiers honored for fighting for the survival of their people, ready to die for its ideals.

But such places are usually denied W-SS veterans. Their attempts to convene and celebrate at public graves or monuments is often forbidden, severely circumscribed, and/or noisily contested. This has caused W-SS veterans and veteran sympathizers to identify space as a special challenge. Their organizations and publications continue to present their counter-narratives, to urge veterans to convene in ritual forms, and to seek out and claim public spaces. This article explores the means by which they do so.

Our sources are veterans’ and W-SS sympathizers’ own publications (and, to some extent, websites). How do these present and discuss spatial ceremonies? We have concentrated on German and Norwegian veterans. These are both vilified – that is, have great difficulty in commanding public sympathy, and thus, concomitantly, in finding a public space where they can perform their legitimizing ceremonies. In order to provide a contrast, we also discuss the Estonian W-SS veterans, for this is a group whose reception is significantly different. We concentrate on the 1990s, when new commemorative places opened up for the (now aged) veterans. Before going into our sources, however, let us briefly sketch the W-SS veterans’ organizational and ideological history.

The Waffen-SS During and After the War

During the Second World War, a total of around 900,000 men came to serve in the Waffen-SS. They were recruited from all of Nazi-occupied Europe. Most were, supposedly, volunteers (something much-celebrated in today’s veterans’ publications); in reality, many were drafted, particularly towards the end of the war and from less “Germanic” areas. The bulk of W-SS members remained German (including *Volksdeutsche*, that is, Germans not resident in Germany proper),

as did the leadership. “Nordic types” such as Scandinavians (e.g., the circa 6000 Norwegians who joined up) were, despite being relatively few, given high status in the association. Baltic states supplied more members, particularly in relation to their populations – 20,000 from Estonia, for instance. Estonians and similar “racial” groups were not, however, as welcome as Germans or Norwegians, even if the SS leadership did, as is well-known, continuously expand its definition of “Germanics” to be able to accept increasingly diverse “racial groups” (Heiber 1968: 134, 233; Wildt 2003: 580f; Emberland & Kott 2012).

After the war, Waffen-SS veterans found themselves increasingly ostracized – much more so, indeed, than other types of World War Two veterans. The acceptance of the W-SS as just another sort of soldier declined most dramatically during and after the 1970s, when television and politicians became increasingly focused on the horrors of the Holocaust.

But public attitudes varied according to national histories. In Germany, an initially fairly sympathetic attitude – after all, the country was full of people who had fought for the Nazis – gave way, as SS war crimes became publicized during the 1970s and 1980s, to public protest and near-total ostracization. (Karsten Wilke, among others, gives a good description of this shift.) The Norwegian W-SS men were, by contrast, branded as national traitors from the start. Not even in the 1950s was it possible for any political party to flirt with them. After the Fall of the Wall, however, Waffen-SS veterans and their sympathizers could look to new publics. In Estonia, for instance, as in other Baltic countries, and to the open disgust of West European (and Russian) commentators, the W-SS veterans were often viewed – and, sometimes, publicly and officially celebrated – as heroes who had fought for their countries’ independence, for Europe against Bolshevism.

The W-SS veterans maintained a communal identity throughout. In Germany, local veterans’ associations came together only a few years after the end of World War Two, founding, in 1959, a federal organization called the Mutual Help Association of Former Waffen-SS Members (the HIAG).³ Local and federal HIAG organizations were complemented by groups of W-SS veterans who had served in the same units, so-called *Truppenkameradschaften*. During the 1950s and 1960s, as Karsten Wilke (2011) has shown, the federal HIAG attracted quite a bit of high-level political attention as a significant pressure group and source of votes (politicians tended to overestimate its influence and membership). The organization had, at most, around 20,000 members; it had many contacts with W-SS veterans in other countries (e.g., Belgium, Holland, France and Scandinavia, a network kept up, not least, by the HIAG in-house publication *Der Freiwillige*). The HIAG’s influence depended, not least, on veterans’ ability to separate out and define the W-SS as a separate and relatively innocent fighting group: this image was advanced in efforts to attain veterans’ benefits and a role in the reconstituted Bundeswehr. During these early years, moreover, its mass meetings could be legitimized as part of a drive to locate and free missing comrades; they were graced by

local politicians and the German Red Cross. (For this history and that below, see Wilke 2011).

A reversal set in, however, during the 1960s, with increasingly public distancing from the Nazis' ideology and war crimes. Divided into various factions, increasingly dismissed by politicians as irrelevant and irredeemable, and hurt by the publicity given SS atrocities, the federal HIAG dissolved in 1992/3. Local chapters often survived, however, as did associations based on veterans of the same units (the *Truppenkameradschaften* mentioned above), but W-SS veteran groups were becoming increasingly taboo during the decades that followed. The increased attention paid to the neo-Nazi right during the 1990s, finally, adversely affected the veterans' attempts to achieve legitimacy. Even those W-SS members who distanced themselves from Nazi ideology found themselves publicly jeered, as part and parcel of a repugnant Nazi resurgence. Today, no West European country tolerates public W-SS demonstrations, nor are W-SS veterans invited to participate in official World War Two memorial ceremonies.

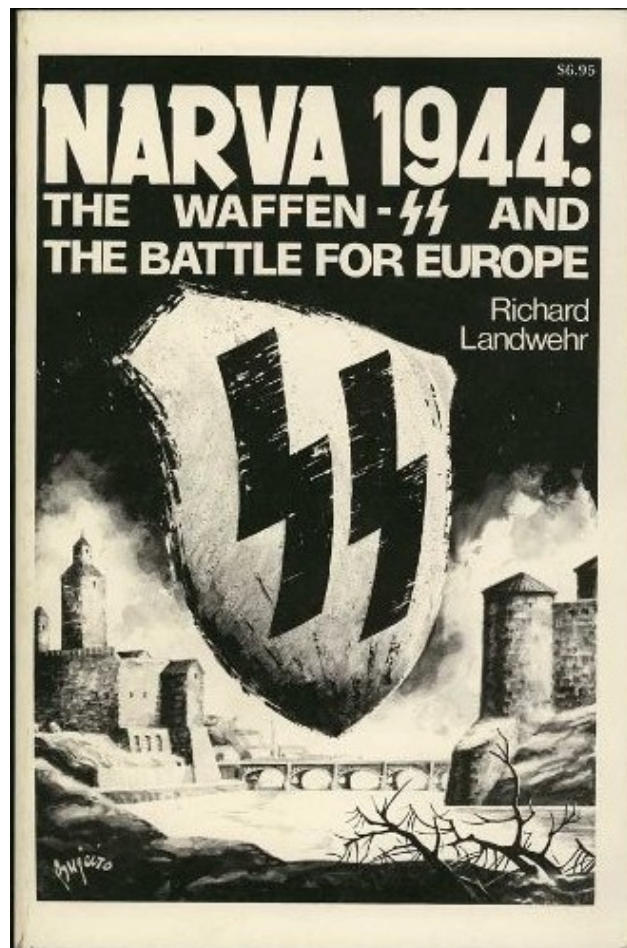
The W-SS veterans are, of course, increasingly aged. But their organizations can depend on next-generation members. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was pressure from the *Truppenkameradschaften* to recruit new members from among younger far-right movements. Many of the W-SS *Truppenkameradschaften* now have younger members, often in leadership positions. While some of these next-generation sympathizers are more interested in heroic WWII battle memories than in politics, and others are relatives of veterans, many are also neo-Nazis (Wilke 2011: 365f). Such members, while welcomed as bringing young blood to the *Truppenkameradschaften*, have also led to the movement's further ostracization. Still, the HIAG's old publication *Der Freiwillige* is kept on its feet, despite the dissolution of the HIAG itself, by younger members, working together with a neo-Nazi publishing house. *Der Freiwillige's* acclaimed aim, today, is to link older and younger generations in a common cause. The same ambition animates *Ein Fähnlein*, a lavishly illustrated newsmagazine that celebrates German WWII-veterans, and particularly the W-SS. Its sub-title is "dedication to duty and tradition" among "young *and* old volunteers!" (their italics).



A sample front cover of *Der Freiwillige* (February 1993).

These periodicals, together with newsletters, websites, etc., keep various veterans' organizations up-to-date on publications, events, and political sympathizers; they publish pictures, celebrate heroes, re-write history, and generally work to infuse life in national and pan-European W-SS veterans' movements. There was and remains much memory-work to be done: re-telling (to the outsider, it seems, endlessly) the history and experiences of SS battalions and veterans, reporting on and contesting negative reports on SS activities in the main-stream press. Then there are angry notices of attacks on SS and Nazi graves, a sign of continued ostracization. The tone is equally polemical when reprinting (the few instances of) pro-SS political speeches or describing marches undertaken by various right-wing groups who, like themselves, are seeking to redefine dominant World War Two narratives. Finally (and in this, they are similar to most social-movement publications), the SS veterans' newsletters give significant textual and pictorial space to their own community events. They note members' birthday notices and deaths; and they write substantially on festivals of commemoration.

Much of their work is, understandably, concentrated on revising the historical image of the W-SS. This is particularly evident in the HIAG's informal successor, the internationally-active "War Grave Memorial Foundation 'When All Brothers Are Silent'" (the *Kriegsgräberstiftung 'Wenn alle Brüder schweigen'*). The veterans themselves have remained organized, often internationally, in both this Foundation, in local remnants of the HIAG, and in the – often international – *Truppenkameradschaften*. More and more, as the veterans themselves began to die off, the iconized survivors function as the center of admiration of (some) family members and of younger W-SS supporters. It is very difficult to say how many people are involved, however: membership numbers are unreliable and/or unavailable. Dur-



Book-cover of revisionist book published glorifying the role of the W-SS at Narva and advertised in organs sympathetic to the W-SS.

ing the 1990s, there were, perhaps, around 10,000 active veterans and veteran sympathizers. *Der Freiwillige* claimed 8000 subscribers; W-SS festival arrangers in Estonia would speak of thousands of participants. None of these numbers can do more than give a feeling of the general order of magnitude of European W-SS sympathizers. (See “The next generation” 2001; *Freiwillige* 2000/46/2; Raabe & Speit 2005; “Hintergrund” 2011; Wilke 2011: 365; “Ein Zeitzeuge” 2001).

All W-SS survivor organizations build on trans-European networks. Being “European” is important to the veterans’ self-image. It allows them to regale in the W-SS’s supposed trans-European history as a bridge between e.g., Danish, Norwegian, Estonian, Latvian, Finnish, Belgian and Dutch “freedom fighters”. This is, as we shall see, an important part of their revisionist historical self-image. The “Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner” and the “Truppenkameradschaft Division Wiking”, for instance, are important veteran organizations for all Scandinavian W-SS men, as most Norwegians, Danes and Swedes served in one of these units during the war. These complement national W-SS organizations such as the Norwegian “Frontkjemperforening” (Front Fighter Association). The Frontkjemperforening, currently led by a next-generation right-wing extremist activist, long drew sustenance from an in-house journal: *Folk og Land*, founded in 1948 by functionaries in the Quisling party *Nasjonal Samling* and with a circulation, when shut down in 2003, of 3000 (*Folk og Land* 1983/8; Hårseth 2010; *Telemarkavisen* 2012).

The Estonian W-SS veterans’ organization, finally, also relevant to our analysis, has a history that is both more discontinuous and more happy than either its German or Norwegian counterparts. Initially organized abroad, Estonian W-SS veterans’ associations were welcomed home, after 1989, by prominent politicians and by parts of the populations. They remain numerically strong, when considered in relation to the national population. The “Union of Estonian Freedom Fighters”, founded in 1992, claims around 2000 members (here, they are able to draw on the anti-Soviet partisans “Forest Brothers”). After the turn-of-the-century, the Union was complemented by a veterans’ organization based on the W-SS unit “20. Waffen-Grenadier-Division of the SS” (which had been a primarily Estonian division), and, for younger right-wing extremists, the 2007 “Club for the Friends of the Estonian Legion” (see *Kultuur ja Elu* 2009: 2, 68 as well as websites “eesti-leegion” 2013; “metapedia” 2014).⁴

Our study uses concentrates on these W-SS groups, using W-SS veterans’ and sympathizers’ publications and websites during the 1990s, drawing primarily on reports given in *Der Freiwillige* and (what could be termed) the “next generation” magazine *Ein Fähnlein*. We will also use sundry German and Norwegian in-house publications (e.g., newsletters from Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner and the War Memorial Foundation, the *Neues vom Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner e.V* and the *Mitteilungsblatt der Kriegsgräberstiftung “Wenn alle Brüder schweigen”*, hereafter *Neues Korps Steiner* and *Wenn alle Brüder*). We mine these for reports on

rituals of memory and place. First, what is this memory to contain; second, what ceremonies are involved; and, third, how are they emplaced?

Recasting Narratives: Europe's Victimized Heroes

Waffen-SS veterans and their sympathizers do not stoically accept ostracization. As Wilke points out, their main rhetorical point is, indeed, victimization. They have been demonized (they complain) by the victors in World War Two, who re-wrote history to suit themselves. The "correction" of this dominant version of history is, hence, one of the veterans' most important tasks. Their publications seem, accordingly, obsessed with historical facts.

First, and importantly, the veterans' associations claim to represent only the Waffen-SS, not the SS as a whole. The W-SS had, they continue, little or nothing to do with war crimes – which are, moreover, vastly exaggerated. (Both premises are demonstrably false.) Second, the W-SS is worthy of the honor accorded by other World War Two veterans – and more. Not only were they all idealistic volunteers; they were also the first true pan-European warrior group to be mobilized against Bolshevism. And their battle has proven not only just, but, with the Fall of the Wall, victorious (Wilke 2011: 17; for veterans' own works, Straßner 1958; Mabire 1980; Krabbe 1976/ 1998). As an author in the German veteran publication *Der Freiwillige* put it,

Perhaps NATO – perhaps the unification of Europe is only a continuation of our will, our determination to ensure the freedom of Fatherlands in the European Fatherland [...] It was, say what you might, we who did the preparatory work, while the others still were blind. (1995/7)

SS-veteran Henri Fenet, formerly of the French 33rd Waffen-Grenadier-Division "Charlemagne", agreed (his speech was printed in the 1998 *Freiwillige*). The SS had fought "for Europe, for a European Community and against Bolshevism":

After a half-century, history has justified our mission [...] We have paved the way to independence and self-sufficiency, and now the Europeans are walking down the road, that we, then, paved. (1998/44/1: 22).

The story of being both the misunderstood victims and heroes of history is thus important to W-SS veterans' associations. Their publications and speakers repeatedly propose the alternative, a heroic history of "Europe against Bolshevism". This has consequences, as we shall see, for the memory-work practices of the W-SS veterans themselves. For SS veterans not only speak and write; they also commemorate, assemble and remember.

In-house publications always cover commemorative rituals well; those of W-SS veterans and their sympathizers are no exception. Reports on W-SS veteran ceremonies follow a standard form, one recognizable, indeed, from accounts given by veterans' associations throughout the West. Speakers and participants – bearing flags, inscriptions, sometimes uniforms – assemble, preferably at a signif-

icant public and/or hallowed site. They are, again preferably, flanked by attentive on-lookers. The text often opens with the description of the group's solemn assembly (sometimes marching up, sometimes staying in formation), music, words of welcome, a speech – often, from both a military and civil authority; additional performances, songs or poems, from younger members; the communal singing of significant songs (the titles carefully enumerated) and, according to the report, an attendant “solemn mood” (including, sometimes, not unmanly tears). The descriptions often end with praise of the good military order maintained, the summing-up of the event as significant and moving, and, sometimes, a transition to subsequent hearty camaraderie over food and drink.

The W-SS veterans' versions of these ceremonies follow the same pattern. To be sure, there is a frequent absence of civic and military authorities and outside audience. They may have to hold their meeting in a secret, hired locale; they may be interrupted by police and hecklers. There is careful avoidance of their most well-known symbols (compensated, in part, by obligatory inclusion of the old SS *Treuelied*, whose words provide a thinly veiled stand-in for the once-celebrated SS motto *Unser Ehre heisst Treue*, that is, roughly, “Our honor is our faith”).⁵ But the basic form is the same. The reports on W-SS veterans' meetings do not seek to diverge from reports from main-stream veterans' associations.

The tone in is different, though. Those writing about, arranging and participating in the SS veterans' ceremonies tend to assume the reproachful and strident voice of the misunderstood righteous. They are, further, often isolated. They have little or no access to public space or monuments. They are forced either to visit important sites as private tourist groups, to commemorate their heroic community in tucked-away, private places, or to face down loud expressions of state and public opprobrium. It is much less fun to celebrate heroic sacrifices in private spaces, or in circumscribed and contested public space, or as a sometimes appendage to other vilified groups (e.g., neo-Nazis). But the W-SS's veterans' counter-narrative has been treated with contempt by main-stream politicians and media. The W-SS has, today, no public presence in West European commemorations of the victims-and-heroes of World War Two. What does this do to communal feeling; how do the veterans' organizations react?

No Place To Go

Access to significant place is important to community memory-work. Place anchors memory; group pasts are (often) spatially imprinted. Doreen Massey (1994, 1995) describes, indeed, how this anchorage can lead to bitter battles over places. Different groups can have competing “space-time envelopes”, trying to establish *their* usages, *their* symbols and histories, in an exclusionary claim to a particular place. Such rivalry becomes particularly intense when the places in question are already hallowed in public memory and/or tend to host communal ceremonies –

squares in front of palaces and parliaments, churches, grave-yards, monuments. Here, the place itself evokes respect. Even casual visitors might acknowledge this by solemn and attentive looking and speaking. One scholar speaks of group memory's "spatial practices", the perceptual engagement "with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past" (Ingold 1993: 53; see also Hodder 1985: 14). This is where War Memorials are; this is where one finds the Grave of the Unknown Soldier. As Michael Elliott (2011) has pointed out, today's public-space soldiers' monuments are no longer erected in order to inspire the young to emulation. Rather, they are meant to invoke memory and respect for dead soldiers. This memory is solemn and moving. At its most effective (e.g., the Vietnam Soldier Memorial in Washington, or the battle-field graveyards of British World War One soldiers), those at the site are effectively called to invoke the dead as their martyr-like forebears: the monument promotes an acknowledgement that their sacrifice was both meaningful, and done for us.

Finally, the place is further invested with meaning if it is "officially" designated – by an acknowledged authority, a church, state or institution – as a traditional site of community-affirming rituals. Like the dominant public sphere, "legitimate" public space contains utterances and actions which, when done according to specified forms, can claim full public notice and import. Public rituals performed at such places – full of group memory, semi-sacralised, acknowledged as publicly significant – are much easier to think of as deeply meaningful, as transcendental.

Unsurprisingly, then, veterans seek to conduct their ceremonies in such spaces. On Canada's "Remembrance Day", various newspapers detail acts of public commemoration: "At City Hall, hundreds gathered as wreaths were laid at the cenotaph" – "let us all pledge to never forget our past to pay tribute to those who gave their lives for freedom", newspapers quote the Edmonton Mayor (Maimann 2013). Korean war veterans long protested their public invisibility in both the US and Canada. They were propitiated, most recently, by an official Canadian invitation to a celebration at the National Capital Region. Note both the place, and the ritual, as detailed on the invitation: They were to launch a memorial photo exhibit, view a Book of Remembrance, and participate in a ceremony at the National War Memorial (website "Anniversary" 2013). Veterans' Remembrance Day in Union Grove, Wisconsin, takes place at a cemetery (with memorial plaques, "They will never be forgotten"), and involves uniforms, flags, marches, martial songs and music, wreathes and prominent speakers (both politicians and army). It is, according to a veteran interviewed in the Union Grove's own video, effective: "The cohesiveness and camaraderie is strong, the spiritual transcendence is unique" (website Union Grove 2013). Official sanction in public space, for communal memory-work, embodied in spatialized ritual: who could ask for more?

From all such things W-SS veterans, families and sympathizers were, as the 1990s progressed, excluded. But they had by no means given up. Each year, veterans (albeit increasingly few and aged) and their younger supporters meet on

significant dates to re-affirm their community and remember the fallen. Each year, they organize pilgrimages to significant graveyards and battle-fields. They have had to do much of this in private or incognito. The Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner's in-house 1996 invitation to an "Anniversary celebration" (published in *Neues Korps Steiner*, 1996/8/16) gives painful acknowledgement to the dangers of publicity. "For well-known reasons, we do not wish to have our meeting at the usual place. We have found a place, which is equally beautifully located, also in the North German area." Those wishing to find out *where* this was would be told after they had sent in a participants' card; the information could (evidently) not be posted in the advertisement, nor (the arrangers warned) be communicated orally.

Despite hostile public opposition, lack of official confirmation by army, state, or church, contested or denied access to significant places, however, W-SS veterans continue doggedly to seek public places in which to commemorate war dead. But they run into problems – hecklers, for instance – with, it seems, deleterious effects on ritual ceremonies. Let us look at how such commemorations, the memory-work of oppositional history, may be described in in-house websites, newsletters, *Der Freiwillige* and *Ein Fähnlein*; and how public opprobrium disrupts.

We will set the stage by describing a neo-Nazi attempt, orchestrated in 2012, to claim German war dead on behalf of a version of war history supported by the W-SS. Covered in the W-SS-friendly publication *Fähnlein* (2012/3), the story illustrates the difficulties inherent in the far right's attempts to find uncontested commemorative space.

On the 8th of May, neo-Nazis in Pomeranian Demmin were to march to the harbor and throw a wreath into the river – in memory of (among other things) war-time dead, here defined as victims of "Anglo-American" war crimes. The writer opens with an account of the Anglo-American atrocities (that is, presents the history that frames this march and the counter-narrative is to propose), and then ushers in the hero – the "peaceful and solemn sorrow-march of the *Volks-treuen* movement in Demmin". There were, supposedly, 230 men and women present, marching "to commemorate the war dead as well as the victims of deportation, murder and imprisonment".

The text follows standard ceremonial order, describing marchers moving in well-disciplined columns. They were accompanied by "ethnic Demminer" well-wishers; "and also from the windows and balconies many families and citizens looked on". As yet, the only disruption came from a small, timid group of "anti-fascist shindiggers". But this did not last. At the Town Harbor was a "somewhat more whipped-up rabble, loudmouth left-wing extremists and do-gooders who bellowed their stale old 'Out with the Nazis!'" Unimpressed (the article continues), the marchers silently continued to the agreed-upon harbor site, where they listened to a neo-Nazi leader give a speech, a young woman read a poem, and then bequeathed a wreath to the river waters – where, the text concludes, "anti-fascists"

swimming to steal it were heroically defeated by a fellow-marcher, who threw himself full-clad into the water in the wreath's defense (*Fähnlein* 2012/3).

The fact that the *Fähnlein* reprinted this story of neo-Nazi memory work shows the interest of W-SS veterans, and of those who espouse their cause, in public demonstrations on behalf of historical revisionism. They, like the marchers, wish to use ritualized movement through a public space to claim the memory of war-dead for their own. It also shows the disruption that occurs, even in the heavily-edited narrative, when that procession through public space is challenged. As long as locals are (openly) sympathetic to the cause, the solemn commemoration can continue. But when the loud-mouths begin to shout, the text on the marchers is no longer solemn, but angry and defensive; while the wet wreath-rescuer is certainly out of ritual sync. The march loses its footing, so to speak, and becomes a tale of battle rather than of transcendental moral meaning.

The dangers of disruption are witnessed in other texts concerning commemorative events, including those orchestrated by W-SS veterans themselves. W-SS veterans have an easier time finding public places in Baltic States. But even there, disruption is a problem. Take, as evidence, the English-language website narrative of past and planned W-SS-veterans' demonstrations posted under the title "Latvian SS Legion" (2010). The website shows two pictures: "Veterans of the Legion remembering the Battle of More" (around and on top of a defunct tank) and "Veterans of the Latvian Legion remembers [sic] their fallen comrades" (black- and formally-clad elderly men kneeling, amidst flags and in front of on-lookers, to put down wreaths at a monument). The narrator continues:

Tomorrow at March 16 the Latvian Waffen SS Legion remembrance day will be celebrated [...] Occasionally at this day Legion war veterans and their nationalist supporters with flags takes a route from the Dome square to the Monument of Freedom. They put flowers at the monument to remember fallen comrades and remember the hard days of war.

But, the writer continues, the day is also "regretted by others" – "loud and angry", the "Russian nationals, Socialists and others", who in recent years have harassed those partaking in the ceremony – so much so that "this date is no longer a remembrance of war victims but rather a fight". This is, the author concludes, because "history is always written by the victorious side" (website Latvian SS Legion 2010). Here, again, is an emplaced fight about history. The rituals of place and communication with the dead, in defense of one communal memory, are openly and unpleasantly disrupted by hostile on-lookers. The marchers' right to define the memory, for the sake of the nation, is contested. The ceremony is weakened.

Opposition, obviously, matters. We can return to theorists of communal ritual. Durkheimian scholars define such rituals as invoking and involving sacred forces – in the Durkheimian phrase, the locus of a people's "ultimate concern." According to Terence Turner (1977: 144), the efficacy of ritual within a group depends

on the ritual's ability to make the actors feel that they are in unmediated contact with a "generative principle" or "transcendental ground". Or, as John MacAloon (1984: 251) puts it, rituals cause internal group conflicts to melt away; they are transcended into an immediately experienced higher, unifying ideal.

This, MacAloon argues, also applies to civic rituals (his example is the Olympic Games). But here, the community can claim wider significance for its "transcendental ground". A ritual pure and simple, he postulates, states that "all contents represent the most serious matters and are completely true". But then there is the "ritual festival". This makes similar claims, but on behalf of the audience, as well; the local community is included as part of the community. Finally, MacAloon postulates, we have a "ritual spectacle". Here, the audience independently and demonstratively shows agreement with the "truth" of the ritual performance; it creates supportive rituals of its own. Cheers, flowers, flag-waving, throwing hats and streamers, singing along and applauding, all contribute to the consecration of the ritual as ritual spectacle. As MacAloon puts it, this allows the statement that "all contents represent the most serious matters and are *universally* true" (MacAloon 1984: 242-256, italics in the original).

Those who tell the stories of ceremonies afterwards seem aware of the significance of audience mood and recognition. On-lookers are often described (or, today, interviewed) as giving evidence of being moved; they are affected by and share the performers' solemn and elevated mood. For if, conversely, such audience support is clearly lacking, the spectators missing, silent, apathetic, amused or hostile, the ability of ritual performers to claim general or even local, communal validity for their spatially-based narrative is severely circumscribed. This is situation faced by W-SS veterans.

The ritual-performers are, moreover, particularly vulnerable to audience disdain when the marchers need to create a mood that is solemn, proud and valorous – as is common with the dual "hero-victim" narratives sponsored by veterans of lost wars. Indifferent, amused and hostile audiences reduce the ceremony's claim to validity. Even if such audiences are explained away as consisting of an alien minority (as in the Latvian case), their behavior seriously disrupts spatial memory work. The marchers are open to marginalization, even ridicule: it is they who are out of place, making unjustifiable and particularistic memory claims.

What can W-SS veterans do? One option is to eschew public space: to be content with (what MacAloon would call) a ritual pure and simple. Many such rituals are, in fact, described in *Freiwillige* and *Fähnlein*. Take, for instance, a quite recent meeting of one of the last surviving local HIAG groups (*Fähnlein* 2012/3). They had hired and filled a hall (the writer tells us). The mood (he continues) was festive and enthusiastic, as confirmed both by representatives of other W-SS divisions and notables from related organizations. Eight W-SS divisions were represented by actual veterans; the bulk of the meeting was made up of younger sympathizers. The meeting was opened, the ladies and gentleman welcomed, partici-

pants sang the Deutschlandlied (“Deutschland, Deutschland über alles”), Guten Kameraden and the old SS Treuelied – the narrator states, “with all their hearts, whereby a few comrades could not mask one or two tears.” This mood was proper for what followed: remembering “all the fallen comrades from the Wehrmacht, Luftwaffe, Kriegsmarine and Waffen SS”. These fighters were linked, in turn, to “all the German women, children and men, victims of the inhuman bomb war, the victims of sexual outrage and violence”. Finally, homage was paid to “all the comrades of foreign nations who gave their life for the freedom of Germany and Europe, as well as all the fallen comrades of our *Gemeinschaft*.” A wreath was presented by “the younger comrades”; veterans’ names announced and applauded; and the ceremony closed (ibid.). No audience, no disruption: as re-told, the ritual was successful. But oh, that it could have been a ritual spectacle!

But the W-SS veterans have no public place. Political spaces, war memorials, city streets, even graveyards, are off-bounds. In Norway, a bronze placard-graced memorial stone does exist. It was erected by the Frontkjemperforening during the 1970s, in a clearing in the woods in Bamble, and was long the site of yearly commemorations (supposedly gathering 100-200 veterans). The stone remained undisturbed (probably because no-one knew it was there) until media publicity led to its vandalism, in 1993, by left-wing activists. A member of the Frontkjemperforening (as well as the Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner) had attempted, two years earlier, to get the Bamble church to incorporate the stone in its graveyard – an attempt, one might say, to gain the added protection and legitimacy, one supposes, of being on holy ground. But in vain; instead, and to his disgust, he was “outed” by local main-stream media as a right-wing extremist (see, e.g., *Folk og Land* 1983/8, 1993/10; *Telemark Arbeiderblad* 1993, *Telemarkavisen* 2012).

Or take the situation in France. A 2012 issue of *Ein Fähnlein* account of the commemoration of the French W-SS’s dead shows similar placelessness. The “SS-Division ‘Charlemagne’ – Gedenken in Bad Reichenhall” documents the torturous process necessary to commemorate (what the publication termed) the “murder” of twelve French SS-members. The dead were buried in a Bad Reichenhall churchyard; but in 2007, their memorials, to which W-SS veterans (the writer claims) had long travelled, were removed by city authorities in a “night-and-fog action”. The W-SS veterans were not to be deterred. In 2012, eighty of them travelled to the village and, ignoring the “provocations” of a massive police presence, held a remembrance ceremony – not in public, to be sure, but in a rented room in an inn. The author details the usual rituals: the trumpet playing the W-SS song *Ich hatte einen Kameraden*, the poem read out by a “young comrade”, the speech detailing the cruel outrages of the victors, and the singing of Treuelied (*Fähnlein* 2012/1).

What about the grave – the place where the dead could be directly invoked as evidence of transcendent communal truths? “In answer” to the authorities’ removal of the SS gravestone, the narrative goes on, “certain comrades from the area”

had created a “mobile” memorial (pictures are included). This portable birch-log memorial is borne into the graveyard by two SS veterans (only two SS veterans were allowed in the graveyard at a time, the local authorities had decided). Other veterans enter, pair by pair, lay wreaths and take photographs, and then leave. Finally, two veterans take the wooden monument away again. The article ends with the slogan “Ewig lebt der Toten Tatenruhm” – in temporary and portable memorials of birch-logs (ibid).

No place, no official confirmation, no sympathetic audience. What might be done? As one peruses the W-SS publications, one finds that much of the solution lay in seeking out significant places outside of West Europe. But how could this work?

Effective commemorations can, in fact, be held on foreign ground, if the patch of earth is held to be significant at home. Indeed, the bodily experience of far-off sites venerated as “holy” can be strongly moving. Maurice Halbwachs (1952/1992) has described a type of spatial exaltation – the combined pilgrimage and tourist-goal – which has its roots in Holy Land travel. When pilgrims move through a (communally) sacred site, treading hallowed ground, following the footsteps of the sanctified dead, they experience significant *privilege*: the individual is briefly lifted up out of the masses. The euphoria of direct contact with the sacred is intensified by taking place in an unfamiliar context, framing the feeling of “awe and reverence” with a sense of (what anthropologists might term liminal) disorientation (see discussion in Olick & Robbins 1998; Scutts & West 2008).

This type of sentiment can, it seems, be transferred to non-religious sites. The emotional pull of the West’s battlefield pilgrimages (a form of tourism that took off after World War One) is evidence of this. Brad West (2009) has interviewed Australians visiting the World War One battlefield Gallipoli, a sacred place whose story allows an “enchantment of national [Australian] history”. The Gallipoli visitors, indeed, described the experience as unique, intense and emotional; several claimed, further, to now realize that “they died for us” (West 2009: 262).

For veterans, the feeling of being in contact with those who died before is, arguably, an important part of the construction of meaningful community. This is one reason for the high popularity of pilgrimages to war memorials; it holds also for visit to gravesites and battlefields. The latter places are physically imbued with ancestral memory: we stand where they stood, we see what they saw. Indeed, the bodies of those “who died for us” may be part of the earth upon which we walk.

W-SS veterans seek, like other veterans, to claim such sentiments as their own. It is difficult to do this in the Western Europe for which they supposedly fought. During the 1990s, indeed, public hostility to neo-Nazi manifestations (in which the W-SS veterans were, willy-nilly, included) drove them increasingly to foreign parts. Luckily, World War Two had covered a lot of ground. Where, then, to go?

Estonian Brothers-In-Arms

“The Waffen-SS Marches Again”, “The Waffen-SS As Freedom Fighters”, “Distorted History” – headlines were spurred by East and West European W-SS veterans joining in public World War Two commemorations in the Baltic states (see *The Allgemeiner* 2012; *Junge Welt* 2012; Huffingtonpost 2012; *taz* 2012; *Aftonbladet* 2013). Ritual celebrations at the “historic SS battlefield” close to Narva especially outraged them. What was happening here?

The actual history of the Estonians’ involvement in the W-SS, as sketched above, is, perhaps, relatively irrelevant in this context. What matters is W-SS veterans’ ability to argue that they had volunteered not to fight *with* Germans, but to fight *against* Soviet annexation. In the Baltic States, this has resonance. Bitter memories of poor treatment by the occupying Nazi power have been overlaid by bitter memories of occupation by the Soviet Union. The result is an alternative moral interpretation of World War Two, where Russia is the evil villain – a divergence from the West which Stefan Troebst pithily summarizes as Gulag *versus* Holocaust (Troebst 2005; also Wulf 2007; Bottici 2010).

It was during the 1990s, when the Baltic State toleration and encouragement of W-SS veterans’ celebrations reached its height (in what commentators termed “the war of monuments”, see Brüggermann & Kasekamp 2008; Smith 2008; Wulf 2007), that Scandinavian and German W-SS veterans first contacted their Baltic comrades. Within a few years, West European W-SS veterans would learn to use this unexpected commemorative space, situated among and honored by a people whom the W-SS had once held to be an expendable, non-Germanic people, in W-SS memory work.

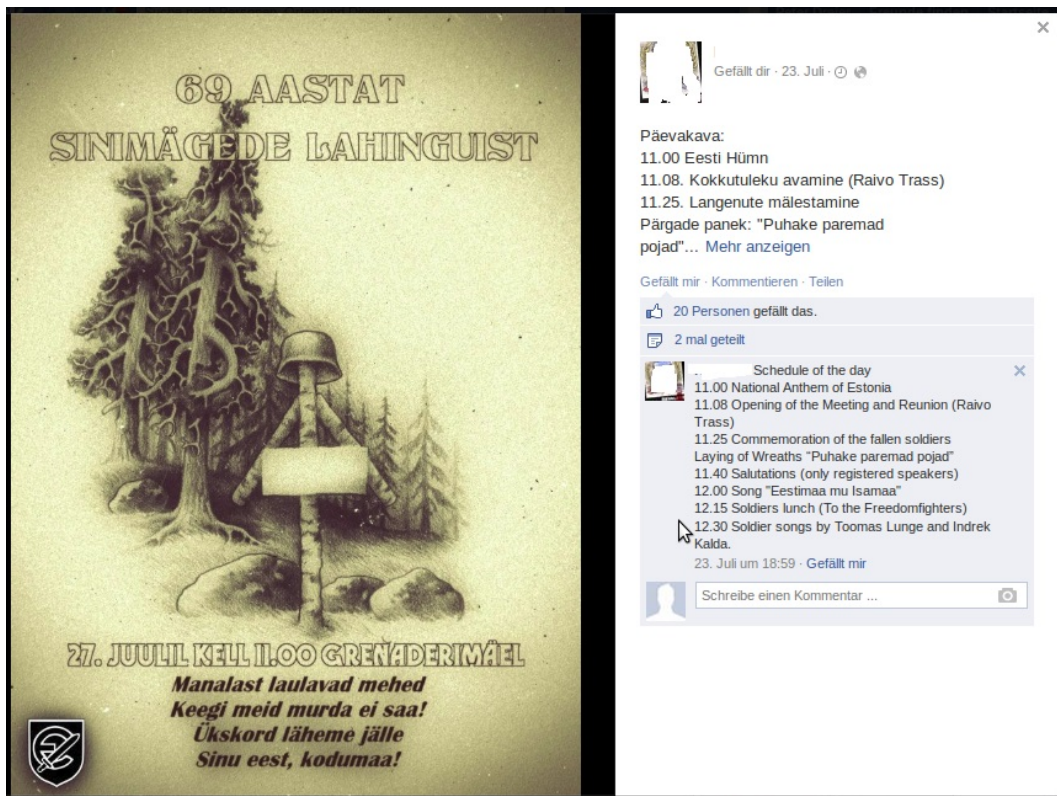
They were aided by the fact that Estonia houses significant SS battlefields. One of these has, indeed, had long been the object of W-SS veterans’ veneration: the site of the Battle of Narva. Fought in 1944 while retreating from the Russians, and manned, on the German side, by (mostly) W-SS units, this was, in W-SS veteran parlance, Europe’s “only real SS battle”. The Third (Germanic) Armored Corps, which played a major role, was, moreover, unusually “European”. Formed to be the flagship of the international volunteers’ movement, it included German, Scandinavian, Dutch, Belgian and Estonian soldiers. Its commander, General Felix Steiner, remains an idol for many W-SS veterans (including, of course, our old friends, the Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner). It was easy, therefore, for W-SS veterans to incorporate the battle into stories of their heroic defense of Europe against predatory Bolshevism (info14.com 2006; for example, Landwehr’s revisionist 1981 book).

During the 1990s, the battle site was adopted by nationalist Estonians. In 1993, the Estonian veterans of the W-SS Battalion “Narwa” invited German veterans to visit. *Der Freiwillige* (1993/39/11) proudly reported that representatives of the Norwegian Frontkjemperforening had joined Erhard Heder, the German chairman

of the Truppenkameradschaft Wiking and a delegate from the Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner, in an Estonian expedition. The Germans (in a pattern which mirrored continuing power hierarchies and which would, it transpired, be typical for West European W-SS veterans and sympathizers visiting the East) had arrived with a trailer of relief supplies. Speeches were made and further donations promised to “our brothers in arms” (no empty words: as German main-stream media later noticed, Western W-SS veterans donated on a fairly major scale; see *daserste.ndr.de* 1998).

In 1994, W-SS veterans and sympathizers from Germany, Scandinavia and Estonia met again, this time celebrating a pompous veterans’ ceremony in Narva itself. The chairman of the Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner took advantage of the opportunity to contrast the Estonians’ public and official ceremonies in honor of W-SS veterans to the “contempt” expressed in the Germany: “You, in your young democracy, can stand by your past; we in our 50-year old [democracy] cannot do it” (*Freiwillige* 1994/40/10). The contrast was, indeed, telling. The W-SS veterans’ press had been able to report on the presence Estonian military of the commanders-in-chief at the 1993 meetings; again, in 1995, 1996 and 1997, it noted the presence of high-ranking politicians, priests and military personnel at Estonian SS veteran ceremonies (*Freiwillige* 1993/39/11, 1995/41/7; *Neues Korps Steiner* 1996/8/16, 1997/9/18).

This was emplaced, ritual recognition at its best. No wonder West-European W-SS veterans and their sympathizers continued to flock to the site. The commemorations were, of course, progressively redefined so as to focus less on the Estonian W-SS and more on the supposedly pan-European nature of both historical and present SS ideals. As early as 1994, at the Narva commemoration, the German chairman of the Truppenkameradschaft of the Wiking Division ended his speech with the words “Long live Estonia. Long live Germany. Long live Europe.” The *Freiwillige* reporter, who had reproduced the speech in full, endorsed this: the Estonian meetings would, he hoped, “someday” develop into “European soldiers’ meetings” (1994/40/10). His hopes seem realistic: after all, the Korps Steiner had established an Estonian Aid, which contributed goods and money to Estonian veterans’ associations, and also, eventually, paid for an on-site stone memorial, commemorating the entire Korps Steiner (*Wenn alle Brüder* 2006/3; *Freiwillige* 1993/39/4, 1993/39/5).

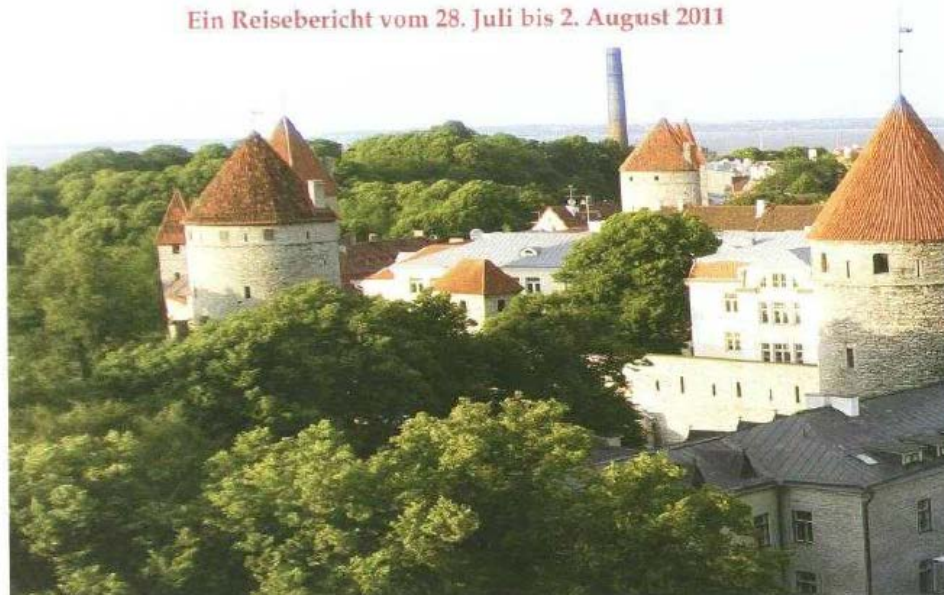


Screenshot of an Estonian far-right band's Facebook website, which reproduces an Estonian invitation to the annual W-SS commemorative meeting at Sinamae/Narva.

The West-East relation did involve some friction. The Estonians' first concerns, however much they welcomed outside West European input, were nationalist. The European W-SS, by contrast, was uninterested in the heroic story of Estonia's national survival. *Their* story concerned Europe. Narva was referred to as Europe's "Thermopylae", the W-SS troops' retreat becoming, of course, an indirect victory. The self-sacrificing and idealistic W-SS men had, in the end, saved Europe. As the Korps Steiner leader put it in 1997, "Just as, today, stories are still told of the Spartan warriors of King Leonidas, great in historical renown, so shall, in after-years" – in different places, on the Narva river and "before Leningrad" – history celebrate the W-SS men, the "earliest Europeans", who had fallen in the battle of Narva (*Neues Korps Steiner* 1997/9/18). Or, as another speaker put it, "it was we [Waffen-SS Germans] and our European volunteers who alone stopped Stalin's armies' advance to the Atlantic" (*Neues Korps Steiner* 1997/9/18). The myth was not of Estonian survival, but of the salvation of Europe: the only reason that all of Europe (and, implicitly, the rest of the West) were not taken over by Communists had been the self-sacrificing endurance of these "first Europeans" (*Fähnlein* 2012/1).⁶

Veteranentreffen der Europäischen Freiwilligen in Estland

Ein Reisebericht vom 28. Juli bis 2. August 2011



Wenn wir heute erleben, daß eine große Zahl junger Männer aus Skandinavien, aus den Niederlanden, aus Flandern, aus Wallonien, aus der Schweiz, zusammen mit Volksdeutschen und Reichsdeutschen, in die Waffen-SS gekommen ist mit dem Ziel, gegen einen gemeinsamen Feind zu kämpfen, so ist es wichtig, daß wir nicht nur an der Waffe ausgebildet und mit ihr vertraut werden, sondern auch wissen, worum es in diesem Kampf geht...

Nur der Mut, der im entscheidenden Augenblick die Verantwortung zu tragen bereit ist, kann das Volk retten und den neuen Menschen schaffen. Dieser neue Mensch mit dem Mut zur Verantwortung für sein Volk beginnt sich heute schon allenthalben zu formen. Insbesondere in der germanischen Jugend, die mit der Waffe in der Hand die Zukunft ihrer Völker im härtesten Kampf im Osten verteidigt und neu begründet und dafür in vielen Fällen aus dem engsten

Familienkreis heraus und bei weiten Bevölkerungskreisen kein Verständnis findet, im Gegenteil sich zurücksetzen, verdächtigen, schädigen und beleidigen lassen muß."

Aus „Die germanische Revolution“, eine Schrift, die vom Generalkommando des III. (germanischen) SS-Panzerkorps verbreitet wurde.

Die Aufstellung dieses Großverbandes wurde am 30. März 1943 vom Oberbefehlshaber der Wehrmacht befohlen. General Felix Steiner wurde sein erster Befehlshaber und war es auch Ende Juli 1944. Zu dieser Zeit fand in dem Gebiet Vaitwara, heute Vaivara, das sich am Finnischen Meerbusen, ca. 20 km westlich von Narva befindet, eine Abwehrschlacht statt, die nicht nur von den Einheimischen als eine Art estnische Thermopylen dargestellt wird, weil es mit geringen Kräften möglich gewesen ist, den mächtigen Feind am Vorstoß zu hindern. Die Landenge, die Schauplatz schwerster Kämpfe

6

Ein Fähnlein - Premierenausgabe 2011

Coverage of a "Veterans' Meeting of the European Volunteers in Estonia",
Ein Fähnlein.

This narrative was presented in conjunction with the dedication of an additional on-site stone, that of the W-SS Regiment Norge in 1996 (the regiment Norge had been a part of the Korps Steiner). This ceremony had had been prepared for the previous year. In 1996, the *Neues vom Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner* (1996/8/16) tells us, in a rather chatty manner, how "we" – German, Norwegian and Swedish veterans – proceeded to a W-SS ceremony, holding reunion meetings and visiting

memory sites on the way. The usual singing of the Treuelied and other “soldiers’ songs” was followed, this time, by less typical activities. This time, the veterans had public acknowledgement.

First, an Estonian “dignitary” reminded those present of “the proud freedom battle of the Estonian people, who together with the German Wehrmacht fought against Bolshevism”. The account continued by noting the “self-evident” presence of local priests and Mayor. Further, two Korps Steiner members who had earned the Ritterkreuz medal (awarded, in its time, by Adolf Hitler himself) had been personally welcomed by State President Lennart Meri, who, in turn, “gratefully accepted” an honorary membership in the Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner (see coverage in *Neues Korps Steiner* 1996/8).



A picture of the W-SS veterans’ memorial plate dedicated to Lennart Meri, presented to him in 1997, “with the wish for enduring freedom for Estonia in a unified Europe”. Reproduced in *Neues vom Kameradenwerk Korps Steiner* (1997), “Estlandfahrt des Kameradenwerks Korps Steiner”.

The Norwegian veterans' *Folk og Land* (1996/7, 1996/8) described the stone in detail. It stood proudly on church grounds in near-by Vaivara – that is, on hallowed ground – and was formally dedicated to the members of the Regiment Norge. The stone, *Folk og Land* continues, carries inscriptions in Norwegian, German and Estonian – “In Memory of the Fallen”. Its inscription would also seem to link East Europe to Germany, in that it tells of how the regiment travelled through Croatia, Russia, Estonia, Latvia and Pomerania to Berlin. (A photo of the memorial re-appears on the title-page of *Der Freiwillige* 1997/43/5, flanked, here, by the Norwegian flag.) The Norwegian national anthem was played and the stone blessed by a priest. There followed a re-print of the celebratory speech by the Mayor of Vaivara:

We only know, that many soldiers from the European peoples became heroes on this site [...] The monument stands in honor of the Norwegian soldiers, their hardihood and self-sacrifice. It is in memory of their undefeatable determination to be free, with which they also helped us Estonians. (Ibid; also *Folk og Land* 1996/8.)

Thus did Estonian statesmen get on with local and visiting W-SS veterans.



*Europäische Freiwillige am Gedenkstein des „Korps Steiner“
Ein Fähnlein - Premierenausgabe 2011*

9

Veterans at Narva, 2011: “European Volunteers at the Memorial Stone of ‘Korps Steiner’”,
Ein Fähnlein 2011

The Vaivara site, today, includes stones and plaques commemorating the participation of Norwegian, Danish and Flemish SS troops. A visit to these stones is often included in what has become annual W-SS veterans’ and veterans’ sympathizers’ battle-field pilgrimages to and ceremonies at Narva. The annual meeting

is, nowadays, one of the high points on the calendar of European veterans and their sympathizers. Virtually all pertinent forums carry admiring reports on the festivities. In August 2011, for instance, *Ein Fähnlein* describes the meeting as “the European volunteers’ veterans” meeting *tout court*.

Nationalists in countries within the former Soviet Union could, thus, provide European W-SS veterans with both significant places and public acknowledgment – both becoming increasingly scarce elsewhere. Indeed, in 1994, Norwegian W-SS veteran Arnfinn Vik was able to report at a (private) W-SS veterans’ meeting that work was proceeding on additional monuments and places – not only “a commemorative stone monument in Narva”, but also one at “Krasnoye Selo” – for “we are certainly be most sympathetically met in the East” (*Folk og Land* 1994/9). One could put it, somewhat provocatively, that the Scandinavian and German veterans functioned as European volunteers in the Baltic war of memory of Gulag *versus* Holocaust.

What additional places had been found?

Go East, Old Man: Ukraine, 1992-2010

It must have been an unusual sight: in June 1993, about three dozen elderly men and women standing in an East-Ukrainian potato-field, singing enthusiastically and to accompaniment of a trumpet. The song was the SS Treuelied; and they faced a recently-erected wooden cross (3.6 meters high; of oak, of course), bearing a placard with the legend: “1941-1945 / To Honor of the Fallen / The First European Armored Division” (*Freiwillige* 1993/39/2).

The singers were W-SS veterans and their families; and the inscription is, as usual, somewhat misleading. The “First European Armored Division” refers, in fact, to the W-SS Division Wiking. In 1993, the veterans were, in their own words, staking out an SS graveyard, established in 1942 and subsequently abandoned. Seventeen years later, in 2010, the Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior would sign a fifty-year contract leasing the field to the innocuous-sounding German Association of War Graves (Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge; see www.volksbund.de and *Wenn alle Brüder* 2010: 2) through which, in fact, the W-SS were working. W-SS veterans had found still another place to be.

The story began in 1992. The collapse of the Soviet Union – as W-SS veteran and Wiking leader Eberhard Heder explained in *Der Freiwillige* (1993/39/2) – had increased veterans’ interest in seeking out “the far-scattered traces of a fateful past”. Two veterans, accompanied by a guide and a translator sympathetic to the cause, had taken off, caravan in tow, toward the East. Their goal was Uspenka (formerly Uspenskaja) in East Ukraine. Here, the W-SS Division Wiking had once had its supply base, and here – as the expedition knew – was a Division Wiking grave-yard. The expedition intended to contact the Mayor of Uspenka, as well as those townspeople upon whom the SS had been billeted. Heder hoped that

the expedition would “use the opportunities and conditions of such a visit to proclaim good will” (*Freiwillige* 1993/39/2).

Good will was expressed by the substantial load of relief goods, including clothing and medicine, stowed in the veterans’ caravan. This was (one would supposed) to ensure a welcome in Uspenka; Heder maintained that another purpose was to obtain an official designation as relief transport and thus facilitate the border crossing (ibid).

In Uspenka, Heder’s second, same-issue *Freiwillige* article tells readers, all went very well. The veterans were “greeted with friendliness” by the director of the local “Kolkhoz”, who shook their hands and took them into the village. There, Heder continues, they met villagers, while the director held a short speech. “Dear German veterans! We have been waiting for you. We have prepared ourselves for your visit. It is good, that you are back in Uspenskaja after fifty years”. The audience applauded. Heder answered (truly from the heart, he writes) that “We were in your village earlier. Then we were eighteen-nineteen years old. And we had fought with all the passion and power of youth. But your soldiers, too, your current grandfathers, were also fighting for their fatherland” (ibid).

The veterans then distributed the goods they had brought and were, finally, “lavishly entertained”. The writer repeatedly expresses gratified astonishment at the sympathetic, “friendly and approving” attitude shown by the local population. They had been toasted in vodka; given a feast; they had sung a song for the villagers, and had joined in the latter in their own renditions of the songs *Kalinka* and *Katjuscha*. “Filled with contentment”, Heder concludes that such a welcome would be impossible were it true that the W-SS had used “arson, terror and rape” – as the Soviet divisions had (ibid). For once, it seems – albeit in far-off Ukraine – witnesses and audiences, the local population, were held to confirm the truth of the SS’s revisionist view of its own historical role and character.

The next step was to establish a commemorative pilgrimage site. Heder writes that “official Uspenka” approved of the idea. In summer of 1993, thirty-two W-SS veterans and sympathizers arrived at the village; it is they who erected the wooden cross. A “proud Wiking” elaborated on the cross’s inscription in *Der Freiwillige*, as follows:

Thenadays, 1941-1945, Finns, Norwegians, Danes, Flemish, Walloons, Dutch and Swedes fought shoulder-to-shoulder with us [Germans] against Bolshevism, hence [the name] “First European Armored Division”! (1993/39/9)

During the following weeks, four additional veteran groups visited the cross in the field. Two more crosses were soon erected. *Der Freiwillige* (1995/41/8, 1995/41/11) announced and coordinated annual excursions thither, and published celebratory accounts of the visits, all emphasizing that the veterans were always greeted as “friends”.

The final aim, however, was to get official sanction for the site. By 2007, the veterans, now operating through a “German-Ukrainian Association” and, later, the

fairly respectable German association *Der Volksbund*, were working hard to establish the field as what the W-SS-veterans' *Wenn alle Brüder* (2007/3) now called the "Soldiers' Graveyard of the Three Crosses". And they were doing well. There was a dedication ceremony, visited by enough visiting dignitaries and approving audience to, indeed, qualify the ceremony (at least on paper) as a ritual festival. A Ukrainian Orthodox minister and an evangelical preacher alternated in leading devotions and prayers, while veterans and sympathizers were joined by members of the village population. The entire was, the *Wenn alle Brüder* author maintained, a great success.

The German-Ukrainian Association ended by calling for additional contributions to further develop the site (*Wenn alle Brüder* 2007/3). In 2010, the climax came. The W-SS veterans' German War Grave Memorial Association published a special issue of *Wenn alle Brüder*: "Uspenka – only a few mile-stones for an extraordinary project" (2010/2). At this point, the Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior signed over the field, now with a wall enclosing 300 square meters, newly-planted acacias and a new commemorative stone on behalf of Wallonian veterans, to the *Volksbund* (to whom, in a complicated maneuver, the *Kriegsgräberstiftung* donated money ear-marked for developing the Uspenka site). The W-SS Wiking and its comrades had, in short, found a second pilgrimage site: a W-SS graveyard with commemorative stones and crosses dedicated to themselves, acknowledged by both local public and state. A good place, in short, for much-publicized and successful ritual festivals; a good sop to communal self-identity.

And Deep in Enemy Territory: Norwegians in Russia, 1998

Were there more worlds – or, rather, public sites – to conquer? The Norwegian veteran Arnfinn Vik, as noted above, had already mentioned "Krasnoye Selo" (*Folk og Land* 1994/9). As we have seen, Estonian anti-Soviet sentiments afforded veterans of the W-SS, now redefined as Europeans fighting Bolshevism, with memory sites within the former Soviet Union. Why not, then, Krasnoye Selo, where, in 1942/42, for instance, the SS Legion Norge had been stationed – that is, just outside the city once known as Leningrad?

To commemorate the W-SS there would, one would think, necessitate some creative thinking. By no stretch of the imagination could the W-SS veterans present themselves as ancient "allies against alien occupation", as the Vaivara Mayor had put it. But history could be re-interpreted in other ways. Had not the W-SS tried to liberate the Russians from the Russians themselves? Or, as *Folk og Land* put it in 1998 (7), the only reason that the W-SS volunteers had had to fight Russian soldiers was because they, the Russians, had been "the first victims of Bolshevism". But Russian soldiers (the author hastens to add) had been valorous, too – all fighting for their fatherland, here as in Ukraine – and it was time, it seems, to let by-gones by by-gones.

It did take some time to put this myth – and site – in place. Years of veterans' travel to Russia and Krasnoye Selo, in order to meet with (and hand over money to) various officials and local politicians, were followed by direct negotiations with Krasnoye Selo's Orthodox ministry (see *Monitor* 1999/1). This, together with continued donations all round, turned the tide. In 1998, a memorial stone to the Norwegian "volunteers" was erected and dedicated on church property just outside the city of St. Petersburg.



FOLK og LAND

UAVHENGIG AVIS Nr. 7 - 1998 46. årgang

Forsoning - Samhold - Kjærlighet

Legionens minnestøtte over falne nordmenn avduket i Krasnoje Selo - støtten står på den russiske kirkes grunn - under dens beskyttelse



FOR FRED OG FORSONING
NORDMENN SOM FALT

ЗА МИР И ПРИМИРЕНИЕ
ПОБИВШИМ
НОРВЕЖЦАМ
1942. - 1943.

«Folk og Land» var med da minnesteinen over falne legionærer ble avduket i Krasnoje Selo den 23. august.

Det ble en gripende høytidsstund som gjorde et sterkt inntrykk på de mange norske og russiske krigsveteraner som var tilstede.

En legionær betegner avdukingen som det største som har skjedd i Legionens historie.

I dette nummer bringer vi en større reportasje fra begivenheten, ledsaget av vår fotografs «billedlige» inntrykk.

Norske frontkjemper i Regiment NORGE har også vandret på gjengrodde stier. I juli var de i Estland, der de deltok i de estiske frontkameraters minnehøgtideligheter, og hvor de også la ned krans på minnesteinen for nordmenn som falt under kampene.

Du finner reportasjen inne i bladet

The Krasnoye Selo stone, as pictured in *Folk og Land* 1998/7. “Reconciliation – Cohesion- Affection. The Legion’s memorial over the fallen Norwegians /.../ One legionnaire describes the dedication as the greatest that has happened in the history of the Legion.”

Folk og Land (1998/7) gave first-page coverage to the dedication of the stone, which stands “on the grounds of the Russian church – and is under its protection.” Per Storlid, the moderately reliable eye-witness who does the reporting, continually emphasizes that the (W-SS) dead are being, finally, honored and protected. The ceremony itself was “moving”, making “a strong impression on the many Norwegian and Russian [!] war veterans who were there.” The notice is full of hackneyed Slavic romanticism. “Mother Russia, through her church, has taken these

fallen foreigners, once enemies, to herself as her own, forever". The priest who does the blessing is described almost ecstatically – his eyes shine with “mildness and wisdom”, as evidenced in his words “All dead have the right to a place where they can be remembered”. The visitors feel “a friendliness as from an old acquaintance”. The stone awaits, under a Norwegian flag, a be-ribboned wreath in honor of the dead, and an anonymously bequeathed bouquet. After a very lengthy religious ceremony, performed in full regalia and with the help of three additional officiants, the priest asks if he may put a Russian orthodox cross on the stone. Storlid records the response: “*no*, no-one has anything against that”, for “in this way Russia’s church takes this memorial explicitly and visibly in its care and protection for all time.” The stone is unveiled, the flag and ribbons donated to the priest, and the Norwegian national anthem (but not the Treuelied) is sung. Jørgen Høve holds a brief speech on the subject of reconciliation. The newsletter’s picture of the stone shows inscriptions (in Norwegian, with a Russian translation, and under two clasped hands: “For Freedom and Reconciliation – To the Fallen Norwegians” (ibid, italics in the original).

This article is flanked by another, a brief, anonymous addition to the piece’s memory politics (*Folk og Land* 1998/7). Here, a W-SS veteran reminisces about his time at Krasnoye Selo. His had been the task, every day, of standing before “the legion” and calling out the names of the dead. The dead men (he writes) had been friends – he had remembered the good times, “common happiness, common sorrows, common fight and common battle. The strong bands of brotherhood in arms shall again be knotted between those who stand in formation in gray rows, and those who lie under the earth.” In this edition of *Folk og Land*, the Norwegian SS veterans have found a way of commemorating their dead, and thus themselves – solemn, meaningful, and very much emplaced.

The W-SS itself, it seems, was not mentioned. Neither the SS insignia nor the words Waffen-SS appeared on the Russian stone; they were not mentioned in speeches. This meant that Norwegian and Russian antifascists could accuse the veterans, in a 1999 demonstration against the memorial, of having deceived the community: they had been silent on their membership in the W-SS, and had also kept quiet about the fallen soldiers’ volunteer status. They also brought up the fact that money had changed hands between veterans and priests, not least at the ceremony itself (see www.vespen.no). These protests were ineffectual. On the contrary: shortly after the protest, an additional stone was erected and blessed, this time on behalf of the Flemish SS veterans (*Wenn alle Brüder* 2006/4). A major propaganda point had been won. If SS veterans could find public, officially blessed places for ceremonies just outside St. Petersburg, that is, amidst what had once been deepest enemy territory, how could they be denied legitimacy and place in Europe itself?

Concluding Remarks

A military unit, argue Ender, Bartone and Kolditz (2003), is based on a particularly intense form of comradeship. There is “the feeling of freedom and power instilled in us by communal effort in combat”. But there is also the true comradeship that appears “only when each is ready to give up his life for the other, without reflection and without thought of personal loss” (quoting Gray 1970: 46). This particularly strong, often idealized comradeship, is an important part of any legion’s experience. Army leaders must (Ender et al continue) respect this; for them,

there is no event more important to the preservation of unit morale than a soldier’s memorial service. /.../ It is an officer’s solemn duty to preserve the memory of a fallen comrade and in doing so communicate respect and concern for the living soldiers in the unit. Far from being mere impression management, the common expectation is that the commander is personally involved and deeply emotionally moved. The shedding of tears is accepted and not viewed as a form of weakness. (Ender et al 2003:n.p.)

These intense feelings of comradeship and sorrow, and the equally intense need to publicly display such feelings, may be part of what drives the W-SS veterans’ and, by extension, veterans’ sympathizers, to their unrelenting commitment to commemorative ceremonies. It is at least as important, it seems, to the W-SS sympathizers who never experienced the war itself: the ceremonies are intense and valued because (one might conclude) this is the closest that those born after 1945 can get to what they see as the pre-eminent experience, the most meaningful battle. To find a counter-hegemonic heroic myth and a place to be are, arguably, appendices to this emotional commitment. But the sentiment is indeed swaddled in new apparel; and the Emperor’s new clothing has implications for proposed revisions of the history of World War Two and of Europe.

Each of the ceremonies detailed above cement the myth of heroic Europeans volunteering against Bolshevism. The anti-Bolshevist / European profile of the fighters is thus all that matters; the fact of fighting an expansionist, racist, genocidal war under German leadership is constantly erased. On none of the monuments do the two letters SS appear. There is, of course, a set of codes that allow those with even a little knowledge to read the messages correctly: inscriptions (on stones in Hungary and Austria) which read “Their Honor is Faith”, citations from the Treuelied, or even the self-designation “Europe’s soldiers”.⁷ Still, this self-designation leads thoughts far from the real W-SS. Images of benign internationalism are reinforced by the consistent addition, at each site, of memorial stones to various nationalities, each designated by neutral terms such as the “Fallen Norwegians” or “European Armored Division”. And in this guise, particularly in the areas once part of the Soviet Union, the W-SS’s new self-identification seems viable.

The determination to refashion themselves, publicly, as the fascinating forbears of modern Europe, has further implications. The organizations covered here call for recognition of the W-SS as soldiers (if not soldiers pure and simple: they are very proud of their European-wide and volunteer status). As such, they claim a place in the ranks of loyal, true soldiers everywhere. It is notable, indeed, the degree to which W-SS veterans' organizations constantly mention *reconciliation*. The Estonian ritual festivals are, exceptionally, about brothers-in-arms: the Russians are still the enemy. But in the Ukraine and in Russia itself, as in, for instance, France, Germany, and Scandinavia, the message is very different. All soldiers are honored. Only the Bolsheviks, as insubstantial, here, as the Jews whom Hitler accused of causing world war, were evil. All those who actually fought tend to be exonerated.

This is not unique to organizations sympathetic to the W-SS. Australian visitors to Gallipoli – ushered around, it should be added, by Turkish guides – find both Australian and Turkish soldiers innocent, patriotic victims of German manipulation and malice (West 2003). Of course, that battle was not strictly comparable to the slaughter, often of civilians, brought about by parts of the W-SS. But even that can be forgotten and forgiven between soldiers. It was regrettable, writes Storlid (*Folk og Land* 1998/7) that “the fight that these volunteers who fought against Bolshevism was simultaneously a war that brought the Russian people unending suffering and losses”. But this was only because the Russian people were “the first victim of Bolshevism”. For the rest, each man was fighting for his fatherland; and so each must be remembered and honored. True to their “European” status, the W-SS veterans' publications claim that the veterans have advanced far further than any modern politicians in terms of reconciliation. After all (it seems), they were reconciled with the men whom they once tried to kill. And this is possible *because* they had once tried to kill the others – *because* they were soldiers.

True, honorable soldiers, according to veterans' publications, never hate the enemy. This was particularly true of the W-SS soldiers (as opposed, various W-SS veteran publications maintain, to English, American, or – here they slip – Russian soldiers). Politicians are among “the post-war born ingrates” who still bear malice for battles fought in the War. The “old soldiers, who were once forced to fight each other /.../ have long ago made peace with each other” (*Wenn alle Brüder* 2005/1). Or, as *Wenn alle Brüder* put it in 2004:

Of course, at that time, there arose hate as a result of propaganda and experiences, but there were also instances of high respect and deep understanding for the situation of oppositional soldiers, which could be tied to the idea of a reconciliation between peoples after the end of the war (2004/4).

Indeed, illustrative examples of “honorable” or “soldierly” actions join positive statements about former enemies in filling the pages of veterans' magazines (see e.g., “Slik treffes tidligere fiender”, *Folk og Land*, 2002/3). When an article on the

Uspenka monument-erecting expedition is entitled “Trip of Good Will”, it says something about the self-understanding of such men. The Ukrainians and Russians, themselves excellent soldiers, can bear no ill-will; all were honorable, all were true, and all were fighting evil. Let the W-SS come.

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Notes

- ¹ We owe thanks to the Expo Archiv in Stockholm for the material we use for this article. We owe special thanks to Jan Raabe, of “Argumente & Kultur gegen Rechts” in Bielefeld, for his help to Steffen Werther in making material available.
- ² The Waffen-SS (W-SS, known until 1940 as the SS Verfügungstruppe) is to be distinguished, nominally, from the “Allgemeine” (General) SS. The W-SS was a relatively small proportion of the SS as a whole, created in order to partake in battles together with (but not as a part of) the German Army. However, arguments that there was no overlap between the two SS organizations do not hold; there was, historians have shown, a fairly regularized exchange of personnel.
- ³ Hilfspolizei auf Gegenseitigkeit der Angehörigen der ehemaligen W-SS.
- ⁴ Estonian names: Eesti Vabadusvõitlejate Liit; Eesti Relvavägede Diviisi Veteraanide Ühendus and Eesti Leegioni Sõprade Klubi.

- ⁵ Also known under its title, “Wenn alle untreu werden”. In the SS’s WWII song-book, the “Treuelied” is listed just after the “Deutschlandlied” and just before the notorious “Horst-Wessel-Song”. See Wilke 2011: 192f.
- ⁶ The exploitation of the Sparta/Thermopylae topic has a long German tradition, with a peak during WWII. See: Roche (2013).
- ⁷ See, also, inscriptions on the highly controversial Hungarian memorial stones. For the checkered history of the SS-veterans’ Budapest monument (dedicated to SS divisions “Totenkopf” und “Wiking”), *Wenn alle Brüder schweigen, Mitteilungsblatt* Nr. 1, February 2005.

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