



4. Transformation in 1943

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Reforming the Military System

With considerable use of propaganda from German and collaborationist sources, the Waffen-SS gained a few thousand troops in one Dutch regiment and three battalions of Danes, Norwegians, and Flemings. Recruiting, transportation, and training took so long that almost a full year elapsed before these units had taken position in the Leningrad sector of the Eastern Front. That front, for all its deadly combat and arduous conditions, had become the backwater of the Russo-German War by the end of 1941; the volunteer legions quite simply provided basic manpower to fill out the thin lines of a subsidiary German theater of war. Since the legions experienced difficulty in maintaining their strength at the front (because of casualties, sickness, etc.) one may conclude that the recruiting effort had run dry and the legionnaires simply represented an initial and relatively isolated wave of enthusiasm. As the war carried into 1942 and the Soviet state continued to refuse to collapse, potential volunteers for the legions may have lost their zeal.

On the other hand, the several thousand regular Waffen-SS recruits in the SS *Wiking* Division had proven themselves primarily in the more demanding battles in southern Russia, from the Ukraine in 1941 into the Caucasus in late 1942. The apparent reluctance of the Waffen-SS to throw the legions into the more decisive sectors was symptomatic of a bias against them that, in view of the deteriorating German fortunes, would have to be rectified.

Himmler's regulations governing the national legions demonstrated his original intention to keep them separate from the more select ranks of the regular Waffen-SS. In a sense they became foreign auxiliaries, much as the legions of Rome had employed foreign levies to augment purely Roman units (although we shall see how—like the Romans—the Waffen-SS came to depend more and more on foreign troops to stem the tide). These foreign volunteer units were to be "appendages" to the Waffen-SS units ("*der Waffen-SS angegliedert*") and would be controlled through the central command office of the SS. The normal uniform of the Waffen-SS was altered to show the different status of its wearer, and the rank structure was also varied accordingly (e.g., a non-German major in the legion would be called a *Legionssturmbannführer*, while a German major would be called *SS-Sturmbannführer*). Their oath was modified only to the extent that fidelity was pledged to Hitler solely as Führer, and not as Chancellor of the Reich. ¹

The second-rate status of the legionnaires soon transcended purely bureaucratic levels, as they received considerable abuse from hard-bitten German drill instructors in the training camps. Lacking any recognition of the differing psychological, social, or cultural characteristics of the Germanic volunteers, the Germans injured the feelings of foreign officers and enlisted men alike. One can see from contemporary observations how far apart the Germans and the foreign volunteers remained in orientation. The subtle differences in volunteer motivations hardly came to light when, as higher bureaucrats lamented, "It is simply incomprehensible how little influence Waffen-SS methods have upon the men's ideological attitude." ²

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Gottlob Berger had anticipated the need to correct German errors in handling volunteers in order to salvage his faltering Germanic recruitment program. In February 1942, he outlined several examples of SS bungling, which threatened to alienate all further recruiting efforts. Some volunteers who had served as officers and NCOs in the Russo-Finnish war had served too long in subordinate grades. The absence of sufficient measures to preserve the

nationality of volunteer units showed when nine Danish volunteers were killed in the SS *Das Reich* (nominally an all-German unit) after only a brief training period. Failures to notify next of kin through military channels had also occurred in several cases. Since indicators of slackening recruitment had surfaced already, Berger recommended that Himmler promulgate an order emphasizing the importance of the Germanic portion of the SS; order improvements in postal services to the volunteer units; indoctrinate German unit commanders who supervised Germanic volunteers; and single out a portion of the volunteer group for officer and NCO courses. ³

Himmler sought in particular to improve the leadership skills of German officers and NCOs in the non-German volunteer units. He ordered them to devote their fullest attention to the "instruction and care" (*Erziehung und Umsorgung*) of *volksdeutsche* and Germanic volunteers entering and leaving the service. He stressed that the failure to develop real comradeship would spoil the opportunity to win foreigners to service with the Waffen-SS and for the Führer. The volunteers had the unique perspective of serving far from the Reich—without the influence of German education and cultural heritage—and yet fighting in the cause of the Germanic order. Only by understanding this perspective would the SS leadership prove successful, in Himmler's view. A stream of orders from Himmler and his staff implemented these and other views of the Germanic "problem." ⁴

As the numbers of foreign SS troops slowly increased from recruiting, wounded returned from convalescence, and the withdrawal of the legions from the front for refitting, the problem of finding foreign officers of sufficient quality and experience to lead larger and more complex units demanded much attention. SS officers had benefited from six months of cadet training at the SS *Junkerschulen* at Bad Tölz and Braunschweig (small numbers of cadets trained as well at army and technical schools). Hence, foreign officers and cadets began training at Bad Tölz in 1942 under Himmler's guidelines reforming the volunteer system. ⁵ Officers graduating from Tölz received regular Waffen-SS rank rather than legionary status, and technically remained indistinguishable from their German SS peers. Thus, by February 1943, 47 officers and 172 cadets from Flanders, Holland, Norway, and Denmark were training at Tölz. These efforts greatly improved the existing leadership capacities of the volunteer contingents in the Waffen-SS (which had only 7 native officers for 2300 men) and the four legions (with 50 officers for 6000 men). ⁶

The SS leadership hoped for even greater expansion of the Germanic volunteer pool, and special courses for Germanic cadets and officers were ordered in May 1943. This same order forbade the elevation of the Germanic officers to their former grades in their native services without graduation from Tölz and its strict training and examination process. The foreign volunteer officers received the standard moral, ideological, tactical, and technical training of the Bad Tölz curriculum, taught for the most part in German. The sole drawback to this essential construction of a volunteer officer corps lay in the time required to train these cadres, since the expansion of the foreign SS units consistently outstripped the production of Tölz graduates. ⁷

In the end, the opening of foreign labor pools in the Reich to SS recruiters proved the strongest impetus in improving the recruiting for the Western European SS formations. Albert Speer's Labor Ministry gave its approval to recruitment of Germanic volunteers in German factories in late April 1943. By July, Berger jubilantly reported his success to Himmler in signing up 2500 men, and forecast another 6500 enlistments by mid-September. Actually, Berger obtained some 8105 recruits by mid-August, but only 3154 proved suitable for duty: ⁸

 Kaisergruber:
to Germany
Kaisergruber:
Joins Legion

"Recruited" "Suitable"

Norwegians	2	2
Danes	211	119
Dutch	3262	1448
Flemings	1069	529
Walloons	904	279
French	2608	736
Swiss	47	40
Lichtensteiner	1	1
Estonian	2	1
TOTAL	8105	3154

The specific conditions and incentives that produced these recruits remain open to speculation. Sporadic reports from the SS recruiting offices in the western Reich indicate that recruiting teams made good use of propaganda films, fliers, and speeches by foreign SS veterans imploring their countrymen to take a stand against Bolshevism. Recruiters used some anti-Semitic propaganda as well. Although some complaints of strong-arm tactics and impressments of workers appear in recruiting office files, there is no corroboration in documents or the pertinent literature. ⁹

Because the French LVF remained on anti-partisan duty in the rear of Army Group Center and the Walloon Legion never returned to combat duty with the German Army, the army never had occasion to evaluate its method of handling foreign units. It of course already had its hands full maintaining millions of German conscripts in fighting shape on the Eastern Front as well as the Western Front later in the war. Volunteer formations that had been thrust upon the German Army in 1941 simply remained insignificant to all but a few harried staff officers charged with their maintenance. The sole exception was the Spanish Division, which merited attention because of its size and length of service at the front. Because Spain remained a "neutral" in the war and was not an occupied territory, it only shared some of the experiences of other nations providing volunteer units.

When the Spanish Volunteer Division formed and trained at Grafenwöhr during July and August of 1941, the Spanish Army virtually divested itself of control and responsibility for that unit. The volunteers in effect were handed over to German authority in almost the same sense that war materials changed hands between the two countries. Planning on a short and victorious campaign, no attempt was made by Spanish authorities to maintain a replacement organization or any kind of logistic support system. The only support echelon furnished to the Blue Division by its home government was the rear area medical establishment. This consisted of small staffs of Spanish doctors and nurses in the German hospitals at Hof, Berlin, Königsberg, Vilna, and Smolensk (later, Riga), and a completely equipped hospital train manned by twenty Spanish doctors, thirty-two nurses, and twenty-eight orderlies. Based initially at Porkhov, the train would carry casualties in excess of its capacity to the Smolensk facility. ¹⁰



Left to fend for itself, the division relied upon a combination of experience and conscientious study to prepare for the Russian campaign. From commanding general to the most junior reserve lieutenant, the officers of the Blue Division had considerable experience from the Spanish Civil War and were aware of the impact of the latest weaponry upon tactics. The division staff sections translated a large number of the latest German doctrinal bulletins and battle experience studies and circulated them to all units. The commanders of the various units wrote basic orders and disseminated procedures for combat operations from their first days at Grafenwöhr. Every attempt was made to collate and disseminate German and Spanish combat experiences throughout the campaign in order to improve the division's

combat readiness and efficiency. In the area of training, however, nothing could be accomplished in the way of unit battle drills, which would fully indoctrinate the Spanish rank and file in the latest combat techniques necessary for the rigorous frontline operations in which they were quickly employed by the German command. The Spanish officers were quite stoic regarding this lack of combat temper within their units, however, and remained confident in the ability of the Spanish soldier to adapt to the most hostile environment and compensate for training deficiencies with the fiery spirit he had so often demonstrated in his previous "crusade against the Reds." 11

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Generally, the officers were vindicated, as the Spanish Division carried out its various missions with a high degree of determination and personal sacrifice. Many of the Spanish officers showed a keen sense of leadership and demonstrated great energy in setting personal examples of dedication and endurance. Perhaps the most visible example of this type of officer was the first commander, General Muñoz Grandes. Already well known as a man of great integrity and professionalism, he endeared himself to his officers and men by sharing all of their hardships on the march and in combat. He was also very quick to demand similar sacrifices on the part of his subordinates, and impressed German observers more than any other Spaniard as a combat leader. The later Spanish commanders, Esteban-Infantes and García Navarro, were well-respected staff officers but did not impress the Germans nor many Spaniards as having the inspirational personality of their first leader. 12

The officers and men of the Blue Division soon had cause to regret their total dependence upon the Germans for logistical support. On the extremely cold Eastern Front, the Spaniards naturally suffered somewhat more than their German comrades, who themselves remained in dire straits due to the insufficient supply of winter clothing available in the winter of 1941-42. Equally uncomfortable for the Spanish troops were the German field rations and hardtack. As a partial solution, the Spanish government began in early 1942 to forward special trains to the division and squadron periodically which contained quantities of rice, coffee, condensed milk, olive oil, tobacco, wine and other items unobtainable from German sources. The division also requested a shipment of 15,000 pairs of boots during the first winter, indicating the extent to which the German supply system had failed. In general, the Spanish soldier was sufficiently hardy and withstood the multiple discomforts of poor rations, cold and wet weather, and rugged terrain about as well as the German soldier. Perhaps the most difficult condition the Spaniards encountered was the overwhelming quantity of supporting arms—tanks, artillery, and aircraft—that the Soviets employed against them. 13

The Spaniards encountered a clear problem in their continued recruitment program for replacements in the 1942-43 period. Although officers continued to volunteer in excess of requirements, attracting sufficient volunteers for the ranks grew increasingly difficult. This resulted in part from the diminution of anti-Communist enthusiasm on the part of Spaniards when it became obvious that no quick German victory was in sight. The return of the first severely wounded and disabled men from the front and the publishing of lengthy death notices also dampened volunteer ardor. This trend of lessening enthusiasm continued until—by mid-1943—the relief battalions numbered not students and workers among their ranks, but Spanish Legionnaires, *Regulares* from Morocco, Spanish Army soldiers, and a smattering of militia and civilian members. Undoubtedly many of these men were soldiers of fortune and troops bored with ordinary garrison duty. It has also been suggested that in many cases authorities placed some pressure upon men to obtain their services. 14

The Germanic Corps

Before the withdrawal of the legions from the Eastern Front, Himmler had already

compromised the exclusive status of his foreign auxiliaries by combining them with each other and with German units. Thus, in September 1942, Himmler reported to Hitler that he would merge the legions with the formerly all-German SS brigades in Army Group North. The Danish volunteers joined one regiment of the 1st SS Brigade, and the Dutch and Norwegian Legions formed a regiment in the 2nd SS Brigade. ¹⁵ Such mergers undoubtedly stemmed from the experience of operating the weak legions in the huge combat maelstrom of the Russian Front. In recognition of the fact that only larger units were viable on the front and that the legion recruitment had already run its course, Himmler now decided to combine the available Germanic volunteers in a new multinational division modeled on the successful SS *Wiking* Division, as part of the 1942 expansion program of the Waffen-SS.

The new division, christened the volunteer mechanized infantry division SS Nordland, absorbed the SS Nordland Regiment from *Wiking*, the remnants of the volunteer legions, and new replacements recruited in Norway, Denmark, and Holland under Berger's refurbished recruitment program. The impetus for creating the new "Germanic" division most likely arose from the potential for professional prestige and probable promotion for two men already connected with the volunteers in the Waffen-SS. ¹⁶

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Wiking commander Felix Steiner, and Dr. Franz Riedweg, Berger's chief of the Germanic Directorate, argued their case persuasively to Berger in September of 1942. Military efficiency demanded larger and more cohesive units than any combination of legions would prove likely to produce. In addition, they argued, the political apron strings of the nationalist-collaborationist party leaders would have the least effect upon the volunteers if they served in the proper military environment of a frontline division. Finally, the greatest military potential and political benefits would accompany the establishing of a corps command as flag bearer for the Germanic doctrine of the SS. ¹⁷

Himmler's decision, after viewing the improved recruiting figures, came in February 1943. He ordered the establishment of the new division to duplicate SS *Wiking*, and with it a tactical corps headquarters to be commanded by General Steiner. Hitler approved the formation, to be named SS Nordland. Its three regiments would take native versus German names: *Danmark*, *Norge*, and *Nederland*. The Flemish volunteers would remain separated from the other groups for political reasons, and would later form a separate brigade. As a replacement for its lost regiment, the *Wiking* Division would receive the SS *Narwa* Regiment, based upon the Estonian Legion, which in reality never exceeded battalion size. ¹⁸

The Germanic character of the *Nordland* Division and the parent III (Germanic) SS Armored Corps scarcely extended beyond the three regiments of infantry. The armored regiment, divisional artillery, and other support units were filled by German SS personnel and *volksdeutsch* recruits recently obtained by Berger from Romania. To make matters worse, Himmler and his staff found that the foreign volunteers and their supporters in the homeland did not relish such close association with each other in a Germanic division, after having experienced a degree of independence in the national legions. Mussert and German authorities in Holland warned that the *Nordland* name would offend the Dutch, since it suggested the Scandinavian nationalities. Berger produced evidence supporting Mussert's opinion that a Dutch division could be formed (some 15,000 Dutch volunteers then served in the SS and various party militia and auxiliaries in Holland). Himmler ordered the SS *Nederland* Regiment separated from SS *Nordland* and formed a distinct Dutch division, later scaled down to brigade size. The 4th SS Nederland Mechanized Brigade concentrated former Dutch legionnaires in one regiment, designated the 48th Regiment SS *General Seyffard*, and new recruits and transfers in another, named the 49th Regiment SS *De Ruyter*. Further expansion was not possible before the brigade joined the III Germanic SS Corps for training. ¹⁹

As originally conceived by SS headquarters, the III Germanic SS Corps would field two battle-worthy divisions, *Wiking* and *Nordland*, manned by ten thousand Germans and ten thousand Germanic volunteers. At the end of 1943, this corps would enter combat as one of four elite corps of the expanded Waffen-SS. In actuality, when this corps assembled in Yugoslavia for training, it did so with only the *Nordland* Division and *Nederland* Brigade. The elite *Wiking* Division could not be spared from the southern Russian front. In addition, the resulting national mixture proved wholly inadequate vis-à-vis the original plans. Only 4900 Germanic volunteers (Danes, Dutch, and Norwegians, with a few Swedes and Flemish) had reported to the corps. Likewise, a mere 5600 German Waffen-SS men could be found, requiring the inclusion of over 8400 *volksdeutsch* troops. [20](#)

Although some additional Nordic volunteers remained in the SS *Wiking* Division, it seems doubtful that they ever exceeded a few hundred in number. [21](#) The corps staff blamed new problems in recruiting and personnel administration for their shortfalls. New repressions in Holland by occupation authorities, the illegal general strike by the Dutch, and the drafting of workers between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five into the Reich Labor Service posed new problems for SS recruiters. Competition from the Dutch homeguard—where combat duty proved less likely—and the German Navy, which was opened to Germanic recruitment in 1943 by Hitler, proved problematic as well. The establishment of a Norwegian volunteer ski battalion for SS Division Nord on the Arctic Front required leaders and troops from the Norge Regiment.

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III GERMANIC ARMORED CORPS

Strength by Nationality, December 1943

Unit	Germans (%)	Volksdeutsche (%)	Germanics (%)
SS <i>Nordland</i>	4131 (33)	5895 (47)	2491 (20)
SS <i>Nederland</i>	1048 (19)	2148 (40)	2230 (41)
Corps Troops	443 (44)	386 (38)	181 (18)
TOTAL	5622 (30)	8429 (44)	4902 (26)

The latter scarcely could afford such transfers virtually on the eve of battle. [22](#)

Far from being a large multinational corps command, the III Germanic SS Corps had taken shape as a German SS Corps under which the several expanded legions had been grouped and some of the new *volksdeutsch* drafts from Romania attached. The language of command was German, as were the senior commanders: Steiner commanding the corps, Brigadier General Fritz von Scholz commanding the SS *Nordland* Division, and Brigadier General Jürgen Wagner (formerly regiment commander of SS *Germania*) leading the SS *Nederland* Brigade. German officers commanded all the regiments, and foreign SS officers held command only at the battalion and company levels, filling about half of these positions. [23](#)

After forming these large units, the SS command transported the entire corps in August to Yugoslavia for training and to assist in the anti-partisan war in the Balkans, recently vacated by Italian units after Italy's surrender. The difficulty of carrying out training exercises and hunting partisans can only be inferred from the corps operations report, which noted two officers and forty-one enlisted men killed (2/109 wounded) during this period! Four Iron Crosses, first class, and forty-four of the second class were awarded to men of the corps at the same time for combat exploits.

In late November, after ten weeks' training in Yugoslavia, the corps headquarters and *Nordland* Division began movement to the Leningrad front and its

assigned sector, with the *Nederland* Brigade following three weeks later. SS *Nordland's* tank unit—the only one available to the corps—was sent west to train in the new Panther tank, leaving the corps with only artillery and assault guns for support until the new year. ²⁴

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Steiner's corps reached the Oranienbaum front, its initial assignment under the Eighteenth Army. This was a salient around the port of Oranienbaum bypassed in the initial German drive of 1941 because of its forbidding terrain. Third-rate units had guarded it in the past, but German commanders watched nervously as the Russians built up reserves behind the Leningrad front and reinforced the Oranienbaum front for the anticipated winter offensive of 1944.

Steiner estimated the SS *Nordland* Division as combat ready and capable of meeting Soviet Army attacks, but not yet up to the demands of a major battle. The division featured a skilled and experienced division staff which still lacked the cohesion that comes from working as a team. He considered the subordinate leaders "hard and experienced," and the battle spirit of the troops very good. His SS *Nederland* Brigade was not ready to face a tank attack, and required more training. He reported to higher headquarters that he would use the Dutch Brigade for coastal defense until it became more battle-worthy. ²⁵

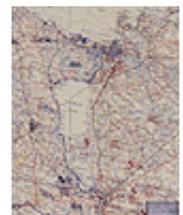
The III SS Corps' commander took operational responsibility of the Oranienbaum sector on 27 November 1943, subordinating the 9th and 10th Luftwaffe Field Divisions and numerous small units then in the lines. The SS *Nordland* Division began occupying the lines on 13 December, when the SS *Norge* Regiment relieved four army battalions. By the year's end, the two Luftwaffe Divisions guarded the east side of the Soviet salient, with *Nordland* on the south and *Nederland* on the west side. Steiner's Corps also exercised control over various army, navy, and replacement units, organized as Battle Group "Coast" under the command of none other than Brigadier General C. P. Kryssing, the original Danish Freikorps commander, now the corps artillery officer. He had been promoted to general rank on 1 August 1943, the first foreign volunteer to attain that rank in the German armed forces. ²⁶



This situation barely lasted two weeks, for the Soviet winter offensive of 1944 began on the Leningrad front on 14 and 15 January with twin assaults delivered by Soviet armies into the narrow corridor separating Leningrad and Oranienbaum. The assault destroyed the 9th Luftwaffe Division and threatened the neighboring 10th with collapse. Steiner used battalions of the *Nordland* Division and *Nederland* Brigade to stave off disaster on the collapsing flank for a week, and then as a rear guard for a rapid withdrawal to the Luga River line to the east. Finally, the Corps occupied the Narva Salient, a land bridge connecting the Gulf of Finland with Lake Peipus, the northern hinge of Army Group North as it faced the Russian attacks from the emergency "Panther" Line with only half the frontline strength it possessed prior to 14 January. During February, the Soviets attacked the Narva salient frontally against the newly arrived 20th Estonian SS Division, which held. ²⁷ Next came a dangerous penetration in March on the southern flank, between SS *Nordland* and the neighboring 11th Infantry Division. *Nordland* and the army units executed three counterattacks to restore the German lines. Then came a series of powerful attacks into the city of Narva from the east.



The *Nederland* Brigade resisted these attacks, incurring very heavy losses. The 49th Regiment *De Ruyter* lost half its strength, and the 48th Regiment *Seyffard* virtually ceased to exist. Then came the 24th *Danmark* Regiment's turn to bleed, as it drew heavy attacks south of Narva city. By July, the infantry companies of SS *Nordland* Division mustered under one hundred men each, and both infantry regiments dropped to two weak battalions each. But they held, and the stand of the



Narva SS troops received great publicity in war propaganda, being one of the few bright spots in a miserable winter for the German forces. Steiner's superior commander, General Grasser, nominated him for the Swords of the Knight's Cross. This act received hearty endorsement by the beleaguered commander of the Eighteenth Army, General Lindemann. He called Steiner's Narva battle a "defensive success for the whole eastern front ... holding off eleven divisions and six tank units of the Soviet Second Shock and Eighth Armies with his weakened two divisions and single brigade."



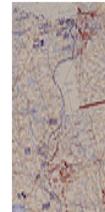
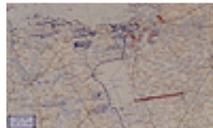
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By the end of March, the III SS Armored Corps reported over 7500 casualties in *SS Nordland* and *SS Nederland*, representing thirty-three percent and sixty-two percent, respectively, of their strengths upon arrival in December.

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	Killed	Wounded	Missing (Officers/Enlisted)
<i>Nordland</i> Division	24/788	58/2708	9/516
<i>Nederland</i> Brigade	25/626	33/2244	5/473

Against these heavy losses, the corps had absorbed 1336 replacements from the remnants of the 9th and 10th Luftwaffe Field Divisions and some army units, of which 710 went to *SS Nordland* and 482 to *SS Nederland*. These statistics lend credence to survivors' reports that fewer than half of the foreign SS men survived the Narva Battle. 29



Pressure continued from Russian forces through the summer of 1944 against Army Group North, but it was the collapse of the German Army Group Center that summer that doomed the northern group. Army Group North first had to give up first-rate divisions to set up new fronts against the Soviets around the collapsing central front. Then the burden of overextending German lines and a dangerous thrust toward Riga in the rear of Army Group North forced a precipitous retreat by the Germans across Estonia and into the Courland (*Kurland*) Peninsula. The III SS Armored Corps withdrew there in fairly good order, providing battalions as "alarm units" to block Russian thrusts along the way. The corps then anchored the center of the Courland Army Group lines in mid-September and prepared for yet another defensive winter battle. 30

The Assault Brigades (*Sturmbrigaden*)

While the Dutch, Danish, and Norwegian Waffen-SS volunteers fought in the icy north in their regiments under General Steiner against the Soviet 1944 winter offensive, their Flemish, Walloon, and French comrades fought in independent formations attached to the German field armies in the south, under equally harsh conditions.



Himmler had decreed early in 1943 that the Flemish volunteers would not serve in the

units of the III Germanic SS Armored Corps. He continually saw political dangers in mixing Flemish and Dutch groups, for fear that such association would fuel the "Greater Holland" notions of Staf de Clerq and his Flemish National Union Party. He authorized the establishment of a separate regiment for the Flemish, to be sent to the 4th SS Police Division, with other Flemish volunteers detailed as infantry replacements for *Wiking* Division's SS *Germania* Regiment and as replacement technical troops in the existing first line SS divisions (excepting the 1st SS *Leibstandarte*). [31](#)

The Flemish Brigade

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SS Headquarters ordered the conversion of *Legion Flandern*



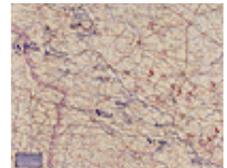
to *Assault Brigade SS Langemarck* at the end of May, in compliance with Himmler's policy. By combining the some six hundred effectives from the legion with available Flemish recruits and replacements in the SS depots, the SS envisioned forming a reinforced battalion (three infantry companies and a machine-gun company) together with separate companies of infantry, assault, anti-aircraft, and anti-tank guns, all of these motorized. The brigade trained in Bohemia with its new equipment through the latter half of the year. [32](#)

These assault brigades, established under the SS reorganization of 1943, were organized as balanced forces of all arms rather than as infantry regiments. In the field, they served as rapid reinforcement elements, compatible with and augmenting the strength of the regular SS divisions, which spent more and more time at the front as the German situation on the Eastern Front began to deteriorate. On just such a mission, the Flemish volunteers, still led by Major Konrad Schellong, moved by rail in December toward Army Group South, then reeling from sequential Soviet attacks along its front.

Assault Brigade SS *Langemarck* joined the 2nd SS Das Reich Division, then fighting at battle group strength under the Fourth Panzer Army. The German forces fought into 1944 to restore their broken Ukrainian front south of Zhitomir. The Flemish brigade deployed first to Staro Constantinov and then Yampol, anchoring the left flank of their division and the LIX Corps of the Fourth Panzer Army against a forty-mile gap in the German lines, extending westward. The brigade mopped up battalion-sized pockets of Soviet troops in its zone in late February, but major Soviet attacks began to hit the brigade in its Yampol position as the Soviet offensive in the Ukraine found its second wind. Regimental attacks from three sides were repulsed on 29 February at a cost of thirteen killed and forty-five



wounded. The Russians returned with "overwhelming strength" on 2 March, hitting the Flemings from two directions. They held their positions by means of sharp counterattacks, but after a day the Flemish SS evacuated their wounded and began to withdraw to the southeast. Soviet tanks and infantry caught them on 4 and 5 March, and they only broke through to friendly lines by infiltration.



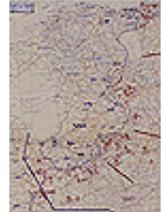
Still, the German command credited the SS *Langemarck* Brigade with destroying or capturing nineteen tanks, eleven artillery pieces, eighteen mortars, twenty-four anti-tank guns, and numerous weapons. Some sixty-one prisoners were taken, and about two thousand Russian troops killed during the month at the front. Major Schellong, wounded in this fight, received the Knight's Cross with a citation crediting SS *Langemarck's* stand at Yampol with saving the major fortress of Tarnopol further to the south. [33](#)

There was little rest for the Flemish troops at Staro Constantinov, however, as the Germans pulled the entire corps back to Proskurov and built a new line of resistance there. The entire First Panzer Army then had to fight its way out of a pocket, withdrawing behind the Saret River in April. The *Langemarck* Brigade came out of the Ukraine with an estimated combat strength of four hundred, barely twenty-eight percent of its fielded

strength. Losses in the officer corps hit the brigade especially hard. The brigade commander, all company commanders, and most platoon leaders had become casualties. The survivors gathered in Knowitz, Czechoslovakia in late April for refitting and retraining. [34](#)

The brigade recovered rather rapidly from its ordeal, as new recruits and returned convalescent troops swelled its ranks to 47 officers, 262 NCOs, and 1422 men by 30 June 1944. Konrad Schellong, now promoted to lieutenant colonel, resumed command of the brigade, now formed into two battalions (each of three infantry companies, one weapons, and one anti-tank company) and four support companies of artillery, assault guns, and light and heavy anti-aircraft guns. [35](#)

On 19 July, the First Battalion, under Captain Wilhelm Rehmann, was ordered on the march to the Narva front as a reinforcement to the beleaguered III Germanic SS Armored Corps. On 25 July, the battalion occupied the lines with the SS *De Ruyter* Regiment of the battered *Nederland* Brigade. The Flemings also reinforced the SS *Norge* Regiment as Steiner's corps withdrew towards Courland amid heavy fighting. Some 130 Flemish survivors embarked, shipping in Reval for their return to Germany. On 30 October, these remnants joined their brigade near Soltau as it reorganized for expansion to division status. [36](#)



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The French Brigade

The origins of the French Assault Brigade differed greatly from the Flemish unit. The French legion, or LVF, remained in action with the German Army until the summer of 1944. Almost a year earlier, however, recruiting began in occupied France for a French unit of the Waffen-SS. Individual Frenchmen had enlisted in the Waffen-SS in France and Germany since 1942 but had not served together in a single unit. By late 1942, Himmler apparently had overcome his varied prejudices and Francophobia so that he could approach Hitler for permission to form a French SS regiment (*Standarte*). Hitler's reaction to his henchman's idea, while undoubtedly interesting, remains undocumented. Himmler confirmed in mid-December that the regiment would become an assault brigade and would include no members of the LVF. The latter point permitted the inclusion of only those of the highest racial standard in the ranks of the French SS, men who thought and appeared as "Germanics." Himmler proposed the names "Charlemagne" or "Gobineau" for the formation, the latter after Count Joseph Gobineau, "the founder of racial study and proponent of Germanic thought in France." [37](#)

The Laval government agreed under pressure from the German government to permit a Waffen-SS recruitment program in France for a French SS unit, with the understanding that they would not fight on French territory or against the Free French Forces. The usual committee of collaborationist luminaries formed to support the drive. Laval's proclamation of 23 July 1943 gave all French SS recruits identical legal status with members of the LVF. Officers and NCOs of the former French Army could qualify for command after attending appropriate SS schools. Sixteen recruiting stations recruited volunteers in the provinces for the central Paris SS office. [38](#)

In the first six months of official recruiting in France and among French laborers in Germany, some 30 officers, 44 NCOs, and 1614 enlisted men assembled as the [8th French SS Volunteer Assault Brigade](#). The groups trained in Sennheim, Alsace, under



SS Major Heinrich Hersche, a former Swiss Army officer. Unlike the other Waffen-SS formations, the Assault Brigade SS Frankreich used French as their language of command (as would be the case with the Walloon SS). The SS even convened a special officer's course at Bad Tölz in the first three months of 1944. There, twenty-eight former officers and cadets of the French Army received the standard SS cadet course, taught by French-speaking instructors. [39](#)

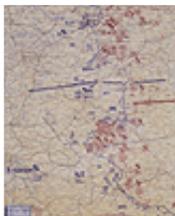
The senior French volunteer, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Marie Gamory-Dubourdeau, received a commission as major in the Waffen-SS at the end of the course and returned to SS *Frankreich* as its commander. The confidence the SS leaders placed in their training techniques became apparent when the first operation orders came to the brigade. On 20 July, the operationally ready First Battalion, under command of Captain Pierre Cance, detached for duty on the Eastern Front with the 18th SS *Horst Wessel* Infantry Division battle group. A German liaison staff commanded by an SS lieutenant accompanied Cance to interpret orders, but the SS command forbade any exercise of authority over Cance. Major Gamory continued training his staff and other units with German assistance. [40](#)



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The French SS men entraining for the front in the summer of 1944 were young men led by young officers who had been seasoned at Bad Tölz in SS leadership and tactical skills. Although they came from diverse social and economic backgrounds, the internal dissension typical of the French LVF did not prevail in SS *Frankreich*. The detailed screening and vigorous physical training of the SS account for some of the differences. But the high morale of these volunteers reflected the ideological commitment of the French collaborationists and their *esprit* in volunteering for service with what they recognized as the military elite of the conqueror's war machine. Perhaps this essential cohesion made the difference in the performance of French SS men under fire compared to the men of the LVF some two and a half years earlier. [41](#)

In early August, the French SS battalion joined the 18th SS *Horst Wessel* Infantry Division, deployed in defensive positions in reduced strength near Sanok, Galicia. The battalion secured the left flank of the division and held its lines in a reliable fashion as the German forces regrouped on the Eastern Front. Then, on 19 August 1944, the division began its withdrawal, as the German Army Group North Ukraine began to fall back before the late summer Soviet assaults. Several sharp fights with Russian troops in this retrograde movement produced about a hundred French battlefield deaths, including seven officers. Still, the battalion emerged from the fighting intact under its commander, Cance, with three hundred effectives. The French SS men earned fifty-eight Iron Crosses, second class, from the commander of the SS *Horst Wessel* battle group. The battalion then boarded transportation to Schwarnegast in the Danzig corridor, where the entire assault brigade had assembled, now totaling three battalions and some two thousand men. [42](#)



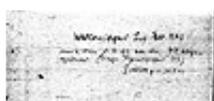
The Walloon Brigade

The veterans and new recruits of *Legion Wallonie* spent the first six months of 1943 on leave, assembling and retraining at Pieske, near the Polish frontier. Rexist Party leader Degrelle spent much of this time persuading the SS hierarchy to take the Walloon volunteers into the Waffen-SS. Berger told Himmler on 5 January that Degrelle had made inquiries about forming a Walloon SS unit in the summer of 1943. Degrelle greatly admired the SS troops for their youth and enthusiasm for National Socialism. The Army officers, he claimed, appeared older, more



conservative, and easily tired by the rigors of campaigning. The SS represented mental toughness and physical strength; character counted for more than did intelligence. The mysticism of the SS credo seemed analogous to what Degrelle sought to impress on his countrymen through the mysticism of the Rexist movement. Degrelle also considered postwar politics in his decision to seek SS sponsorship. For him, it was clear that army veterans would have no role in the politics of the New Order after the war—the SS state represented the future. Although Berger remained lukewarm to Degrelle's pressure, Degrelle won over Himmler personally with his persistent arguments about the presence of Germanic blood in the Walloons and promises of two thousand recruits in Walloon Belgium ready to enlist in the Waffen-SS. With this shift toward the SS, Degrelle cast his lot firmly with the German side, to the astonishment of many of his more national-minded party followers. By 1944, the Legion clearly meant more to Degrelle than the Rexist Party, and he became the undisputed icon of New Order Europe, making speeches in sympathetic circles in Berlin, Brussels, Vienna, and Paris. [43](#)

Himmler came to an agreement with the German Army and Armed Forces High Command about the SS takeover of the Walloon Legion in May 1943. There appears no evidence that the Army resisted the loss of the enlarged, two-battalion legion. Effective 1 June, the Walloon volunteers became the [6th SS Volunteer Assault Brigade](#). Himmler determined the existing two battalions of 1600 men (700 of them veterans) too weak for use as a brigade without supporting arms units. Although he foresaw eventual expansion to a full mountain or infantry division, Himmler ordered the troops redistributed into one battalion of infantry with additional companies of anti-tank, light artillery, and engineers, and planned to introduce artillery units as new recruits arrived. Captain Lippert would retain command in the SS, with promotion to major. [44](#)



Although Himmler first envisioned sending the Walloons to the SS Cavalry Brigade for use in anti-partisan operations, by July he had decided to equip them as a first-rate motorized assault brigade. Perhaps he felt encouraged by a staff report that month which identified over 18,000 Belgians in military service. These included Flemings and Walloons of the SS, home guard auxiliaries, and transport services. The report stated that service in the Waffen-SS still attracted youthful Belgians, who recognized that service as the most distinguished. [45](#)



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Himmler also agreed to Degrelle's request that French be the language of command in the brigade and that their chaplain be incorporated into the organization. His pleas that the brigade be allowed to carry the Belgian flag and fight in Belgian uniform as the core of a new Belgian Army fell on deaf ears, however. The other legions absorbed into the Waffen-SS fared less well, and perhaps the youth and romantic zeal of Degrelle appealed to the equally dreamlike *Reichsführer-SS*. [46](#)



The Walloon Brigade completed its combined arms training in the Waffen-SS at Wildflecken and entrained on 11 November for the Eastern Front as a reinforcement unit for the SS *Wiking* Division at Korsun in the Ukraine. The 1850 man brigade, with its 250 vehicles, would prove a welcome addition to *Wiking*, still heavily engaged on the front despite the loss



of its SS *Nordland* Regiment earlier in that year. The German forces stood on the defensive against successive Soviet attacks through the winter of 1943-44. [47](#)

The *Wiking* Division initially employed the new brigade piecemeal, scattering companies into the veteran *Germania* and *Westland* Regiments and the division rear. By 5 December,

though, the brigade held its own portion of the front: a quiet, forested sector some twenty-five kilometers wide. The division counterattacked some Russian penetrations in early January, and Degrelle volunteered the brigade to eliminate a salient remaining before the village of Teklino, between the Germania Regiment and the *Narva Battalion*. [48](#)

Assembling companies in depth, the Walloon Brigade attacked from 14 through 17 January to clear the two kilometers of Russian defenders. The brigade sustained about 200 casualties in this effort, its baptism of fire in the service of the Waffen-SS. [49](#)

The Walloons could not congratulate themselves for long, though, as the Soviet Sixth Tank Army ripped through the German lines on 26 January and completely encircled the German forces in the Korsun area two days later. Inside this pocket (called Cherkassy to this day by German veterans, though that town remained outside the pocket) stood some 56,000 German troops of five divisions and supporting units (of the XI and XLII Corps). Higher headquarters organized an airlift to supply the beleaguered defenders and rushed parts of two Army armored corps to relieve them, but ultimately the troops had to fight their way out over the last nine kilometers to friendly lines. [50](#)



60

The Walloon Brigade, initially positioned in the northeast extremity of the pocket, gradually fell back under pressure toward the Korsun airstrip, as the German commander of troops in the pocket prepared for relief or breakout to the west. By 11 February, the Walloons took up their final positions around Novo-Buda (southwest of Korsun), bringing some 350 of their wounded with them. Only 250 effective combat troops of the Walloons remained in action, with five anti-tank guns and two infantry guns. Four German tanks remained in support. A sniper killed Major Lippert the next day, while he was scouting his lines. Taking his place was Léon Degrelle, promoted to captain on 30 January, now the fifth commander of the Walloon volunteers. [51](#)



Kaisergruber:
Breakout

The Walloons struggled through the perilous breakout operation with SS *Wiking* Division. Some 30,000 of the 56,000 German troops made good their escape, albeit without weapons and equipment.

In all, some 1100 Walloons died or fell into captivity at the Korsun pocket. The approximately 650 dazed survivors, like their German counterparts, proved incapable of further duty after their narrow escape, and the German command moved them to Wildflecken for rest and reorganization. [52](#)

German propaganda attempted to portray the Korsun breakout as a defensive victory. Degrelle played some part in this effort and gained some measure of Nazi support in the process. He flew out from the front after the breakout (Hitler had wanted him flown out earlier, but the airstrip had fallen). On 23 February, Degrelle made a radio broadcast about the battle. He played down the obvious dangers the German forces had faced and lied about the numbers of Germans lost in the pocket. He characterized it as a typical breakout, where the Germans asserted their tactical superiority over the Russians. Four days later, he made a seventy-five minute speech at the Brussels Sports Palace to an estimated crowd of 10,000 Belgians. After the war, Degrelle claimed that the Korsun (Cherkassy) breakout became a shot in the arm for the European Waffen-SS, as all national units grew to division size as a result of increased recruiting, but this peculiar growth will be studied in the following chapter. [53](#)



Degrelle and
Hitler



Walloon
Parade

It suffices to observe that, in the space of a few days, Degrelle received the Knight's Cross and promotion to major of the SS from Hitler. On 1 April, he received another rare personal honor as he led a motorized

detachment of SS *Wallonie* as it paraded through Brussels and Charleroi. It encamped near Mons so that its veterans could enjoy a three-week furlough. The veterans of SS *Langemarck* caustically remarked later that they had endured their own "Cherkassy" but had no Degrelle in their ranks to guarantee them appropriate publicity. [54](#)



The Assault Brigade Wallonie slowly recovered in its new training camps in Germany. In May 1944, some 800 new recruits arrived in camp. In Degrelle's absence, Major Tchekhoff, a former commander from the legion days, took charge until Major Franz Hellebaut, a Belgian Army general staff officer, arrived after his release from a prisoner of war camp. Hellebaut would command the Walloon Brigade tactically through the end of the war, although he nominally served as chief of staff under Degrelle. This arrangement was a legacy of Lucien Lippert, who maintained a correspondence with Hellebaut during the war and asked the latter to take command if he were killed. [55](#)

 Kaisergruber:
Degrelle

 Kaisergruber:
Degrelle
in command

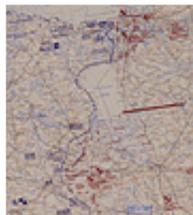
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At the end of July, the brigade moved to Breslau and continued training. Vehicles and weapons were issued, and the brigade's strength swelled to some 1800 effectives. During September, a number (estimated at over 1500) of new recruits drawn from factories, prisoner of war camps, and Rexist paramilitary formations arrived in training camp, the beginning of a refugee flood that caused the Germans to consider expanding SS *Wallonie* to nominal division size. [56](#)

 Kaisergruber:
Lippert

A final episode in the life of the Walloon Assault Brigade paralleled that of its Flemish sister formation, SS *Langemarck*. In mid-July, the Germans called for a reinforcement battalion to be sent to the III Germanic Corps in Estonia, which was being bled white in the Narva battles. Accordingly, a battle group of three companies and some support units—440 men in all—entrained for the Eastern Front under command of a First Lieutenant Reulle. On 25 July, this unit unloaded at Johvi, forty-five kilometers west of Narva. At this point, Léon Degrelle joined this small band of Walloons from Brussels and assumed command.



Rather than reinforcing the III Germanic Corps, though, the Walloon battalion marched south to the vicinity of Dorpat (or Tartu), where it was thrown into a fluid, confused muddle of German units attempting to contain the Soviet breakthrough at Pskov. On 10 August, the Walloons joined Battle Group "Wagner." For three weeks, they fought against Soviet infantry, tank, artillery, and air assaults. At the end of that period, only half of the battalion remained in action. As the Germans retreated toward Courland, the Walloon battalion left through the port of Reval, rejoining the assault brigade at Breslau in September. The anti-tank platoon leader, Lieutenant Léon Gilles, a veteran legionnaire since 1941, won promotion and a Knight's Cross in this action. Degrelle again flew out of the combat zone to confer with SS headquarters in Berlin and received the Oak Leaves to go with his Iron Cross from the Führer. [57](#) The SS *Norge* Regiment

As noted above in the discussion of the organization of the Germanic Corps by the SS, the recruitment of expert skiers in Norway diverted numerous volunteers from the SS *Norge* Regiment. In the late summer of 1942, some 120 Norwegians responded to the call by the SS by volunteering for service in northern Finland in the SS mountain division stationed

there (the 6th SS Nord Division, an all-German unit formed in 1942). The company trained together in infantry tactics through the fall at the SS training camp at Sennheim, Alsace. Officers attended the cadet course at Bad Tölz. Military ski training followed for the Norwegians at Dresden at the German Police training center. Finally, in February 1943, the company entrained for Danzig and there joined their officers, newly graduated from Bad Tölz. By ship, train, bus, and foot, the Ski Company moved through Finland beyond the Arctic Circle to join the SS Nord Mountain Division. Subordinated to the reconnaissance battalion, the Norwegians found themselves on the division's north flank, patrolling out of wooden huts and bunkers built into the snow. The May thaw brought the skiers' skirmishing activities to a halt and they returned home for leave in July. Allied intelligence reported that ninety men returned to Norway and immediately toured the country in a propaganda campaign. [58](#)

The success of using Norwegian ski specialists stimulated the SS command to expand the Ski Company to battalion size, even at the expense of drawing Waffen-SS men from the SS *Norge* Regiment operating in Army Group North. As early as April 1943, Berger had urged the *Reichsführer-SS* to combine the skiers with the SS *Norge* Regiment to ensure the success of the conversion of the old Norwegian Legion into a regiment of the Waffen-SS, but Himmler insisted on keeping the skiers with the SS *Nord* Mountain Division, saying that they would transfer to SS *Norge* only if the latter expanded to division strength. In the end, volunteers filled out three ski companies and a staff company. Their Norwegian officers had experience from SS *Wiking* or the Legion and had trained at Bad Tölz. A German officer commanded the battalion, which trained in the fall of 1943 in Oulu, Finland. [59](#)

In January, the Norwegian skiers returned to SS *Nord*, where they again formed a scouting and security screen on its north flank. Later, another contingent of volunteers, the Second Police Company, joined the battalion. Recruited from among Norwegian police for a six-month term of service, the police company augmented the skiers' defensive positions, but departed in April for the homeland. In June, the battalion suffered several attacks from Russian forces in regimental strength. Personnel reorganization came as some 150 men returned home and 200 more, including the 150-man Third Police Company, joined the battalion in August. [60](#)

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The Finnish capitulation in September brought an end to the ski battalion's career, along with the other units of the German Twentieth Army, all of which retreated into northern Norway from their positions before Murmansk. As the German forces passed through Narvik, the ski battalion detached from SS *Nord*, which transferred to the Western Front, and boarded ship and train to reach Mysen in southern Norway in early December. There the skiers sat out the end of the war without seeing any further action. [61](#)

Political and Military Results

As the last days of 1943 faded, the German armed forces gathered their resources and prepared to face what their leadership increasingly saw as the decisive year of struggle. Could the German forces hold a defensive position in the East until the Allies' second front invasion attempt, expected in the spring, was repulsed? If so, the entire Wehrmacht could return eastward and resume the offensive en masse with a vengeance. As it turned out, neither objective could be attained. German forces would only take the offensive in limited counterattacks through the end of the war.

The Germans could look with some satisfaction, however, upon their revisions to their methods in the military use of foreign volunteers. The Waffen-SS improvements in recruiting, training, and fielding volunteers and mixed units had produced tangible results

compared to the questionable and varied performances of volunteer units the previous year. To be sure, the declining German fortunes on the battlefield had modified the first instinct, which had been to view foreign contingents as mere propaganda troops. Previously, only Himmler and his inner circle had envisioned a large foreign military contingent. Now, the entire institution of the SS saw the occupied Western states as valuable sources of military manpower as well as the of the labor manpower that was already being exploited. This fundamental change in values among the German leadership, particularly the SS middle-tier leadership, proved necessary to move forward various measures calculated to make the best use of foreign volunteer soldiers.

With the exception of the Spanish volunteers, the German recruiting apparatus began to take a larger share of responsibility for finding and inducting foreign volunteers. Recruiting stations of the Waffen-SS multiplied and spread over the major Western European cities. The agreement with the Labor and Armaments Ministries was exploited to recruit French, Belgian, and Dutch volunteers in greater numbers. In many respects, these recruiting measures signified recognition by the Germans that the value of the collaborationist parties and their leaders had reached an end.

Apparently, once the collaborationist parties had made their initial calls for volunteers for the Army or SS, the well had dried up. The collaborationist leaders had failed to expand their movements and held little power of persuasion over the general populace. With no advantage remaining to dealing through the collaborationists, the German tendency was to take direct charge.

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Himmler wrote Dr. Best in Denmark that Frits Clausen should cease to complain about the disbanding of the *Freikorps*. All the former legions had been brought into the SS *Nordland* Division for practical and military reasons. It was not technically an SS division, as the men wore no SS runes on their collars. The regimental names—Denmark, Nederland, and Norge—corresponded to the nationality of the legion they absorbed. As to the Danes fielding their own national unit—an apparent desire of Clausen's—Himmler stated, "it depends upon him when the Grenadier Regiment Danmark becomes a Danmark Division." Later, the SS leadership would recommend disbanding the peacetime Danish Army to influence more Danish officers toward service in the SS. By 1944, the Germans cared so little for the Danish Nazi Party that Berger enlisted most of its paramilitary *Schallburg Korps* into the Waffen-SS. [62](#)

In Norway, these German policies failed to generate any real popular support. SS recruiting, independent of the Quisling Party, did not prove effective. Although numbers of skiers for SS Nord, sailors for the German Navy, and local guard personnel could be found, the turnout of Norwegian volunteers for the SS *Norge* Regiment remained disappointingly low. Apparently, Norwegians clung most stubbornly to the notion of national units. A letter from a returning SS *Nordland* veteran reported great disillusionment among his countrymen. Norwegians had enlisted to fight for Norway on a contract basis, not to fight for Germany throughout the war's duration. Norwegian volunteers had been spread too thinly in "German" units. "Most would fight better when they stand alone as Norwegians and go where the Germans indicate," he stated. He cautioned the Germans to win them over with good will and equity, not by trying to convert them to the National Socialist way and by saying Germany was Norway's sole friend. [63](#)

An anonymous memo in the SS files on Norway, obviously written late in the war, lamented, "we can expect no more volunteers or workers." It went on to suggest a formal peace with autonomy for Norway to make an example of Germanic solidarity and to promote pro-German feelings. "A peace treaty in some form would be fundamental to the resumption of recruiting." The author enthusiastically foresaw 10,000 seamen for the Navy and two to four divisions for the front being gained in this way. [64](#)

Volunteers did prove more plentiful outside of Scandinavia, however, and significantly larger numbers of Frenchmen, Belgians, and Dutch reported to the SS recruiters in both native cities and German factories. Volunteers in this period probably presented a different character than those in the first wave of 1941. The volunteers of 1943 did not feel any political motivation to join the German forces, as the collaborationist parties had all failed to gain public recognition or wholesale German support by that time. On the other hand, the resistance movements had gained strength by 1943, and pro-German, anti-communist men may have felt increasingly uncomfortable in their homelands. The material conditions of life in occupied Europe (except Scandinavia) clearly had deteriorated, making service in German factories or the German military somewhat appealing. Finally, there can be no doubt as to the manifest boredom many experienced in occupied Western Europe. This factor may have proven a particularly strong motivation among the demobilized and imprisoned soldiers and officers of the French, Belgian, and Dutch Armies. One of the major aims of political collaboration with occupation authorities lay in the freeing of the prisoners of war retained by the Germans. Many of the foreign labor recruitment programs hinged upon agreements for compensatory release of prisoners of war. For instance, Philippe Burrin credits the Vichy regime with facilitating the release of 220,000 of the 600,000 French prisoners returned from the German camps (of 1.5 million originally taken), with 90,000 specifically released under the labor rel eve. Many to whom the idea of fighting the Soviet Union held some political appeal saw fit to leave POW camps or the jobs they had found after the French Army had demobilized. [65](#)

German propaganda efforts to enhance the image of foreign volunteers in the Wehrmacht and to promote notions of Germanic solidarity had improved considerably by 1943 as well. Personal testimonials in the form of published letters and pamphlets emerged from the presses, as did narratives of combat by foreign volunteer units. German radio communiqu es, weekly newsreels, and news magazines featured items on foreign volunteer contingents. This media exposure augmented recruiting posters and other publicity forms, and helped keep volunteer recruiting in the public eye. [66](#)

80

Regardless of the ebb and flow of recruiting, though, the primary change in German employment of foreign volunteers came in the organization and equipment of the units themselves. Although the German Army continued to equip and operate foreign units as second-rate or auxiliary forces, the Waffen-SS units fielded in 1943 bore little resemblance to the legions of 1941. Training improved as well, with considerable use being made of officer cadet training for foreign officers, regardless of prior experience. Finally, by 1943 the weaponry provided for the volunteer units of the Waffen-SS was indistinguishable from that given to the best German SS units, with the exception of tanks and self-propelled heavy artillery. These items, in critical shortage throughout the war, reached only a score of Army divisions and the half-dozen "elite" divisions of the Waffen-SS (including *SS Wiking*). In the III Germanic SS Corps and the SS assault brigades, first-line anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, including the redoubtable 88-mm guns, as well as plentiful machine guns, mortars, and infantry cannon reached the hands of foreign volunteer troops. The SS even attached units of assault guns, slightly less valuable than tanks, within the Walloon and Flemish assault brigades.



Assault Gun
StG IIIG

The weapons and training invested in the new wave of volunteer units allowed the Germans to treat them as first-line combat units and deploy them accordingly. All of the Western European volunteer formations that were formed in 1943 entered the front lines in early 1944. The Germanic Corps anchored the flank of Army Group North in an admittedly quiet sector, but performed well in the withdrawal to the Narva position and the heavy defensive fighting involved. The three assault brigades of Walloons, Flemish, and Frenchmen were attached to the elite *SS Wiking* and *SS Das Reich* and second-line *SS Horst Wessel* Divisions respectively and fought conspicuously well in difficult combat actions with those divisions. Finally, the Norwegian ski battalion performed well in

its specialized role with SS Nord in the polar region.

None of these demanding actions could have been handled by the weak, loosely knit and ill-prepared legions of 1941-42. On paper, the Germans had succeeded in expanding their one mixed SS division of 1941 (*Wiking*) to a full field corps of two and one-half divisions (*Wiking, Nordland, Nederland*). The erstwhile legions of the Army and SS had become either mixed regiments within *SS Nordland* or modern SS assault brigades. The Army still operated the Spanish Division and French LVF under original circumstances, but it otherwise slowly devolved the responsibility for foreign units to the SS.

These "paper" results concealed serious shortages in manpower and recruiting, which nearly collapsed in Scandinavia; the proportion of Germanic volunteers in the two and one-half Divisions of the original Germanic Corps proved to be about twenty-five percent instead of the desired fifty percent. Nevertheless, the combat potential and overall quality of the Germanic Waffen-SS units increased markedly over the 1941 standard.

The year 1944 proved disastrous for German fortunes and overall strategy, and as the volunteer formations fell back on the front or withdrew for refurbishing, yet another reorganization of Western volunteers was in the offing, and yet another "wave" of units would be fielded. These foreign volunteers participated in every detail of the final German *Götterdämmerung*.

Notes:

Note 1: Himmler order 3/11/41, in Kurt G. Klietmann, *Die Waffen-SS - eine Dokumentation* (Osnabrück: Munin, 1965), 477-81. [Back.](#)

Note 2: Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, trans. Richard Barry (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970), 476; George H. Stein, *The Waffen-SS: Hitler's Elite Guard at War 1939-1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 154-55. [Back.](#)

Note 3: Berger letter 9/2/42, T175/109/2633657-62. [Back.](#)

Note 4: Himmler order 6/12/42, T175/166/2699094-95. Cf., T175/29/2535696, 2535688-93 and 17/2520978; Jüttner letter 3/2/43, T175/175/2760406-12, concludes "... it is therefore an offense to call these men 'gypsies' and 'criminals.'" [Back.](#)

Note 5: Himmler letters, 29/5/42, 31/1/43 and 1/3/43, T175/66/2582573, 2582499-502 and 2582416-7. [Back.](#)

Note 6: Richard Schultze-Kossens, *Militärischer Führernachwuchs der Waffen-SS: die Junkerschulen* (Osnabrück: Munin, 1982), 46. Schulze-Kossens, the last Commandant of Bad Tölz, estimated 3000 foreign officers gained SS rank without SS training (30). [Back.](#)

Note 7: Schulze-Kossens, *Militärischer Führernachwuchs*, 56-58. The first four classes of 1943 had 278, 243, 177, and 184 Germanic cadets, including large numbers of Estonians. There also existed bureaucratic problems for the volunteer program in the form of the personal rivalry between Gottlob Berger, chief of the SS Main Office, and Hans Jüttner, head of the SS Operations Staff. The latter controlled the training, organization, and operational employment of SS units. Jüttner tended to obstruct Berger by advocating quality over quantity in SS formations. The frequent discord in the areas of recruiting, training, and operations contributed to the stagnation of the volunteer program. Bernd Wegner, "Auf dem Wege zur pangermanischen Armee," *MGM* 28 (1980): 106-07. [Back.](#)

Note 8: Labor Ministry letter, 27/4/43, T175/59/2574728; Berger letter, 28/7/43, T175/

59/2574712; Berger letter 21/8/43, T175/59/2574773. [Back.](#)

Note 9: Reports of SS Recruiting Office "West," T175/15/2518296-320; 160/2691850ff. Cf. Analysis of 3000 letters of West European workers read by Frankfurt SS office, 1-19 July 1943, T175/70/2546746-63. [Back.](#)

Note 10: DEV, 28/33/7/2; Emilio Esteban-Infantes, *La División Azul* (Barcelona: Editorial AHR, 1956), 25; María Lothano Cabo interview, Madrid, 20/3/74. It should be noted that the Spanish Division received on 3 and 18 September a few hundred men from Spain as replacements for those men sent home from Grafenwöhr as sick or disabled. There were also several accidental deaths during the early movement and training phases. DEV, 28/1/16/3. [Back.](#)

Note 11: In particular see the "Memoria: Sobre la influencia de las épocas de lluvias, frios y deshielo en los servicios de guerra en la campaña 1941-42 en Rusia," a 29-page staff study covering climate effects on terrain, unit types, operations, and rear area services with attached charts and graphs, XXXVIII Corps, T314/903/842-72; DEV, 28/33/3/1-6; García Rebull and Emilio Esteban-Infantes interviews. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Rafael Ibáñez Hernández, "Españoles en las trincheras: la División Azul," in *Españoles en la II Guerra Mundial, el frente del Este*, ed. Ricardo Recio Cardona (Madrid, Ediciones Vandalia, 1999), 68-69; García Rebull and Gonzales Saez interviews. [Back.](#)

Note 13: ose Díaz de Villegas, *La División Azul en Línea* (Barcelona: Ediciones Acervo, 1967), 188; Gonzales Martinez, *Alas Españoles Sobre Moscú* (Madrid: Editorial Aeronautica, 1955), 172-74. Especially useful is the personnel and correspondence file of Lt. Col. Luís Zanon Andalus, DEV personnel record #25675, Archivo de la Milicia Nacional (now in Archivo Militar, Guadalajara). [Back.](#)

Note 14: DEV, 28/18/11/1. Esteban-Infantes, *División Azul*, 105-06; Gonzales Saez, Garcia Rebull, and Emilio Esteban-Infantes interviews. [Back.](#)

Note 15: Himmler memo 29/9/42, T175/109/2633371. Cf. Jüttner order 28/8/42, T175/109/2633385 (not executed). [Back.](#)

Note 16: Wegner, "Auf dem Wege," 108. [Back.](#)

Note 17: Riedwig letter, 2/9/42 and Steiner letter 16/9/42 in Wegner, "Auf dem Wege," 114-16. [Back.](#)

Note 18: Himmler memo 3/3/43, T175/111/2635157-62; Himmler letter 18/3/43, T175/74/2592299-302; Berger letter 10/2/43, T175/59/2574736-42; Wegner, "Auf dem Wege," 116-21. Himmler had originally proposed the name SS *Waranger* for the new division, symbolizing what he thought were the traditional forefathers of contemporary Danish, Dutch, Finnish, Flemish, Norwegian, Swedish, and Swiss cultures. [Back.](#)

Note 19: Seyss-Inquart letter, 9/4/43, T175/74/2592576-7; Berger letter, 7/5/43, T175/111/2635328; Wegner, "Auf dem Wege," 109-10; Klietmann, *Die Waffen-SS*, 237-41. [Back.](#)

Note 20: III SS Armored Corps, One-year operations report, 31/3/44, T354/120/3754140ff; Wegner, "Auf dem Wege," 129-30. [Back.](#)

Note 21: O. Krabbe, *Danske Soldaten I kamp pa Østfronten 1941-45* (Odense: Universitetsforlag, 1978), 127. Peter Strassner reprinted July/August 1944 strength figures for SS *Wiking*: 8892 Germans, 715 Volksdeutsch, 130 Dutch, 177 Danes, 619 Flemish, 664 Estonians, 47 Norwegians, 5 Swedes, and 2 Finns; *Europäische Freiwillige*, 3rd Edition

(Osnabrück: Munin, 1977). [Back.](#)

Note 22: III Corps report, 31/3/44, T354/120/3754140ff; Wegner, "Auf dem Wege," 111. [Back.](#)

Note 23: Wilhelm Tieke, *Tragödie um die Treue*, 3rd Edition (Osnabrück: Munin, 1981), 9-10; Krabbe, *Danske Soldaten*, 143. [Back.](#)

Note 24: Because of the paucity of mechanized equipment in Steiner's force, one might conclude that the III SS Corps was neither Germanic, Armored, nor a Corps! N. In't Veld, *De SS en Nederland* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 1521. [Back.](#)

Note 25: III Corps report, 31/3/44, T354/120/3753892-914. [Back.](#)

Note 26: Ibid. [Back.](#)

Note 27: Krabbe, *Danske Soldaten*, 163-70; Tieke, *Tragödie*, 32-57; Earl Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1968), 258. [Back.](#)

Note 28: Grasser letter in Steiner file, BDC; Tieke, *Tragödie*, 57-67; Krabbe, *Danske Soldaten*, 177. [Back.](#)

Note 29: III Corps report, 31/3/44, T354/120/3754140ff; interview with Elo Jorgenson, Copenhagen, 24 May 1982. [Back.](#)

Note 30: Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin*, 403-9; Krabbe, *Danske Soldaten*, 196-201. During this phase the *Nordland* Division blocked a potentially catastrophic Soviet breakthrough toward Riga on 22 September. [Back.](#)

Note 31: Wegner, "Auf dem Wege," 111; Himmler memo 3/3/43, T175/111/2635157-62; Berger letter 10/2/43, T175/59/2574736-42. [Back.](#)

Note 32: Jüttner letter 31/4/43, T175/111/2635303, including table of organization. In October, the Flemish unit was redesignated the 5th SS Assault Brigade *Langemarck*. Vierendeels estimates the strength of the brigade at 2000 officers and men initially; Franz Vierendeels, *Vlamingen aan het Ost front*, 2 vols. (Antwerp: St. Maartensfond, 1973), 2:49. [Back.](#)

Note 33: Fourth Panzer Army, T313/1399/8691142ff; LIX Corps, T314/1524/1020-23; Schellong file, BDC; Vierendeels, *Vlamingen*, 2:80-97. [Back.](#)

Note 34: Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin*, 276-82; Jüttner letter 29/4/44 reprinted in Vierendeels, *Vlamingen*, 2:106-07. [Back.](#)

Note 35: Klietmann, *Die Waffen-SS*, 509. [Back.](#)

Note 36: Vierendeels, *Vlamingen*, 2:120-36. [Back.](#)

Note 37: Himmler letter 12/12/42, T175/124/2598758; Robert Aron, *The Vichy Regime 1940-44* (Boston: G. P. Putnam, 1958), 450-51. [Back.](#)

Note 38: Eberhard Jäckel, *Frankreich in Hitlers Europa* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966), 301-02; Bertram M. Gordon, *Collaboration in France during the Second World War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Press, 1980), 266. Philippe Burrin, *France under the Germans: Collaboration and Compromise* (New York: New Press, 1996), 434-5, states that postal censors reported that most recruits by the first half of 1944 were motivated by a lust for adventure, material needs, and failed romances, with only a minority showing political interests. For a facsimile of the Vichy proclamation, see Jean Mabire, *La Brigade Frankreich* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), Appendix. [Back.](#)

Note 39: Jüttner order 16/9/43, T175/111/2635147; Klietmann, *Die Waffen-SS*, 518; Schulze-Kossens, *Militärischer Führernachwuchs*, 57-58. Course convening order 26/1/44 in Pierre Cance file, BDC. A detailed history of the Sennheim (Alsace) training complex, where other foreign contingents trained as well, is Henri Mounine, Cernay 40-45: *Les SS-Ausbildungslager de Sennheim*. (Ostwald: Editions du Polygone, 1999). Hersche, born in Zurich in 1889, demonstrates the transparent Swiss presence in the Waffen-SS. A major in the Swiss Army (1909-1935), he entered the Waffen-SS rolls on New Years' Day, 1942, was made an SS major on February 19, and won promotion to SS Lieutenant colonel on 21 June, 1944. He seems to have served only in the Berlin staff and training commands, probably because of his languages; Hersche file, BDC. [Back.](#)

Note 40: Rouff letter 20/7/44, T175/166/2699113-14; Gamory took command at 59 years of age. Married, with no children, and a Doriot party member, he received consistently good evaluations from the Germans; Gamory File, BDC. The choice of the SS *Horst Wessel* Division proves of interest, as it formed on 25 January 1944 from the former 1st SS Infantry Brigade (motorized), which spent most of its operational life as part of the rear area security forces, including in the Orel-Mogilev zone where the LVF practiced that particular trade. It never received its allocation of vehicles and generally fought in nominal brigade strength; Rolf Michaelis, *Die Panzergrenadier Divisionen der Waffen-SS* (Erlangen: Michealis-Verlag, 1996), 194-233. [Back.](#)

Note 41: Letter, Henri Fenet to author, 25/3/82; Fenet interview, Paris, 3/6/82; Gordon, *Collaboration in France during the Second World War*, 270-75. According to Burrin, the collaborationist elite despised mass movements and military mobilizations, but joining the Waffen-SS allowed them to fantasize themselves as a "heroic aristocracy," thus fitting Bernd Wegner's description of the SS order (France under the Germans, 421). [Back.](#)

Note 42: Merglen, "Soldats francais," 78; Mabire, *La Brigade Frankreich*, 315-454, passim; Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin*, 331. Burrin cites an Abetz report from 14/6/44 of roughly 3000 recruits obtained (France under the Germans, 435). [Back.](#)

Note 43: Berger letter 5/1/43, T175/80/2600745; Degrelle interview, Madrid, 8/6/82. Conway's excellent analysis concludes that this venture by Degrelle signaled a final rupture with his own Rexist party and Belgian politics, and that Degrelle became "... a solitary adventurer seeking crumbs of prestige and power amidst the ruins of the besieged Reich" (*Collaboration in Belgium*, 175, 233). [Back.](#)

Note 44: Himmler letter 24/5/43, T175/53/2567726-30. [Back.](#)

Note 45: Jüttner order 3/7/43, T175/111/2635315; letter 1/7/43, T175/80/2600715-31. Cf. Himmler letter on racial and military quality of Walloon trainees at Meseritz, T175/53/2567730. Organizational details are in de Goy, "Legion Belge Wallonie," 40-41. [Back.](#)

Note 46: Degrelle letter 25/12/44, T77/1423/1421-23. At approximately this point, Degrelle escaped scrutiny by the police and occupation authorities over the 'suicide' of his wife's lover, a German Luftwaffe officer, found in the street near Degrelle's house with "...bullet wounds to the head and heart..." One can only speculate on the degree to which Degrelle fell ever deeper into an increasingly pro-German collaborationist mindset. See Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 190-91. [Back.](#)

Note 47: Degrelle, *Die verlorene Legion* (Oldendorf: Schütz, 1972)326; de Goy, "Legion Belge Wallonie," 41. Although Walloon veterans speak of the purity of the Walloon Brigade, the assault gun company accompanying the brigade to SS *Wiking* came from Assault Gun Battalion 4 of the SS Police Division; Husemann, *Die guten Glauben waren*, 2: 229. On the other hand, since French remained the language of command in the assault brigade, this may represent a transfer of equipment and cadre alone. [Back.](#)

Note 48: De Goy, "Legion Belge Wallonie," 41-44. [Back.](#)

Note 49: Ibid., 47-51. [Back.](#)

Note 50: Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin*, 226-33. [Back.](#)

Note 51: De Goy, "Legion Belge Wallonie," 64-66. Lippert had been promoted to lieutenant colonel in early February. [Back.](#)

Note 52: Ibid., 68. Ziemke notes the poor psychological state of the survivors, despite their good physical condition (*Stalingrad to Berlin*, 238). [Back.](#)

Note 53: Degrelle speeches, 23/2/44 and 27/2/44, Degrelle clipping file. Wiener Library Biographical Archive G15, Reel 10, Item 217; Degrelle interview. [Back.](#)

Note 54: De Goy, "Legion Belge Wallonie," 75; Vierendeels interview. [Back.](#)

Note 55: De Goy, "Legion Belge Wallonie," 75-76; Fernand Kaisergruber interview, Brussels, 23/5/82; Lippert letter 1/12/43, copy in possession of Fernand Kaisergruber. Tchekhoff died in Argentina in 1979. Hellebaut died in Brussels in 1983. [Back.](#)

Note 56: De Goy, "Legion Belge Wallonie," 69-70. [Back.](#)

Note 57: Ibid., 77-78; Gillis obituary, *Der Freiwillige* (May 1977): 25. Degrelle stated that he lost eighty percent of his battalion, but 215 returned to the Walloon Brigade at Breslau (*Die verlorene Legion*, 375; de Goy, "Legion Belge Wallonie," 76) [Back.](#)

Note 58: Berger letter 16/10/42, T175/66/2582542; Frode Halle, "Fra Finland til Kaukasus," *Der Freiwillige* 28 (July/August 1982): 19; (September 1982): 7-10; Stockholm Legation dispatch 2694, 17/1/44, Record Group 226, Document 62769, OSS Files. [Back.](#)

Note 59: Berger letter 13/4/43; Himmler letter 4/43; Quist File, BDC. Halle mentions Norwegian complaints of mixed-up orders stemming from German-Norwegian translation problems; *Der Freiwillige* (September 1982): 10. [Back.](#)

Note 60: Halle, *Der Freiwillige* (November 1982): 14-17; (December 1982): 8-10. The responsibility for recruitment of replacements for the ski battalion was transferred to the SS Ordnungspolizei by Himmler's order 9/8/43, T175/66/2582461. [Back.](#)

Note 61: Halle, *Der Freiwillige* (February 1983): 7; Staff Company, Ski Battalion Norge, T354/145/3785796-991, passim. For a personal memoir, see Kaare Söberg letter, *Der Freiwillige* 27 (July/August 1981): 24. [Back.](#)

Note 62: Himmler letter 17/4/43, T175/22/2527574-5; Berger letter 27/5/43, T175/17/2521029-30; Berger letter 6/6/44, T175/120/2656984, reported enlisting 350 of 400 men of the Schallburg Corps. [Back.](#)

Note 63: Per Imerslund letter, undated (c. 1943), T175/109/2633669; Terboven report 4/10/44, T175/66/2582381-2. [Back.](#)

Note 64: Unsigned and undated memo, T175/66/2582393. [Back.](#)

Note 65: These observations stem from conversations and correspondence with foreign volunteers; particularly useful were: Fenet interview, Andre Dedouge interview, Brussels, 23/5/82; and Abel Chapy, letter to author 17/2/82. Burrin, *France under the Germans*, 143. [Back.](#)

Note 66: For example, A. N. Petersen, *Dansk Daad paa Ostfronter* (Copenhagen: n.p.,

1943); K. B. Martinsen, *Frikorps Danmarks Kamp* (n.p., 1944; Xerox in Royal Army Library, Copenhagen); J. B. Van Heutsz, *Wiking door Rusland* (Amsterdam: Storm, 1942); and *Aufbruch: Briefe von germanischen Freiwilligen der SS Division Wiking* (Berlin: Nibelungen, 1943). [Back](#).

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