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German troops and the war against civilians

The partisan war in Italy in 1944 was a multi faceted war. On the backdrop of Allied and German troops fighting at the front, a partisan war broke out in the rear areas, which, according to Claudio Pavone was by itself a complex of three wars in one (a patriotic liberation war of the partisans against German troops, a class war fought by mostly communist partisans against the bourgeoisie and a civil war between Anti Fascists and Fascists. German warfare as well was embedded in the complexities of this multi faceted conflict: while fightings at the front – apart from occasional killings of POW's – were usually conducted according to the general rules of the laws of war, anti-partisan actions quickly degenerated into indiscriminate massacres, with several thousands of innocent civilians killed. During their retreat through southern Italy in autumn 1943 many German units began to treat Italian civilians as the enemy, to kill them in reprisals and to loot their property. When in early 1944 partisan activity grew stronger and began to interfere with German military operations, killing of civilians in partisan controlled areas also increased. Even more devastating for the population were massacres during the German retreat through central Italy. As many as 6000 civilians were killed between Cassino and the Gothic Line in the Summer of 1944. However, there was no one single experience of mass violence in Italy. Its intensity varied considerably according to a set of different factors. Most of the violence took place at the front and was conducted mostly by front-line troops. Although all kinds of military units were deeply involved, the main theatres of indiscriminate atrocities were the operational areas of Nazi elite units such as the Hermann Göring Panzerdivision and the 16th SS-Panzer Grenadier Division „Reichsführer-SS“.

My talk will draw on the results of my research on this subject and focus on the atrocities which occurred in Central Italy in the summer of 1944. Many studies have investigated German warfare and atrocities in the Second World War at length. Yet many questions regarding atrocities by front-line troops have not been sufficiently answered to date. We still know very little about the perpetrators of these „ordinary massacres“. Historians in the area of perpetrators research (Täterforschung) have long focussed on the perpetrators of the Holocaust and in the course of the last two decades have produced a wealth of studies on SS, SD and police organisations. Yet we still know too little about units involved in war crimes against armed and unarmed civilians in occupied countries and their commanders. How is it to explain that regular army units which considered themselves deeply rooted in the traditions of the Prussian Soldatentum at some point during their military history had no restraints in killing obviously innocent

women and children? Was the so-called Osterfahung of many units a factor for the occurrence of atrocities? Massacres were not merely accidental or the unfortunate outcome of an unlawful warfare imposed on the Wehrmacht by the partisans themselves and by the recklessness of the Allied Command who supported them, as German officials tried to contend for decades after the war. Can we find a general trend in the German army towards punishing the population instead for partisan activities? Although situational factors like military crisis, retreats and fear of attacks by the partisans had a decisive effect on unit's behaviour, ideologization and brutalization could make a difference in regard to the intensity and brutality of the German reprisal.