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TASKED WITH REPRESSION:
THE MEN OF THE *SS-POLIZEI-REGIMENT BOZEN*

1. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT AND AIMS OF THE STUDY¹

The SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen in the Historiography

Compared with the many units of the *Ordnungspolizei* (Orpo, Order Police) that served in Italy between 1943 and 1945, the *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* undoubtedly occupies a prominent place in Italian historiography and public debate. This is due above all to the involvement of one of its companies in the via Rasella attack, which was followed by the reprisal at the Fosse Ardeatine². That episode has, in many respects, become emblematic of Italy's so-called "divided memories", particularly in South Tyrol, where a plaque commemorating the «victims of a treacherous attack», installed by the *Kameradenkreis Südtirol der ehemaligen Gebirgstruppen* at the military cemetery of Sankt Jakob, bore witness as early as the 1980s to a still deeply fractured commemorative landscape. More recently, the personal composition of the regiment – whose members were described by the President of the Italian Senate, Ignazio La Russa, as a «band of semi-retired reservists» – has been politically instrumentalized in yet another attempt to delegitimize the action carried out by the GAP in Rome on 23 March 1944. Unsurprisingly, these remarks provoked widespread protest, yet the debate largely remained at the political level. Even interventions by historians have highlighted the lack of systematic research capable and willing of exploring not only the operational history of the regiment, but also the profiles of its members, which remain only sketchily reconstructed.

The unit has therefore long been the object of polemics, apologetic narratives, and recriminations, but has rarely been subjected to a comprehensive analysis situated within a broader and more articulated framework, as recently observed by Lutz Klinkhammer³. As a matter of fact, such an undertaking is inherently complex. The operational and personnel sources are highly fragmented, and the three battalions that composed the regiment were employed in markedly different contexts. Within the framework of passive defense and active anti-partisan warfare, they effectively fought three distinct wars, differing in tactics, adversaries, and operational environments – a point to which this study will return. Taken as a whole, the *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* constituted a central pillar in the repression of the Italian and Yugoslav Resistance movements, both in terms of temporal continuity and operational deployment. The *I. and II. Bataillon* played key roles in repression in the *Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland* (OZAK,

¹ This paper constitutes an expanded English-language version of E. Di Fonzo, *L'SS-Polizei Regiment Bozen: note per una biografia collettiva*, "Geschichte und Region/Storia e regione, n. 1 (2025), pp.179-208.

² See, among others, J. Staron, *Fosse Ardeatine und Marzabotto: deutsche Kriegsverbrechen und Resistenza. Geschichte und nationale Mythenbildung in Deutschland und Italien (1944-1999)*, Ferdinand Schöningh, Paderborn 2002; M. Portelli, *L'ordine è già stato eseguito. Roma, le Fosse Ardeatine, la memoria*, Donzelli, Roma 1999; L. Vianini, *Via Rasella in der Südtiroler Medienberichterstattung*, Universität Wien, Wien 2020.

³ L. Klinkhammer and M. Portelli, *La fiera delle falsità. Via Rasella, le Fosse Ardeatine, la distorsione della memoria*, Donzelli, Roma 2024, pp. 115-116.

Operational Zone Adriatic Coast) and in the province of Belluno respectively, while from the summer of 1944 onwards the *III. Bataillon*, having recovered from a series of severe setbacks, gradually came to be regarded as a reliable unit by the police leadership, and was first deployed in Piedmont and later in the *Operationszone Alpenvorland* (OZAV, Operational Zone of the Alpine Foothills).

Despite the considerable public and political attention devoted to the regiment, scholarly approaches have often relied more heavily on oral history⁴ than on military and police documentation, with repercussions both for the operational analysis and for the reconstruction of personnel profiles – an essential dimension in the study of any military or police formation. This is all the more surprising, especially considering that a substantial portion of the German police sources had already been identified by the historian Giovanna Padovani as early as 1982⁵. The only partially comprehensive reconstruction of the regiment's deployment based on contemporary documents has been offered by Wolfgang Curilla, while studies by Stefano Di Giusto and Tommaso Chiussi have clarified the employment of *I./SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* in the OZAK⁶. Significant gaps remain, however, with regard to the other two battalions, despite their frequent appearance in local studies and in the vast literature on the Fosse Ardeatine.

Approach and Aims of the Study

Given the state of the available sources, the importance of the regiment within the broader strategy pursued by the German police apparatus in Italy, and the markedly heterogeneous employment of its three battalions, it would be misleading to attempt here a comprehensive reconstruction of the unit and its repressive trajectory – an undertaking better suited to a dedicated monograph. This study, instead, focuses on a central yet still neglected aspect: the regiment's personnel composition. Its aim is to outline a collective biography of the men who served in *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen*⁷. This contribution thus stands at the intersection of two historiographical fields. On the one hand, it engages with a well-developed strand of research – particularly in Germany – that has made the Orpo a privileged object of study within scholarship on National Socialism and its crimes⁸. On the other, it contributes to the extensive historiography on the German occupation of Italy, within which the Order Police as a whole has been marginalised.

The methodological approach adopted here consists of a broad-spectrum analysis of the personnel who served in the regiment, ranging from the regimental command staff to the South Tyrolean recruits. With regard to the officer corps, a predominantly qualitative perspective is employed, offering, wherever possible, detailed biographical sketches. In several cases, this allows for a “history from below” approach also to the issue of continuity in policing across different political systems and regime changes. For the bulk of the South Tyrolean personnel and for the German cadres in subordinate positions – above all NCOs – the scope of investigation is heavily constrained by the state of the sources. This has necessitated the use of distinctly quantitative analytical tools, with the aim of providing as complete and representative a picture as possible.

⁴ See C. von Hartungen *et alii*, *Die Südtiroler Polizeiregimenter 1934-1945*, “Der Schlern. Monatszeitschrift für südtiroler Landeskunde”, n. 10 (1981), pp. 494-516; U. Gandini, *Quelli di Via Rasella. La storia dei sudtirolesi che subirono l'attentato del 23 marzo 1944 a Roma*, Alto Adige, Bozen 1979; H. Degle, *Erlebte Geschichte: Südtiroler Zeitzeugen erzählen 1918-1945*, Athesia, Bozen 2009.

⁵ G. Padovani, *Fondo d'archivio: la polizia tedesca nei territori italiani annessi e occupati*, “Protagonisti”, n. 3 (1982), pp. 27-52.

⁶ See W. Curilla, *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei im westlichen Europa 1940-1945*, Ferdinand Schöningh, Leiden 2020, pp. 617-626; S. Di Giusto, *Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland: Udine, Gorizia, Trieste, Pola, Fiume e Lubiana durante l'occupazione tedesca, 1943-1945*, IFSML, Udine 2005; T. Chiussi and S. Di Giusto, *Globocnik's Men in Italy, 1943-45. Abteilung R and the SS-Wachmannschaften of the Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland*, Schiffer Publishing, Atglen 2017. It is also appropriate to recall Chiussi's contribution on the Sappada area, which addresses important issues relating to the deployment of *III. Bataillon* in the Cadore region from late autumn 1944 onward. See T. Chiussi, *I reparti della Ordnungspolizei a Sappada*, “Archivio Trentino”, n. 1 (2020), pp. 193-240.

⁷ W.H. Schröder, *Kollektive Biographien in der historischen Sozialforschung: Eine Einführung*, in: *Lebenslauf und Gesellschaft. Zum Einsatz von kollektiven Biographien in der historischen Sozialforschung*, (edited by) id., Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1985, pp. 7-17.

⁸ For an up-to-date overview of current scholarship on the subject, see J.H. Issinger, *Militärische Organisationskultur im Nationalsozialismus. Das Reserve-Polizeibataillon 61 und der Zweite Weltkrieg in Osteuropa*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2022, pp. 11-26.

The case of *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* offers a particularly revealing lens through which to examine the Orpo personnel in the final phase of the war. Owing to its composition, the regiment can be considered representative of a substantial proportion of units formed from “foreign” recruits or *Volksdeutsche*. Such formations constituted a fundamental component of the Orpo’s order of battle during the last two years of the conflict, even though the *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* also displayed specific features linked to the crisis-ridden circumstances of its formation in late summer 1943, as will be discussed below.

Sources

As briefly mentioned above, the sources used in this study are highly heterogeneous, which has necessitated a differentiated approach to constructing the collective biography. While the cross-referencing of personnel files, decoration recommendations, and several denazification proceedings relating to officers has made it possible to adopt a largely qualitative perspective for this group, the same cannot be said for a substantial portion of the NCOs and, above all, for the rank and file. Their analysis has therefore necessarily relied to a considerable extent on quantitative methods. On the one hand, the personal Orpo files of the South Tyroleans who served in the regiment are not available. On the other, the extant decoration proposals focus almost exclusively on individual acts of “heroism” and convey scant information that would allow the analytical scope to be extended toward more subjective dimensions. Likewise, the files produced by the Bozen *Questura* (provincial police headquarters) in the postwar period concerning former members of the regiment classified as “subversives” by the Italian authorities – although extremely rich and detailed – relate to a small minority and cannot methodologically be regarded as representative.

Overall, the only broad and homogeneous documentary corpus identified consists of the *fogli matricolari* (military service records) compiled during service in the Italian armed forces in the 1920s and 1930s. These sources are more suitable for quantitative analysis, yet they remain essential for outlining the varied social and military background of these men. The reconstruction of the “mental framework” of these policemen therefore remains, at present, a *desideratum* of research. Filling this gap would require a substantial body of ego-documents – letters, postwar statements, diaries, and memoirs – which are currently unavailable.

2. SOUTH TYROLEANS AND THE *SS-POLIZEI-REGIMENT BOZEN* WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF ORPO FORCES IN ITALY

The Regiment in the General Context

A first observation to be made when examining the regiment is of a strictly quantitative nature. Among the police units deployed in Italy, the *Polizei-Regiment Südtirol* – soon renamed “Bozen” – maintained, over the long term, remarkably substantial manpower levels. Between February and November 1944, its average strength stood at approximately 2,313 men. A comparison with *SS-Polizei-Regiment 15* – arguably the most important police unit deployed south of the Alps – reveals a clear difference, as during the same period the latter averaged approximately 2,095 men⁹. Even this initial quantitative glance highlights how the new regiment represented, from the outset, a welcome reinforcement for the Nazi authorities. In the immediate aftermath of the German penetration into the peninsula, the forces available to the *Befehlshaber der Ordnungspolizei* (BdO, Commander of the Orpo), *Generalleutnant der Polizei* Jürgen von Kamptz, were extremely limited, essentially amounting to only two battalions of *SS-Polizei-Regiment 15*. This was clearly insufficient in view of the tasks that would fall to the BdO and the vastness of the

⁹ Bundesarchiv Berlin (BArch), R19/136. Strength reports of Orpo units in Italy.

newly occupied territory. There were, at that stage, no *Gendarmerie* forces available – indispensable in any operational theater for ensuring close territorial control and coordinating police cooperation with collaborationist forces at the local level. The same applied to additional *Schutzpolizei* battalions, the formations most frequently used in repression. Although such units would gradually arrive in the following months, they remained chronically insufficient in relation to the demands placed upon them. By the summer of 1943, it had thus already become evident that the existing Orpo forces would not suffice to manage a new theater of operations. The occupation authorities would therefore have to rely, on the one hand, on cooperation with the police bodies of the reconstituted Fascist state and, on the other, on the creation of new units on Italian soil. These assessments, it is worth stressing, were initially based on the expectation of routine policing duties in an occupied territory; the emergence of a Resistance movement as strong and determined as the Italian one had not yet been anticipated.

Within this context of severe manpower shortages facing the German police authorities – an essential factor in asserting professional competence and negotiating room for manoeuvre within the polycratic system of National Socialist occupation – the province of Bozen effectively remained the main recruitment reservoir for the Orpo in occupied Italy until the final collapse. As a matter of fact, thousands of residents had opted for German citizenship without emigrating, and some were liable for service in the German armed forces under the Italo-German agreements of August 1941¹⁰. Moreover, beginning in November 1943, decrees issued by *Gauleiter* Franz Hofer progressively expanded the pool of conscripts, and by January 1944 included the cohorts born between 1894 and 1926, without distinction between *Optanten* and *Dableiber* – that is, between those who had opted for Reich citizenship in 1939 and those who retained the Italian one. An initial “numerical victory” for the BdO was represented by the subordination of the *Südtiroler Ordnungsdienst* (SOD, South Tyrolean Order Service) to the Orpo. On paper, this meant thousands of additional men in the order of battle. In practice, however, the SOD amounted to little more than an improvised and poorly organized militia, inadequately armed and based on a rotating system of service. Unsurprisingly, *Oberstleutnant der Schutzpolizei Dr. Wilhelm Hartmann*, who had been tasked with reorganizing this clandestine body, would later describe it in a letter as a substantial failure¹¹. Operational requirements clearly pointed in a different direction. The most viable solution was the effective incorporation of this “human capital” under Orpo command, a process that unfolded along three main lines: compulsory or voluntary enlistment in operational units; assignment to territorial or logistical police and SS commands; and, for older age groups, rotational service in reserve formations (*Polizei-Reserve-Bataillone* “Defregger”, SOD, later *Land-* and *Stadtwacht*). According to cautious estimates later provided by *SS-Brigadeführer* Karl Brunner and his direct subordinates to Allied authorities after the surrender, at least 8,000 men served over time in the four South Tyrolean police regiments alone, while around 6,400 passed through the “Defregger” reserve units¹². These were highly significant numbers, to which must be added those serving in other units deployed in the Italian theater, as well as in local *Gendarmerie* and *Schutzpolizei* formations and commands.

Quantitative Coordinates on South Tyroleans in the Ordnungspolizei

For South Tyroleans, the establishment of the *Polizei-Regiment Südtirol* in early October 1943 marked the beginning of a new phase in their wartime employment prospects, one that led many of them into service in the Orpo. Several datasets help clarify the scale of this mobilization, among them lists of prisoners of war compiled by municipalities in 1945 that offer a useful snapshot. In Leifers, for instance, more than 31% of the prisoners listed had served in various police units, above all in *SS-Polizei-Regiment*

¹⁰ C.F. Latour, *Südtirol und die Achse Berlin–Rom 1938–1945*, Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, Stuttgart 1962.

¹¹ BArch, R9361/III/529227. Letter of Hartmann to general Querner, 7.10.43.

¹² Public Record Office (PRO), WO 204/12801. “First detailed interrogation report of Brigadefuehrer Brunner [*et alii*]”, 8.6.45.

*Brixen*¹³. Similar proportions appear in Kaltern, where out of roughly 500 men interned in POW camps, 146 had worn the Orpo uniform – almost 30% of the total sample¹⁴. Comparable figures emerge also in the municipality of Auer: of 185 men listed as having served in the «former Nazi-Fascist forces», including missing and fallen soldiers, over 29% had belonged to the *Ordnungspolizei*¹⁵. Particularly striking are the data from Lana, where more than 48% of the prisoners had served in the Orpo¹⁶. These figures must, of course, be treated with caution. They do not include the majority of those killed in action, who were primarily enlisted in the *Wehrmacht*, and many repatriation requests were submitted by families still residing in the province of Bozen at the end of hostilities. Nevertheless, the proportions clearly indicate the breadth of the phenomenon. In absolute terms, South Tyrolean service in the Orpo appears to have overshadowed the better-studied participation of South Tyroleans in the *Waffen-SS*, which extended over a longer period¹⁷.

In terms of overall losses, too, the contribution of South Tyroleans to the repressive and military apparatus of the Orpo stands out clearly. Although some South Tyroleans had already been serving in *Ordnungspolizei* units between 1940 and September 1943, the vast majority – whether formal optants or not, a distinction that mattered little to the occupying National Socialist authorities – entered Orpo service only from October 1943 onward, as is unequivocally demonstrated by casualty data. A broader look at the proportion of policemen among the total number of South Tyrolean war dead and missing allows for further quantitative orientation. Within the framework of the ongoing research project «Gefallene und vermisste Südtiroler im II. WK», which aims to record the biographical and military data of approximately 8,000 South Tyrolean war dead and missing, precise information has so far been collected for 1,184 victims from the deaneries of Bozen, Kaltern, Terlan, Ritten, Sarnthein, Mölten, and Klausen¹⁸. Although not definitive, it constitutes an unparalleled analytical corpus and may already be regarded as broadly representative at the provincial level: among the recorded war victims, nearly 12% had worn the green uniform of the *Ordnungspolizei*. These figures underscore the extensive mobilization of South Tyrolean “human capital” following the German occupation of Italy, which made them a central pillar of the repressive and territorial control apparatus gradually implemented by the SS/Polizei system.

The Polizei-Regiment Bozen's Losses

According to the data collected for the Italian theater, more than 20% of the wounded, dead, and missing reported by the Orpo south of the Alps originated from the province of Bozen¹⁹. Similar proportions emerge also when considering fatalities from all causes. Within this framework, the centrality of the *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* becomes even more evident: with roughly 440 recorded casualties, it accounts for more than 16% of the total sample, including German cadres. Only *SS-Polizei-Regiment 15* exceeds this figure, approaching 25%, though it must be noted that this unit was active in anti-partisan warfare for a longer period than its South Tyrolean counterpart. More than 130 fatalities from all causes have

¹³ Gemeinde Leifers, archive, Kat. 8 1945. List of prisoners, 16.6. and 19.6.45.

¹⁴ Gemeinde Kaltern, archive, Kat. 8 1945. List of prisoners, n.d.

¹⁵ Gemeinde Auer, archive, Kat. 8 1945. List of prisoners, n.d.

¹⁶ Gemeinde Lana, archive, Kat. 8 1945. Various lists of prisoners.

¹⁷ T. Casagrande, *Südtiroler in der Waffen-SS: Vorbildliche Haltung, fanatische Überzeugung*, Raetia, Bozen 2015.

¹⁸ The open-access database is available at the following link: www.kriegsopfer-suedtirol-zweiterweltkrieg.com/del/. Accessed 14.2.26.

¹⁹ Database Di Fonzo (Database). The database was developed as a research tool to support the study and analysis of the deployment of the *Ordnungspolizei* in occupied Italy and in the two Operational Zones. With regard to the section on casualties, it has been compiled primarily on the basis of Orpo unit casualty notifications preserved in the Bundesarchiv and the Archivio Centrale dello Stato, as well as through analysis of German war cemetery records in Italy and documentation located in the archives of South Tyrolean veterans' associations and municipalities. The data examined here do not include the losses of *SS-Polizei-Regiment Alpenvorland* (later redesignated *SS-Polizei-Regiment 9*) incurred during the final days of the war, which occurred in the context of front-line operations against militarily organized Yugoslav partisan forces – conditions markedly different from the “Bandenkampf” and therefore liable to distort the overall picture.

been recorded among those serving in the *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* – nearly 6% of the unit's average strength. These figures are exceptionally high for a police formation, a consideration that also applies to the regiment's overall attrition rate, which stands at approximately 19%.

Based on the available reconstruction, almost 60% of the regiment's losses are attributable to men killed or wounded in operations against partisans, or executed by them after surrender. This includes, for example, the twelve South Tyroleans who surrendered and were subsequently shot at San Volfango di Drenchia on 8 April 1945, as well as most of the officer corps of *II. Bataillon*, who were seized by partisans of the *Brigata "Val Cordevole"* while formally in Allied custody and summarily executed during the night of 2-3 May 1945. Overall, those executed after surrender account for nearly 13% of the regiment's fatalities, rising to over 21% when considering *II. Bataillon* alone, which was particularly affected by this phenomenon. Returning to losses from all causes, the via Rasella attack accounts for roughly 20% of the total, and 25% of fatalities alone. Air raids and service-related accidents had a more limited impact at regimental level, representing around 11%.

The attrition rate among officers stands at 4.73% overall, rising to more than 9% when considering fatalities alone. While such figures might appear normal – or even low – compared to an army unit deployed at the front or an Orpo formation on the Eastern Front, they are exceptionally high for the Italian theater. By comparison, estimates for *SS-Polizei-Regiment 15* suggest overall officer losses of around 2%, dropping to 1.47% for fatalities. In *SS-Polizei-Regiment 10*, active in the OZAK from July 1944 onward, the officer attrition rate appears to have been around 1.27%. Although the high figures for *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* can partly be explained by the large number of officers executed after surrender or capture, they must also be linked to the relative inexperience of some officers and to the operational practices that characterized the regiment. Officers frequently exposed themselves alongside the men they commanded – an aspect that emerges not only from casualty figures and decoration proposals, but also from extensive photographic evidence. Indeed, even excluding those executed after surrender, officer losses within the regiment remain well above the Italian average, with an incidence of 3.39%.

As for the distribution of losses among the battalions, it is unsurprising that *I. Bataillon* was the hardest hit, accounting for 44% of the total. Deployed earlier than the others in anti-partisan warfare, the Istrian and, to a lesser extent, the Gorizian theaters proved particularly wearing in human terms. *III. Bataillon* follows, with over 38% of the regiment's total losses. Disaggregated data, however, show that the via Rasella attack alone accounts for more than 51% of its casualties, while losses incurred in anti-partisan operations amount to only around 16%. In other words, *III./SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* suffered roughly the same proportion of losses due to illness, air raids, and accidents (around 14%) as it did in counter-guerrilla operations – evidence of the distinctive and comparatively less intense type of warfare it fought. Finally, *II. Bataillon*, though registering the lowest overall attrition rate, was far from marginal within the occupiers' repressive system, accounting for approximately 16.5% of the regiment's total losses. While the Belluno theater cannot be compared to Istria or the Gorizia area in terms of enemy strength and organisation, the intensity of losses suffered by *II. Bataillon* in operations – nearly 77% of its total casualties – reveals the high operational tempo of its deployment in the OZAV, which began gradually in March 1944 and ended with the executions of 2-3 May 1945. At the same time, the relatively low rate of total battlefield losses in relation to the intensity of its deployment and the damage inflicted on the Belluno Resistance – a factor emphasized by the regimental commander himself – must be attributed partly to a capable and well-prepared officer corps and partly to the prolonged training of the men, who had time to acclimatize to this form of asymmetric warfare before the peak of repression in the summer and autumn of 1944. It is no coincidence that *SS-Brigadeführer* Brunner regarded the battalion as his spearhead unit, «the troop [...] that distinguished itself most in my sector»²⁰. Indeed, *II./SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* was never incorporated into the defensive system protecting the construction

²⁰ Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 3079, f.48. Letter of Brunner to colonel Abeßer, 20.11.44.

sites of the *Blaue Linie*, unlike the other South Tyrolean regiments deployed in the sector or the *Corpo di Sicurezza Trentino* (CST, Trentino Security Service).

The Punished of the SS-Strafvollzugslager

When considering losses in the broadest sense, attention must also be paid to the severity with which the *SS- und Polizeigerichtsbarkeit* – the SS and Police judicial system – fell upon members of the regiment. Here the data are fragmentary, yet cross-referencing available documentation suggests that SS judges intervened harshly, not so much through death sentences as through transfers to SS and Police penal camps, above all the *Strafvollzugslager* at Danzig-Matzkau, but also Dachau²¹. *III. Bataillon* was particularly affected, heavily stigmatized by von Kamptz himself after its “miserable” performance in Rome in early June 1944, when the unit had disintegrated despite being tasked with defending several bridges over the Tiber against advancing Allied columns. In an official order issued to all subordinated units, the BdO wrote:

In Rome a battalion of SS-Polizeiregiment “Bozen” was deployed. This battalion had not yet completed its training but would have had the opportunity to do so in Rome. The purpose of its deployment in Rome was to show the Roman population that there were still uniformed formations capable of guaranteeing peace and order. During the capture of Rome, this battalion was deployed on the bridges over the Tiber to block the advance of enemy armored columns. Although the battalion lacked both the training and equipment for such a task, what occurred cannot be excused under any circumstances, even if it is certain that Wehrmacht units also left the city in a state of disorder. A significant number of members of the “Bozen” battalion not only fled, abandoning weapons and equipment, but went as far as Bozen without orders. Groups from the battalion were also found in Bologna, Florence, and Perugia. A thorough investigation will identify those responsible and bring them to justice²².

Although the general acknowledged mitigating circumstances, he attributed the catastrophic behavior to the «complete failure of the bulk of the battalion’s troops»²³. Rumors of the unit’s disastrous military performance soon reached Berlin, where there was talk of the «failure of Regt. Bozen during its deployment in Rome»²⁴. The subsequent retreat, which can indeed be described as a rout, scattered the battalion – much as happened to many Wehrmacht units in that moment of military crisis. The competent authorities, however, granted no leniency to the men of the unit. They became the target of a severe response from *SS- und Polizeigericht XXXI* in Verona, which held jurisdiction in the matter. Although precise figures are lacking, numerous veterans later testified that several members of the battalion were tried at that time, sentenced, and sent to SS and Police penal camps²⁵. Many were subsequently assigned to penal units from which most never returned. The case of Alois Prantl, a native of Lana, is illustrative in this regard²⁶. Having joined the *Polizei-Regiment Bozen* in the autumn of 1943, he was assigned to the III Battalion and deployed to Rome. Following the chaotic retreat of the German forces, Prantl returned to his hometown and subsequently reported to the Bozen command. However, he was branded a deserter and transferred first to Como and then to the *Strafvollzugslager* of Danzig-Matzkau, from which he never

²¹ For the SS and Police penal camp system, see especially S.B.T. Emmett, *Strafvollzugslager der SS und Polizei. Himmler’s Wartime Institutions for the Detention of Waffen-SS and Polizei*, Fonhill Media, Stroud 2016; D. Genthner and A. Huth, *Schicksal der “Knochenmänner”. Die Straflager Dachau, Danzig-Matzkau und Mosbach für verurteilte SS- und Polizeiangehörige*, Verein KZ-Gedenkstätte Neckarelz e.V., Mosbach 2016.

²² Istituto Friulano per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione (IFSML), Udine, holding III./SS-Pol.Rgt.12, f.3200. Order issued by von Kamptz, 28.7.44.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ BArch, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 1516. Internal note, 31.7.44.

²⁵ von Hartungen *et alii*, *Polizeiregimenter*, cit., p. 509; H. Frass and F. Berger, *Das Drama der 11. Kompanie in Rom vor fünfzig Jahren. Die Wahrheit über das Polizeiregiment Bozen*, “Südtirol in Wort und Bild”, n. 3 (1994), pp. 8-11.

²⁶ Gemeinde Lana, archive, War Pensions 1939-45. “Liquidazione pensione”, 17.8.55.

returned. Similar destinies are those of Alois Maurer, who perished in Dachau following his internment after the retreat from Rome²⁷, or that of *Unterwachtmeister der Polizei* Alois Profanter of 10. *Kompanie*, sent to Danzig-Matzkau and still listed as missing in that area²⁸.

To the “punished of Rome” must be added many comrades sent to penal camps for other offenses under the military penal code. A.M., from Villnöss, was initially sentenced to death by *SS- und Polizeigericht XXXI* for «treason, disloyalty, unauthorized absence, and surrender of military equipment», but was later pardoned by the *Reichsführer-SS* himself and transferred to the *Straflager der SS und Polizei* in Dachau, from which he would return only after the war²⁹. His fellow villager K.J. of 8. *Kompanie* also survived the experience of internment³⁰. Even the small village of Lengmoos, on the Ritten plateau, preserves documentary and commemorative traces of these victims of SS and Police military justice. Three of the names on the local war memorial refer indeed to members of *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* who disappeared after internment at Danzig-Matzkau³¹. In some cases, more precise information is available regarding their subsequent deployment in penal units. This is true, for example, of *Unterwachtmeister der Polizei* E.K. from Schenna. Assigned to *III./Polizei-Regiment Bozen* from its formation, he was sent – under unclear circumstances – to Danzig-Matzkau. In the final months of the war he was transferred to *SS-Regiment Kaltofen*, a penal unit composed precisely of prisoners drawn from SS and Police disciplinary camps, which suffered extremely heavy losses on the Eastern Front during the final stages of the conflict³². Although E.K. survived the war, his trajectory can be considered representative of many comrades who never returned. These fragments of what was undoubtedly a broader and numerically significant punitive framework also compel us to consider the impact that such exemplary sentences must have had on the “mental framework” of individual policemen and, more generally, on the internal cohesion of the regiment. It is therefore necessary at this point to turn to the unit’s structure and the modalities of recruitment.

3. STRUCTURE AND RECRUITMENT

The Structure of the Regiment

Upon closer examination, the creation of a new regiment composed of South Tyrolean recruits was one of the first decisions taken in Berlin by the police leadership in the aftermath of the occupation of Italy, and it testifies to the urgency with which this “recruitment reservoir” was brought under control. Although the formal order for the regiment’s establishment is dated 1 October 1943, NCOs and enlisted leaders had already been selected by 11 September, and three days later the officers assigned to the new unit received their transfer orders³³. The unit’s structure, however, assumed a somewhat unusual configuration: it consisted of a regimental *Stab* (command) and three battalions, with the *I. Bataillon* organized into four companies, whereas the *II.* and *III. Bataillon* initially comprised only three each (the 5th-7th and 9th-11th companies, respectively). An 8. *Kompanie* would not be formed until the summer of 1944³⁴, and archival evidence remains inconclusive as to whether a 12. *Kompanie* for the *III. Bataillon* was ever

²⁷ Private archive, Sterbebild.

²⁸ www.kriegsopfer-suedtirol-zweiterwelkrieg.com/de/person/3240/. Accessed 14.2.26.

²⁹ Südtiroler Landesarchiv Bozen, SVP, Registratur Landesleitung 1945-1952, Pos.128. “Der Reichsführer-SS. Hauptamt SS-Gericht. Betr.: Gnadensache”, 12.4.45. I would like to thank Lorenzo Vianini for bringing this document to my attention.

³⁰ Gemeinde Villnöss, archive, Kat. 8 1945. “Elenco degli appartenenti alla polizia non ancora ritornati”, n.d.

³¹ Gemeinde Ritten, archive, Kat. 8 1946. “Liste der Vermissten für das Ministerium”, 20.11.46; the names are reported also here: www.kriegsopfer-suedtirol-zweiterwelkrieg.com/de/. Accessed 14.2.26.

³² Gemeinde Schenna, archive, Kat. 8 1957. “Ministero del Tesoro. Ogg.: Informazioni ex militare Alto Atesino K.E.”, 18.12.56.

³³ BArch, R19/136, ff.21-46. Order for the establishment of *Polizei-Regiment Südtirol*, 1.10.43; *ivi*, R19/332, f.52. “Der Chef der Ordnungspolizei. Betr.: Gestellung von Unterführern für Truppeneinsatz in Italien”, 11.9.43, signed Winkelmann.

³⁴ Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS) Roma, Uffici e comandi militari e di polizia tedeschi (Uffici), b.10, f.62. “8./SS-Pol.-Rgt. Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr. 4 für die Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.”, 31.3.45, signed Frieser.

actually established. In early 1944, a *IV. Bataillon* was also set up, but it served primarily as the nucleus for the formation of *Polizei-Regiment Alpenvorland*³⁵.

Over the following months, the regiment's motorized component was gradually expanded. Italian armored vehicles captured as war booty were even attached to *I. Bataillon* and were used extensively in Istria³⁶. Each battalion possessed a signals platoon, but there was no regimental signals company, as Berlin lacked the resources to provide one. For training and cadre functions, 250 NCOs, junior leaders, and policemen were assigned, in addition to the officers already selected and specialist personnel such as medical staff. As for armament, this was overwhelmingly of Italian origin, again largely consisting of captured materiel.

A Volunteer Unit?

According to the plans drawn up in Berlin, the *Polizei-Regiment Südtirol* was to be organized as a volunteer formation, modeled on numerous similar units raised in occupied territories. Indeed, the order establishing the regiment explicitly referred to «volunteer South Tyroleans»³⁷. On the surface, the conditions appeared favorable: German troops entering South Tyrol after the armistice had been warmly welcomed, and the aforementioned SOD had assisted in the disarmament and capture of Italian soldiers. In practice, however, as would also occur a few months later in the neighboring province of Trento with the formation of the *Corpo di Sicurezza Trentino*, voluntary enlistment did not prove particularly enthusiastic. The core of the regiment ultimately consisted largely of optants who were compulsorily called up for service in the Orpo, but who were nevertheless registered as volunteers. The reason appears clear. Although optants were, on paper, subject to conscription into the German armed forces, the legal uncertainty following the occupation made the formal creation of a volunteer regiment politically expedient. Indeed, under the Hague Convention such units were recognized as possessing the rights and duties of belligerents, thereby avoiding potential legal complications.

Unsurprisingly, this situation provoked strong complaints from the recruits and their families, prompting *Gauleiter* Hofer himself to intervene in the matter «for political reasons»³⁸. In May 1944, he explicitly asked two police officers dispatched to Italy for an inspection to ensure that the policemen of *Polizei-Regiment Bozen* were assigned to the reserve, since «they did not present themselves voluntarily and did not sign any corresponding declaration of commitment»³⁹. Hofer's direct involvement highlights not only the sensitivity of the issue, but also the coercive dynamics underlying the regiment's formation – grievances that were later recalled on several occasions by veterans themselves⁴⁰.

4. CADRES FROM THE REICH

An Overview of the Officer Corps

While there was no shortage of men to fill the ranks of a regiment, a different issue concerned the availability of personnel suitable to train, lead, and command them in operations. With regard to the regiment's officer corps, approximately sixty officials who served in the unit at various times have been identified. The picture that emerges shows that they belonged largely to the so-called *Kriegsjugendgeneration*,

³⁵ BArch, R19/326, ff.102-105. Order for the establishment of *Polizei-Regiment Alpenvorland*, 7.6.44.

³⁶ See W. Regenberg, *Armored Vehicles and Units of the German Order Police 1936-1945*, Schiffer Publishing, Atglen 2002, pp. 154-156.

³⁷ See note 29.

³⁸ BArch, R19/332, f.97. Report, 5.5.44; see also the reference in G. Steinacher, *Roma, marzo 1944. Il Polizeiregiment Bozen e l'attentato di via Rasella*, in: *Trentino e Alto Adige province del Reich*, P. Agostini and C. Romeo (edited by), Temi Editrice, Trento 2002, p. 283.

³⁹ BArch, R19/332, f.97. Report, 5.5.44.

⁴⁰ H. Frass and F. Berger, *Drama*, cit., pp. 8-11.

or were even younger, while representatives of the *Frontkämpfergeneration* accounted for only about 10% of the sample – roughly in line with the situation in *SS-Polizei-Regiment 15*⁴¹. At the end of 1943, the average age of the officer corps of *Polizei-Regiment Bozen* stood at around thirty-eight. Among company commanders alone, the figure drops to approximately thirty-two, and falls further to thirty when considering only career officers. In *SS-Polizei-Regiment 15*, by contrast, the officer corps had an average age of about 34.5 at the same date, while company commanders were slightly older, approaching an average of thirty-three years. In terms of geographical origin, the Austrian component within *Polizei-Regiment Bozen* does not appear to have exceeded 10% of the total, yet in terms of political trajectories it represented a markedly Nazified element, as will become clearer below.

As for overall level of politicization, precise data relating to around thirty officers allow for the following outline: roughly one tenth were *alte Kämpfer*, “old fighters of the movement”; only one had joined the NSDAP immediately after the so-called “seizure of power” in 1933, whereas more than half of the analyzed sample took out party membership in 1937, when the general reopening of membership took place⁴²; about 14% joined between 1938 and 1940 and within the sample only two officers could be identified who had belonged neither to the NSDAP nor to any of its affiliated organizations. Finally, nearly half were also members of the *Allgemeine-SS*.

A comparison with a similar sample from *SS-Polizei-Regiment 15* yields a somewhat different picture: “old fighters” accounted for nearly 18%, the so-called *Märzgefallene* for over 32%, followed by 21% who had joined during the 1937 reopening. Membership in the *Allgemeine-SS* was also higher, exceeding 60%. As these figures suggest, both regiments displayed a significant – at least formal – degree of “Nazification”. In both cases, most party memberships postdated the “seizure of power”, reflecting a mixture of ideological commitment, opportunism, and group pressure, as is especially clear in the 1937 admissions. In both regiments, the high rate of membership in the *Allgemeine-SS* must also be noted. For many, this affiliation likely functioned more as an additional credential for career advancement than as a personal endorsement of Himmler’s ideological order, as evidenced by repeated remarks in personnel files noting that several SS members remained closely tied to the Church.

Opportunism, adaptability, and careerism thus constitute key interpretative lenses for understanding the Orpo officer corps. Members of the *Frontkämpfergeneration* had already lived through two regime changes: having shed the uniform of the imperial German or Habsburg armies, they had reinvented themselves in Weimar or Austrian police forces, and then continued their careers under National Socialism after the “seizure of power”, or the *Anschluss*. A substantial proportion of the younger representatives of the *Kriegsjugendgeneration* – well over half of the officer corps according to the available data – had already been serving in the police before 1933 and had therefore undergone their initial professional socialization within the framework of a democratic republic. At the same time, it was under National Socialism that most of these policemen were able to enhance their professional and social status by attaining officer rank. A glance at the company commanders, key figures in shaping the conduct of their men – especially in a context often characterized by dispersed deployment and a strong element of individual decision-making within the framework of *Auftragstaktik* – makes this clear: only about a quarter had already been in the police before the “*Machtergreifung*”, yet all had received their coveted officer shoulder boards between 1937 and 1943, passing through a training system in which ideological education played a significant role in the Orpo officer schools⁴³.

Another important feature of the officer corps was the high proportion of *Revier-* and *Bezirks-offiziere*. These were essentially “wartime officers”, NCOs who had either been directly granted officer rank or had attended accelerated courses designed specifically for them, emerging with the rank of “district officer”.

⁴¹ Database.

⁴² See J.W. Falter, *Hitlers Wähler. Die Anhänger der NSDAP 1924-1933*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2020, pp. 76-85.

⁴³ See S. Deppisch, *Täter auf der Schulbank. Die Offiziersausbildung der Ordnungspolizei und der Holocaust*, Tectum, Baden-Baden 2017.

Although their ranks formally corresponded to those of career or reserve officers, their training was by no means equivalent, nor were the tasks normally assigned to them. While the most capable could be proposed for transfer into the regular officer corps, the rationale behind the creation of these new categories was clearly emergency-driven, prompted both by structural deficiencies and by the attrition suffered by the officer corps during the war, which required faster replenishment than the normal training pipeline allowed. In 1942, for instance, the training of a “district officer” lasted two months, compared to six months for a career second lieutenant. A comparison with *SS-Polizei-Regiment 15* further underscores the emergency conditions under which *Polizei-Regiment Bozen* was formed. By the end of the war, “district officers” accounted for roughly 10% of those who had served in *SS-Polizei-Regiment 15*, whereas in the South Tyrolean regiment they exceeded 26%. Within the regiment, they primarily served as platoon commanders and orderly officers, but there were also cases in which they filled more responsible roles, such as acting company commanders. This reflects both the strain on the regiment’s command structure and the “field value” demonstrated by many of these officers.

A further peculiarity of the South Tyrolean regiment – again linked to the emergency context of its formation – was the high number of officers, both career and district, drawn from the *Gendarmerie*, who accounted for more than 30% of the total sample. This was an unusually high proportion for a police regiment and is once more traceable to the difficult situation faced by the Orpo at that stage, which was compelled to divert essential personnel from a branch already overstretched by institutional duties in the Reich and occupied territories, as well as by territorial control and “anti-partisan” warfare. At the same time, the selection of experienced *Gendarmerie* officers underscores the interest in the South Tyrolean “human reservoir” and the intention to shape a unit capable of both territorial control and active repression as circumstances required. If the significant presence of *Gendarmerie* and district officers already exposes the personnel crisis facing the Order Police at that moment and situates the regiment’s creation within a broader context of strain, a closer look at the regimental cadres will only confirm these observations.

Oberst der Gendarmerie Alois Menschik: An “Officer for All Seasons”

If, taken as a whole, the regimental *Stab* constituted something of an exception within an otherwise strained command structure, the figure of the regimental commander, *Oberst der Gendarmerie* Alois Menschik, stands out for his high professional profile. Although he had never previously commanded a regiment – and does not appear to have attended the relevant preparatory courses – he was one of the leading experts in the use of police forces in mountainous environments. This area of Orpo training had experienced a marked expansion after the *Anschluss*, drawing heavily on the know-how of Austrian *Gendarmerie* personnel. Given Italy’s terrain and the subsequent areas of deployment of the regiment’s battalions, the decision to place a South Tyrolean unit under an officer with such a background had a clear operational rationale.

His profile was further strengthened by significant command experience on the Eastern Front. He was thus a capable and well-prepared official who, despite lacking prior regimental command experience, remained in charge until the very end, even though he had already reached retirement age. Examining his biography is not only essential for understanding the regiment’s leadership; it also opens broader reflections on complexity, adaptability, high levels of opportunism, and the many shades of grey that characterized the Orpo officer corps, especially among former Habsburg personnel.

Born in Olmütz in Moravia in 1888, Menschik began his military career in 1907 and took part in the First World War from its early phases⁴⁴. After being wounded following two and a half months at the front, he transferred to the *Feldgendarmerie*, the military police, serving mainly in Slovenia, the Trieste area, and Istria. At the end of the war, holding the rank of captain, he entered the *Gendarmerie* of the

⁴⁴ BAArch, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 1516. Personnel file.

new Austrian state, specializing in alpine services and ski training. By 1932 he had reached the rank of lieutenant colonel, which he still held when National Socialist Germany annexed Austria in March 1938.

Although he remained in service, both the Gestapo and military counterintelligence placed him under close surveillance, particularly by monitoring his correspondence. He was suspected of pro-Czechoslovak sympathies – aggravated by the fact that Czech was spoken in his family – and of an attitude not considered aligned with the new regime. Although Gestapo investigators found no compromising evidence, the official at the *Stapostelle* Innsbruck responsible for the case described him in highly ambivalent terms:

In public he is extremely cautious and never lowers his guard. Although his unreliability cannot be proven, this does not mean that he is reliable. Mentschik (sic.) is the typical loner who rejects all ties with third parties, probably in order not to lose face. Considering his behavior, neither a negative nor a positive judgment can be issued⁴⁵.

The final report, signed by *SD-Ausland* chief Walter Schellenberg, likewise contained no concrete evidence against him, though the evaluation was far from favorable in National Socialist terms. In particular, his extreme ambition was highlighted: in Linz, thanks to his undeniable skill, he had managed to concentrate executive power in his own hands, reducing the local *Gendarmerie* commander to a mere «figurehead». The investigation also noted his harsh treatment of subordinates, particularly junior leaders and NCOs, at times bordering on «brutality». Politically, Schellenberg emphasized Menschik's caution and calculation, underlining that he had never been a friend or supporter of the NSDAP:

He is essentially a stubborn legitimist. Because of this orientation, during the period of the now-defeated system he also served as a regional representative of the *Gendarmerie* within the framework of the Fatherland Front. M.'s personal hostility toward the NSDAP is clearly illustrated, for example, by the following remark made during a telephone conversation in 1933 or 1934: "If it were up to me, one would have to shoot every National Socialist as if they were rabbits"⁴⁶.

Although no tangible evidence was found against him or his family, the overall picture was far from flattering. Nevertheless, despite these doubts and his evident political opportunism, Menschik's career continued. He integrated – at least formally – into the new system. Having sworn loyalty to Emperor Franz Joseph, he had later served the Austrian Republic – even within the Nazi-hostile *Vaterländische Front* – and was now ready to serve the new order. Opportunism and careerism of this kind were a leitmotif within the *Ordnungspolizei*, which needed experienced figures; as long as there was no open resistance, Himmler's police were willing to retain such officials for their precious expertise.

After the *Anschluss*, Menschik underwent a period of further training in the *Regierungsbezirk* Potsdam, after which he was deemed suitable for positions of responsibility within the *Gendarmerie* of the "Old Reich". In June 1940 he was appointed *Kommandeur der Gendarmerie* (KdG, Commander of the *Gendarmerie*) under the *Befehlshaber der Ordnungspolizei* in Saarbrücken, an area that was anything but simple, effectively a war zone in which police tasks also had a military character. This assignment indicates the trust placed in Menschik by the higher echelons of the Orpo – confidence also reflected by the local top civil and political authority when the time came to consider transferring him. Indeed, in November 1941, when plans were made to deploy a large number of *Gendarmerie* officers to strengthen territorial police presence in the Soviet Union, Menschik was among those considered for transfer east. Upon learning of this, *Reichsstatthalter* Josef Bürckel appealed directly to Himmler, asking that Menschik be retained:

The special conditions of the Gau Westmark [...] require a *Gendarmerie* corps always ready for deployment and energetically led. The commander of such a corps [...] must, however, be a man who enjoys my full trust and who knows both officers and gendarmes as well as the local situation. Oberstleutnant Menschik has integrated very

⁴⁵ Ivi. Telegram of Regierugs-Rat Müller to colonel Hitzegard, 22.2.40.

⁴⁶ Ivi, ff.24-25. "Reichssicherheitshauptamt. Betr.: Oberstleutnant der Gend. Menschik", 11.3.40, signed Schellenberg.

well into the Westmark. He has been able to lead his gendarmes strictly, both professionally and ideologically. This is demonstrated by the good level of training and discipline of his men. [...] I therefore request that Menschik's transfer not be carried out, as I wish to keep him here at all costs⁴⁷.

The remarks of an "old fighter" such as Bürckel highlight Menschik's metamorphosis: he had become a valued and trusted resource, evidently distinguishing himself also in the *weltanschauliche Schulung* – the ideological education – of his subordinates. Menschik himself, fully aware of the career opportunities that a possible eastern deployment entailed, informed his superiors that his departure would be tolerable in terms of local needs. In August 1942 he was therefore assigned to the prestigious new post of *Kommandeur der Ordnungspolizei Bergvölker* (KdO, Commander of the Ordnungspolizei) in the Caucasus, an area recently occupied during Army Group South's summer offensive⁴⁸. In November he was even promoted to colonel, the final advancement in his career. Menschik remained on the Eastern Front as KdO until April 1943, when his command was dissolved. With the forces available locally, he briefly also led a *Sicherungskommando* bearing his name, tasked with keeping lines of communication open during the retreat and being even employed against Soviet armored units⁴⁹, distinguishing himself in the process. The *Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer Kaukasien* (HSSPF, Higher SS- and Police Leader) himself, *SS-Gruppenführer* Gerret Korsemann, emphasized his qualities:

[...] in the Caucasian theater, he acted correctly in every situation and even in the most difficult military operations did what was necessary in the interests of the Wehrmacht and the Police. He never concerned himself with questions of jurisdiction. He is a soldier and acts responsibly. [...] I have come to know Oberst M. and know that he acted correctly in all situations⁵⁰.

Korsemann's assessment complements Bürckel's, presenting the profile of a senior officer capable of operating effectively even under difficult conditions. At the same time, it underscores Menschik's capacity for adaptation and self-reinvention, enabling him to remain a valued resource under very different political and military circumstances. After his eastern interlude, the colonel returned to Saarbrücken, once again assuming the position of KdG. However, in mid-September 1943, while on leave, he received orders assigning him to a new post as commander of *Polizei-Regiment Südtirol*. Bürckel once again tried in vain to keep him in place, but Himmler himself refused, referring to the «new major demands arising from the occupation of Italy»⁵¹.

The choice of Menschik as commander of a regiment composed of recruits from a mountainous region was consistent with the need for units capable of operating in such terrain, given Italy's geography. In the new theater, the colonel would not only shape the regiment's training but would also "distinguish himself" operationally, participating directly in several major operations, from Istria to Monte Grappa. Despite having exceeded the age limits that by the summer of 1944 would normally have required his retirement, he was kept in command until the final collapse.

The Regimental Staff: A Cohesive Group of Experienced Officials

As mentioned above, in contrast to the broader difficulties that characterized the general composition of the regiment's officer corps, the regimental *Stab* presents a comparatively solid and functionally

⁴⁷ Ivi, f.40. Letter of Bürckel to Himmler, 24.11.41.

⁴⁸ Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv Potsdam (BLHA), Rep. 2A Regierung Potsdam, Pol. Nr.623, ff.24-31. Order of establishment of KdO Bergvölker, 21.8.42, signed Winkelmann; BArch, R70-Sowjetunion/41, ff.97-107. "[Kommandeur der Ordnungspolizei] beim SS- und Polizeiführer Ordshonikidse. Erfahrungsbericht", n.d., signed Menschik.

⁴⁹ Ivi, B563/220662.

⁵⁰ Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 1516, f.70. "Der Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer Kaukasien –II- Betr.: Oberst d.Gend. Menschik", 23.4.43, signed Korsemann.

⁵¹ Ivi, f.86. Telegram of Himmler to Bürckel, 26.9.43.

coherent picture. Several of the officers assigned to the command staff combined operational experience with organizational competence, making them particularly suited to the complex demands of leading a formation deployed in counterinsurgency warfare and territorial control.

The first adjutant, *Hauptmann der Schutzpolizei* Theodor Brecht, had been present from the unit's formation and proved to be a key asset at the regimental level⁵². Born in 1911 and a policeman since 1929, he had been commissioned shortly before the outbreak of the war and had gained operational experience with *Polizei-Bataillon 253* in Norway, at times commanding a company. Above all, however, he distinguished himself through extensive experience in training. Indeed, he had served as an instructor at the officer school in Fürstenfeldbruck and later at the *Polizei-Ausbildungs-Regiment Oranienburg*, the unit in which he was serving when he was assigned to South Tyrol. Brecht thus combined field experience with a solid instructional background, an aspect which clearly explains his transfer to Bozen. Within the regiment, which suffered from a chronic shortage of officers, he dealt not only with adjutant duties but also with operational matters, personnel administration, motorization issues, and air defense measures for the command⁵³. A capable and versatile officer, he was selected in the summer of 1944 for the sensitive role of liaison officer between *SS-Obergruppenführer* Karl Wolff and Field Marshal Albert Kesselring. He was succeeded by another experienced officer, *Hauptmann der Schutzpolizei* Werner Ulbrich⁵⁴. Also a member of the *Kriegsjugendgeneration* and a lieutenant since 1939, Ulbrich had served between 1940 and 1941 with *Polizei-Bataillon 252* in Norway, where he commanded a company and distinguished himself in that role. In the spring of 1942 he was placed in command of a company of *Reserve-Polizei-Bataillon 181*, with which he took part in an intensive cycle of anti-partisan operations in Upper Carniola and Lower Styria. This was followed by a six-month period of operations in Serbia within *II./SS-Polizei-Regiment 5*, where he served both as a company commander and regimental adjutant. He was withdrawn from this theater in the summer of 1943 at the request of his father, who invoked the "Last Son Decree" issued earlier that year. From Serbia he was transferred to Italy in the autumn of 1943 as adjutant to the *Verbindungsoffizier der Ordnungspolizei Genua*, the Orpo liaison officer for Liguria, responsible above all for ensuring police cooperation with the "occupied allies" in that region. For a time he even held this command on an acting basis, demonstrating both competence and the ability to navigate the complex network of German and Italian police and military structures. His transfer to replace Brecht in the summer of 1944 thus brought to the regiment an expert of anti-partisan warfare who was also well acquainted with inter-agency coordination.

Responsibility for logistics and supply (*Abteilung IVa*) fell to *Polizei-Rat* Oskar Baumgärtner, who had effectively been "borrowed" by von Kamptz from the *BdO Prag* – an indication of the high regard in which he was held by the general from their earlier service in the Protectorate⁵⁵. Born in 1890 and already employed in army economic services during the First World War, Baumgärtner was a veteran police administrator with early experience in occupied territory⁵⁶. In the autumn of 1939, he had been sent to the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia to establish the economic services of the newly installed *Befehlshaber der Ordnungspolizei*, and remained there until his transfer to South Tyrol. An able official with strong organizational skills, he performed his duties effectively within *Polizei-Regiment Bozen* as

⁵² Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 0950a A.05. Personnel file; ivi, B563/ZK-B 1508/434 Brecht, Theodor; Staatsarchiv München (StaM), Spruchkammern, Kart.2733. Denazification; Archivio Storico Camera dei Deputati (ASCD), holding Commissione parlamentare di inchiesta sulle cause dell'occultamento di fascicoli relativi a crimini nazifascisti (Commissione parlamentare), doc. nr. 53/2, ff.2852-2855. "LKA NW. Dezernat 15. Zeugenschaftliche Vernehmung", 4.1.66, signed Brecht.

⁵³ BArch, R70-Italien/35, ff.208-209. "SS-Polizei-Regiment. Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr.3 für die Verleihung des KVK.I.Kl.m.Schw.", 4.12.44, signed Menschik.

⁵⁴ Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 3585. Personnel file; ivi, R70-Italien/28, ff.205-206. "SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr. 4 für die Verleihung des KVK.I.Kl.m.Schw.", 6.3.45, signed Menschik.

⁵⁵ Ivi, R19/136, f.51. Transcription, 27.10.43; ivi, f.55. Telegram, 29.10.43.

⁵⁶ Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen (NRW), Abt. Rheinland, NW 1045-AD/1317, Baumgärtner, Oskar. Questionnaire; BArch, R70-Böhmen und Mähren/17, f.3. List of administrative officials of the BdO Prag, 10.5.65.

well, earning the praise of the regimental commander, who emphasized his central role in placing the regiment's battalions in a condition fit for deployment in their respective operational zones⁵⁷. His abilities were further confirmed in the autumn of 1944, when he was called to serve as IVa officer within the staff of the *KdO Bozen*. His deputy, *Polizei-Inspektor* Helmut Schwäkendiek, who had been with the regiment from the outset and later succeeded him in the *Stab*, likewise came from *BdO Prag* and was an experienced specialist in administrative and economic services⁵⁸.

The officer responsible for signals, *Leutnant der Schutzpolizei der Reserve* Camillo Krombach, though only a reserve subaltern, had accumulated solid experience both in the training of radio operators and in anti-partisan operations in Poland⁵⁹. Having entered the police in 1940 and been commissioned in August 1942, he specialized early in communications. Between November 1942 and at least May 1943 he served with the *Polizei-Nachrichten-Abteilung* of *BdO Krakau*, and in the spring of that year temporarily commanded *Polizei-Nachrichten-Kompanie 308* during anti-partisan operations in the Minsk area. He also had experience as an instructor, having trained personnel of *Polizei-Nachrichten-Kompanie 72* before its deployment to the Eastern Front. Although Menschik initially evaluated him rather lukewarmly, he soon revised his judgment. Krombach became a relatively important figure within the OZAV, not only training the radio operators assigned to the regiment's *Nachrichten-Staffeln* but also, for a time, serving as signals officer for *Polizei-Regiment Alpenvorland*, earning in the process both a promotion and a merit decoration⁶⁰.

The regimental medical officer, *Stabsarzt der Polizei* Dr. Josef Dollhäubl, was another member of the *Kriegsjugendgeneration* and combined a notable political background with solid medical and operational experience⁶¹. Politically, he belonged to the early Austrian Nazi milieu, having been a member of the SA in Linz between 1923 and 1927 and joining the NSDAP in 1926. After interrupting his political activity to pursue his studies, he graduated in medicine in 1938. Definitively appointed to the police medical service in July 1940 after a probationary period, he accumulated extensive experience in medical services within police units. Before his posting to Bozen, he served in the surgical department of the Vienna Police Hospital and with three battalions: *Polizei-Bataillon 256* in Norway, *II./Polizei-Regiment 10* on the Eastern Front, and *III./SS-Polizei-Regiment 28* in France. In Italy he distinguished himself through his competence, at times also acting as medical officer for *BdO Italien*, and earned the praise of *Oberstabsarzt der Polizei* Dr. Friedrich Becker, the medical authority on the Italian theatre of operations, who described him as «extremely reliable» and «selfless» in caring for his men⁶².

Attention to the selection of capable and experienced officials for the regimental staff remained evident over time, as illustrated by the later assignment of *Oberleutnant der Schutzpolizei* Heinz Knaack during the final months of the war⁶³. Born in 1914, Knaack's path into the police had been mediated by his membership in the *SA-Feldjägerkorps*, an auxiliary police formation created after the "Machtergreifung" and later partially absorbed into the regular police. Commissioned in 1940, he was an accomplished horseman with considerable operational – and criminal – experience. He had served both as platoon commander and as squadron leader in *Polizei-Reiter-Abteilung III* in the General Government. By the time he arrived

⁵⁷ Ivi, R70-Italien/35, ff.21-22. "SS-Polizeiregiment Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr.1 für die Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.", 3.6.44, signed Menschik.

⁵⁸ Ivi, R19/136, f.54. Telegram, 29.10.43; ivi, R70-Böhmen und Mähren/17, f.3. List of administrative officials of the BdO Prag, 10.5.65; ivi, R70-Italien/35, ff.214-215. "SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr.7 für die Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.", 4.12.44, signed Menschik.

⁵⁹ StaM, Pol. Dir. München, 21295. Personnel file; ivi, Spruchkammern, K.2795. Denazification.

⁶⁰ BArch, R70-Italien/36, ff.42-43. "Pol.-Rgt. Alpenvorland N.-Zug. Vorschlagsliste Nr. 1 für die Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.", 8.12.44, signed Krombach.

⁶¹ Ivi, R19/4733. Personnel file; ivi, R9361/III/521707. SS-Officer's file.

⁶² Ivi, R19/4733, f.79. "Befehlshaber der Ordnungspolizei IVb. Beurteilung", 11.4.44, signed Becker.

⁶³ Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 1153 A.11. Personnel file; ivi, R601/2368. "Der Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer im Generalgouvernement. Befehlshaber der Ordnungspolizei. Vorschlagsliste Nr. für die Verleihung des EK II.Kl.", 16.6.43; ACS, Uffici, b.10. "SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen -Stab-. Antrag auf Verleihung des Bandenkampf-Abzeichens 2. Stufe", 6.2.45.

south of the Alps, he had participated in fifty days of “anti-bandit” operations between January 1943 and July 1944. Among these were two days of fighting in the Sobibór area in October 1943, coinciding with the revolt and mass escape of prisoners from the extermination camp, followed by a ruthless manhunt that starkly illustrates what the Nazis meant by the nebulous concept of “*Bandenbekämpfung*”. When he reached Italy, however, Knaack was no longer considered fit for front-line service, having been deeply affected by captivity at the hands of Polish partisans. Captured together with other officers, he had been the only one released, subsequently developing a psychological block against field deployment against partisans⁶⁴. His expertise was nonetheless applicable elsewhere, and he was therefore attached to the *Stab* as *Reit- und Fahroffizier*, assuming responsibility for the regiment’s pack transport services⁶⁵. He replaced in this capacity *Revier-Oberleutnant der Schutzpolizei* Herbert Astmann, an official who had distinguished himself in Menschik’s eyes for his logistical abilities and was subsequently assigned to Section IVc of the *KdO Bozen*, responsible for veterinary services – an evident recognition of his expertise⁶⁶.

To conclude this overview of the *Stab* personnel, it is worth pausing to consider one of colonel Menschik’s closest aides, *Revier-Oberleutnant der Schutzpolizei* Rudolf Küntzler⁶⁷. A decorated Austrian veteran of the First World War, he was also an “old fighter” of the NSDAP. Having entered the police as early as 1921, he distinguished himself through «illegal activities in the Ostmark during the period of the ban [of the NSDAP in Austria, author’s note]»⁶⁸ and in 1937 he also joined the *Allgemeine-SS*. Prior to his attachment to the regiment in November 1943, Küntzler had likewise gained experience in the East during an operational deployment between September 1942 and July 1943. In this case as well, the *Stab* was reinforced with an experienced official – an assessment that, as will be seen, cannot be extended to the majority of his counterparts employed as cadres in the three battalions, who will be examined in the following sections.

Battalion Commanders

Turning to the battalion commanders, for most of them this appears to have been their first assignment of this kind, essentially a testing ground. Nevertheless, the wartime background that the majority of them could claim certainly made them suited for the task. Command of *I. Bataillon* was entrusted to *Major der Schutzpolizei* Oskar Kretschmer, a decorated veteran of the First World War and a police officer already under Weimar⁶⁹. Born in 1897 and a war volunteer, after the final collapse he had remained under arms with the rank of sergeant, serving until 1920 in the *Grenzschutz Ost*, a paramilitary formation tasked with defending the Reich’s eastern border. Like many former comrades, he then entered the police, attaining the rank of second lieutenant in 1928 after successfully completing an officer-cadet course. In line with many colleagues who had entered the police during the Weimar Republic, his career had been largely standard, with promotion to first lieutenant in 1930 and to captain in 1935. After the *Anschluss* he served in positions of responsibility in Austria, most recently as local commander of the *Schutzpolizei* in Linz. Despite having received a decoration for bravery, it is not clear whether he had also seen field service within an operational unit. In any case, he was an officer capable of leading his men and did so in the field, as emerges from various sources relating to his service in the OZAK, where he was also wounded during a

⁶⁴ BArch, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 1153 A.11, f.700. Notes on a call between general Höring and colonel Abeßer, 5.12.44.

⁶⁵ ACS, Uffici, b.10. “Der SS- und Polizeiführer beim Obersten Kommissar für die Operationszone Alpenvorland. Betr.: Verleihung des Bandenkampfabzeichens”, 13.2.45, signed Rittner.

⁶⁶ BArch, R70-Italien/35, ff.210-211. “SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr. 7 für die Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.”, 4.12.44, signed Menschik; ACS, Uffici, b.9, f.33. “Der Kommandeur der Ordnungspolizei. Betr.: Stärkemeldung”, 4.5.45.

⁶⁷ BArch, R70-Italien/35, ff.210-211. “SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr. 7 für die Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.”, 4.12.44, fto. Menschik; ivi, R9362/III/538503. SS-Officer’s file.

⁶⁸ Ibidem.

⁶⁹ Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 1133 A.12. Personnel file; ivi, R70-Italien/23, ff.110-111. “SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr. 2 für die Verleihung des KVK.I.Kl.m.Schw.”, 8.8.44, signed Menschik.

major sweep operation in July 1944⁷⁰. From an ideological standpoint, his superior assessed him in 1940 as a «National Socialist by conviction»⁷¹, an evaluation that also finds confirmation in his earlier political trajectory: already in the early 1920s he had joined a movement steeped in nationalism and antisemitism such as the *Deutschvölkischer Schutz- und Trutzbund*, and when that organization was dissolved he moved directly into the *Deutschnationale Volkspartei*. As early as April 1933, only a few months after the National Socialists came to power, he had taken out membership in the NSDAP.

The picture changes significantly in terms of generational experience and repressive background when we turn to the commander of *II. Bataillon*, Ernst Schröder⁷², who in his biography embodied the much-desired fusion between SS and police envisioned by Heinrich Himmler and Kurt Daluge, commander-in-chief of the *Ordnungspolizei*. Born in 1903, he had entered the police as early as 1924, becoming an officer four years later. Reconstructing his profile is not straightforward, as the evaluations of his superiors appear rather inconsistent and contradictory, at least until 1942. Some constants nevertheless emerge and deserve attention. The first concerns his political outlook. Schröder was a convinced National Socialist who had joined the *Allgemeine-SS* as early as 1934. In most of his periodic evaluations, the ideological component appears as a constant: in 1937 his commander emphasized his «ability to convey the ideological heritage of National Socialism to his subordinates effectively and in a purposeful manner»⁷³, while two years later another superior underlined that he was «a good and successful instructor, particularly in the field of ideological education»⁷⁴. At a later stage, he was even considered for the role of responsible of the *weltanschauliche Schulung* for police troops deployed in the Norwegian theater. Beyond his National Socialist “merits”, however, his superiors also pointed to his difficult and touchy character, as well as his excessive self-confidence.

His limitations became evident in the months following the *Anschluss*, when he was appointed adjutant to the newly installed *Inspekteur der Ordnungspolizei*, who soon requested a replacement, as Schröder proved unable to cope with the bureaucratic duties associated with the post. His first wartime assignment was also unsuccessful. Appointed commander of *1./Polizei-Bataillon 3* in April 1940, he took part in the conquest of Norway and subsequently performed security duties there. About six months into this new wartime career, his commander offered no praise:

He is often stubborn, detached from reality, and unpredictable. His character is reflected in his performance. It is extremely difficult to get him to fulfill his duty in a rigid and systematic manner. During the deployment in Norway I had repeatedly to reprimand him harshly, as his leadership of the company clearly revealed his shortcomings in military and police training. [...] Sch. does not adequately fulfill his role as company commander and is not suited for deployment in foreign theaters⁷⁵.

Such an assessment could have derailed Schröder's career, and his shortcomings were further confirmed in his next assignment. Having failed the test as a company commander, he was nevertheless sent abroad again, this time as an adjutant, in a command entrusted with the delicate task of reorganizing the Serbian police forces. In December 1941, an *Organisationsstab der Ordnungspolizei* (Organisational command of the Orpo) was established for this purpose, attached to the head of administration under the Military Commander in Serbia. However, he did not remain long in that role either, as his commander judged that, despite his undeniable commitment, he lacked the experience and breadth of vision required.

⁷⁰ Database.

⁷¹ BArch, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 1133 A.12, f.30. “Der Reichsminister des Innern. Pol.O.-Kdo. P.II. Vermerk”, 2.10.40.

⁷² Ivi, R19/647. Personnel file; ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 3079. Personnel file; ivi, R9361/III/554894. SS-Officer's file; ivi, R70-Italien/35, ff.191-192. “SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr. 1 für die Verleihung des EK II.Kl.”, 18.10.44, signed Menschik; ivi, ff.208-209. “SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr. 3 für die Verleihung des KVK.I.Kl.m.Schw.”, 4.12.44, signed Menschik.

⁷³ Ivi, R19/647, ff.19-21. “Kommando der Schutzpolizei Wilhelmshaven. Beurteilung”, 1.8.37.

⁷⁴ Ivi, ff.25-26. “Kommando der Schutzpolizei. Beurteilung”, 29.8.39.

⁷⁵ Ivi, ff.28-30. “Kommando der Schutzpolizei. Polizei-Bataillon Mitte. Beurteilung”, 30.7.41.

In March 1942, only a few months later, he was appointed company commander of 2./*Polizei-Bataillon* 64, the assumption being that operational employment might have better suited his inclinations. Indeed, in the Serbian theater, a sort of inner transformation appears to have taken place, as if he were aware that this might be his last opportunity to make a wartime career. During the long Serbian cycle, which from July 1942 saw him command a volunteer company in *I. Hilfspolizei-Bataillon Serbien* and at times hold interim command of the battalion itself, he effectively became an efficient “partisan hunter”. By the end of 1944, despite having several experienced commanders at the head of other units, *SS- und Polizeiführer* (SSPF, SS- and Police Leader) Karl Brunner described him as his best battalion commander, while colonel Menschik portrayed him as «an uncompromising military commander who in every engagement spurs on and leads his officers, NCOs, and men through his courage and composure»⁷⁶.

Completing this training path, in the summer of 1943 Schröder successfully passed a tactical course at *Polizei-Waffenschule I* in Dresden-Hellerau, qualifying to command a battalion. He was therefore a seasoned company commander, tempered by the test of interim battalion command in the “*Bandenbekämpfung*” in a harsh theatre such as Serbia; ideologically reliable, experienced in mountain sweeps, and accustomed to leading foreign recruits – an officer now given the opportunity to prove himself in that capacity within a new unit that, at least at that time, was certainly no elite formation, such as *Polizei-Regiment Bozen*.

The commander of *III. Bataillon, Hauptmann der Schutzpolizei* Hans Dobek, had an entirely different background and can in every respect be considered a “standard-bearer of National Socialism” and a prominent representative of the Austrian contingent of “old fighters” of the NSDAP who advanced rapidly in the ranks of the Reich police on the strength of their political credentials⁷⁷. A Viennese born in 1907, Dobek had gravitated toward party formations from a young age, joining an Austrian national socialist oriented organisation as early as October 1923. In 1928 he entered the *Bundessicherheitswache*, the Austrian police, and in 1932 he joined the NSDAP, also serving as a *Blockwart* in Vienna, before entering the Austrian *Allgemeine-SS*. On 25 July 1934 he took part in uniform in the failed putsch against the Dollfuss government – an event that would weigh heavily on his future and whose consequences would mark him for years:

That day, after the failure of the popular uprising, I was arrested for active participation in the occupation of the Chancellery by the 89. SS-Standarte. I was subsequently sentenced by the military court in Vienna to life imprisonment with hard labor. I served more than three and a half years of this sentence in the infamous hard-labor prison of Stein an der Donau, until I was pardoned on 18 February 1938 as a result of the Berchtesgaden agreements⁷⁸.

After the occupation of Austria, Dobek immediately placed himself at the disposal of the German police, initially being taken on by the Gestapo. Transferred to the *Schutzpolizei*, he was directly appointed officer «in recognition of my merits, as well as my actions and the sacrifice made for the National Socialist movement»⁷⁹, as he himself later wrote. While his political profile was beyond question, he still had to be trained for his new rank and was therefore sent to the officers’ school in Fürstenfeldbruck, where he attended a course reserved for Austrian policemen, selected primarily for their merits toward the NSDAP. Among them were several of Dobek’s former “comrades in struggle”, not a few of whom had been sentenced to severe prison terms by Austrian courts. According to the instructors, the overall results achieved by the course participants were disappointing from the outset⁸⁰, and Dobek himself failed the course, scoring well below average and being described as a policeman «of limited intellectual ability, relatively clumsy

⁷⁶ Ivi, R70-Italien/35, ff.191-192. “SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr. 1 für die Verleihung des EK II.Kl.”, 18.10.44, signed Menschik.

⁷⁷ Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 0982 A.13. Personnel file; Ivi, R9361/III/521527. SS-Officer’s file.

⁷⁸ Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 0982 A.13, f.391. “Johann Dobek, SS-Obersturmführer und Oberleutnant d.SchP. Betr.: Bitte um Überprüfung bzw. um Neufestsetzung des Besoldungsdienstalter”, 13.3.39, signed Dobek.

⁷⁹ Ibidem.

⁸⁰ Ivi, R20/69, f.84. “Pol.-Offizier.-u. Schutzpolizeischule Fürstenfeldbruck. Funkspruch”, 16.12.38.

and awkward»⁸¹. These disappointing results did not, however, harm his career in any way. Transferred to Vienna shortly after the course, he found in the local *Inspekteur der Ordnungspolizei, Generalmajor der Polizei Dr. Karl Retzlaff*, a staunch supporter, who as early as October 1939 proposed him for promotion. Soon afterward, Dobek was also awarded the highest National Socialist decoration, the *Blutorden*, in recognition of the hardships he had endured in prison and his “merits” during the failed coup of 1934.

Over the next three years he worked as an assistant in Retzlaff's command before being sent to an operational unit, *III./Polizei-Gebirgsjäger-Regiment 18*, where for more than a year he commanded *9. Kompanie*, operating mainly in Upper Carniola and Karelia. According to his commanders' evaluations, he adapted very well to his new role, distinguishing himself from the outset in the fight against partisans during operations against Slovenian resistance fighters. Only two months after taking up the post, his battalion commander already offered a highly positive assessment:

He has quickly become proficient in his new troop duties. [...] His ability to assess situations and orient himself in difficult mountain terrain must be emphasized. [...] During operations in Upper Carniola he led his company correctly, proving his worth in every respect. He strives to make up for shortcomings in troop service. [...] He has been able to instill a positive spirit within his company and in a short time transform his men into enterprising fighters. In every respect he leads by example. [...] Dobek has distinguished himself as an operational company commander and is suited for this employment. He is accustomed to the hardships of mountain operations⁸².

Even from this excerpt, several elements emerge that explain his later selection as battalion commander in *Polizei-Regiment Bozen*, particularly his mountain experience and his ability to shape men quickly for the “fight against the bands” in difficult contexts. As the commander of *SS-Polizei-Gebirgsjäger-Regiment 18* later recalled in his memoirs, Dobek also proved his reliability in Karelia, where he at times operated independently with his company, holding a sector along the front line marked by repeated clashes with Red Army reconnaissance patrols and partisan forces⁸³. It should also be added that he was an accomplished skier, having personally conducted ski courses for Orpo personnel.

Yet, beyond his merits in the field, he was also an officer marked by his past. In an evaluation from April 1943, when the unit was stationed near the Arctic Circle on border security and patrol duties under *Wehrmacht* command, the acting battalion commander offered a somewhat ambivalent profile. While once again emphasizing his qualities as an excellent and experienced company commander, the evaluator noted that Dobek was burdened by «a deep pessimism, probably stemming from his conviction and imprisonment during the years of struggle»⁸⁴. This resulted in a tendency «initially to present encountered difficulties as insurmountable, only then to throw himself into overcoming them, usually with success»⁸⁵. In the evaluator's view, although Dobek was a proven fighter and certainly worthy of promotion, his personal characteristics made him more suitable for service in a territorial command than in an operational unit. These remarks were forcefully countered by Retzlaff himself, who described him as a «pioneering fighter of the National Socialist movement»⁸⁶. The negative evaluation had no consequences, and in the summer of 1943 Dobek attended the same course as Schröder, at the end of which he too was declared fit to command a battalion. When the transfer order to Bozen arrived, Dobek was in Tyrol attending a police mountain guide course.

⁸¹ Ivi, f.6. “10. Offizier-Anwärter-Lehrgang. Beurteilungsliste”, 4.39.

⁸² Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 0982 A.13, f.445. “Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer bei den Reichsstatthaltern in Wien, in Ober- und Niederdonau im Wehrkreis XVII. Der Inspekteur der Ordnungspolizei. Abschlußbeurteilung über Hauptmann d.Sch. Johann Dobek für die Zeit vom 23.9.1941 bis 30.4.1943”, 8.5.43, signed Retzlaff.

⁸³ H. Franz, *Gebirgsjäger der Polizei. Polizei-Gebirgsjäger-Regiment 18 und Polizei-Gebirgs-Artillerieabteilung 1942-1945*, Podzun, Bad Nauheim 1963, pp. 62-63.

⁸⁴ BArch, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 0982 A.13, f.445.

⁸⁵ Ibidem.

⁸⁶ Ibidem.

After his death in July 1944⁸⁷, command of the *III. Bataillon* was temporarily assumed by the senior officer of the unit, *Hauptmann der Schutzpolizei* Günter Richter, who will be discussed shortly. However, by late autumn, he was succeeded by Captain Erwin Grimm, an officer who arrived with extensive experience in repressive operations⁸⁸. Born in 1912 and a member of the *Kriegsjugendgeneration*, Grimm had entered the police in 1936 as an officer candidate and received his lieutenant's shoulder boards the following year after training at the officer cadet school in Berlin-Köpenick. Although information about him is relatively scarce, it has been established that from 1941 onward he had been active in the context of the "fight against the bands", initially within *Polizei-Bataillon 318*, with which he had also taken part from the outset in the campaign of aggression against the Soviet Union. At a later stage he was employed in a training unit, before subsequently serving with *I. and II. Hilfspolizei-Bataillon Serbien* in the Balkan theater, much like Schröder. Dobek was thus succeeded by a decorated veteran of counter-insurgency operations, who would command the battalion until the end of the war, also holding command of *Sicherungsabschnitt VIIa* in the Cadore area, where he was tasked with leading all anti-partisan operations in the area⁸⁹.

Company commanders: a look at III. Bataillon

With regard to company commanders, the picture changes and clearly reflects the difficult context in which the regiment was formed, as it was necessary to find men who were more or less suitable for the task wherever possible, while at the same time selecting officers with both operational and training experience. In this respect, it is useful to focus on the situation within *III. Bataillon*, which presents an overall picture largely in line with what has already been reconstructed elsewhere concerning the second battalion⁹⁰.

Among the company commanders, the senior officer was the already mentioned captain Günter Richter, placed at the head of *9. Kompanie*, who on more than one occasion stood in for Dobek, including for several months after the latter went missing in the summer of 1944⁹¹. Born in 1914, after completing his compulsory military service in the autumn of 1936, Richter entered the police and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in March 1938. After the outbreak of war, he served for a couple of months as a platoon commander in *Polizei-Bataillon 62* in Poland; in November he was transferred to Silesia, to the police school in Kattowitz, where he was employed as an instructor. He then moved to the local police district command in the same city as district adjutant. At the beginning of 1942 he was still serving in that command, by then with the rank of captain, when he was placed in command of *Reserve-Polizei-Kompanie Gleiwitz*, which, according to his own statements, he led until February 1943. Overall, his profile combined a versatile set of experiences, ranging from training to leading a platoon in a context of military and police operations, and he did possess company-level command experience. At the same time, however, he does not appear to have had extensive operational experience in the "fight against the bands" proper, unlike his colleague commanding *10. Kompanie*.

⁸⁷ Database. He was initially reported as missing in action, together with his driver and a logistics officer, but in fact they all died in a partisan ambush in the Brescian mountains. See also Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, Staatsarchiv Leipzig (StAL), Polizeipräsidium Leipzig, Nr.PP-PA 519. "SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen. Betr.: Pol.-Sekt. Bruno Reißig, Heimatdienststelle PV. Leipzig, vermißt", 18.7.44, fto. Menschik.

⁸⁸ Staatsarchiv Nürnberg (StaNu), Spruchkammer Ansbach Land, G106. Denazification; BArch, R9361/II/320331. "Der Reichsminister des Innern. Vorschlag zur Ernennung", 1944; ivi, RH 7-1287. "Sich.Division 213. Verleihungsliste Nr.4 für KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.", 1.8.41; ivi, RH 7-1950. "Sich.Div. 213. Verleihungsliste EK II.Kl.", 10.9.41.

⁸⁹ BArch, R70-Italien/102, f.99. "Der SS- und Polizeiführer Bozen. Vorschlag zur Beförderung", 8.5.45, fto. Brunner. For a copy of the same document see also ACS, Uffici, b.9, f.34. On Grimm as head of *Sicherungsabschnitt VIIa* see also T. Chiussi, *Sappada*, cit., pp. 224-225.

⁹⁰ E. Di Fonzo, *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen*, cit., pp. 193-194.

⁹¹ BArch, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 2313. Personnel file; ivi, R70-Italien/28, ff.150-151. "III./SS-Pol.-Rgt. Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr.9 für die Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.", 9.12.44, signed Grimm; ivi, B563/196434. "KgF Entschädigung", 9.6.54; ivi, B563/ZA 11/212 AA 002557. Form of personal particulars, 10.8.45; ivi, B563/ZK-R 529-429 Richter, Günter; Landesarchiv NRW, Abt. Rheinland, NW 1005-G41A/3519 Richter, Guenther. Questionnaire, 29.8.48.

Oberleutnant der Schutzpolizei Hans Hennecke, present from the regiment's formation, also had a background as an instructor, strengthened, however, by significant service in operational units⁹². Born in 1913, he had entered the *Landespolizei* in 1934 and transferred to the *Schutzpolizei* in 1937 after completing his compulsory military service. Commissioned as a second lieutenant in 1939 and a member of the *Allgemeine-SS*, he served in the cadre of *Polizei-Ausbildungs-Bataillon Remscheid* as a platoon commander in that training unit, from which *Polizei-Bataillon 317* was formed. Deployed from the outset of the campaign of aggression against the Soviet Union, he remained on the Eastern Front with the same battalion until July 1942, earning more than one decoration for military valor in the process⁹³. From January 1943 onward he served with *5./SS-Polizei-Regiment 7* in Norway, where he was still stationed in the late summer of 1943⁹⁴. Upon his arrival in South Tyrol, he thus brought with him substantial operational experience, including service in the Protectorate, on the Eastern Front, and most recently in Norway.

As for the first commander of *11. Kompanie*, who, however, remained with the regiment for only a few months, it should be noted that he possessed a particularly solid background, with significant experience both in training and in operational deployment⁹⁵. Born in 1913 and a member of the *Kriegsjugendgeneration*, *Oberleutnant der Schutzpolizei* Bruno Schwarz had entered the police in 1937, after completing three years of military service. Promoted to second lieutenant in 1940, he joined the *Allgemeine-SS* on the same occasion. By October of that year he was already serving with *Reserve-Polizei-Bataillon 112* in the occupied Netherlands, thus beginning a period of foreign wartime service that would effectively end only with his capture in Innichen in May 1945. In February 1941 he was selected to join the small group of instructors tasked with training the Dutch police, organized within the *niederländisches Polizei-Lehr-Bataillon*, where he remained for well over a year and also commanded the small German cadre. At his own request, he obtained the coveted *Frontbewährung* – frontline probation – and was assigned to *I./Polizei-Regiment 8*, operating in the central and southern sectors of the Eastern Front from September 1942 until July 1943, when he attended a course for company commanders. When he arrived in Bozen in the autumn, he could rightly be considered a valuable asset, with extensive experience in training foreign recruits, specific preparation as a company commander, and frontline experience in the Soviet Union. The reasons for his replacement as commander of *11. Kompanie* are unclear, but he did not leave the Italian theater; instead, he was employed as a company commander in the Belluno area within *II./Polizei-Regiment Alpenvorland*, where he led both *5. and 7. Kompanie*⁹⁶.

Schwarz was replaced as acting company commander by *Leutnant der Schutzpolizei* Walter Wolgast, whose profile certainly did not match that of his predecessor⁹⁷. Born in 1915, he entered the police in May 1939 after more than four years of service in the *SS-Verfügungstruppen*, Himmler's armed formation from which the *Waffen-SS* would later develop. From *SS-Standarte "Germania"* he transferred to the *Ordnungspolizei*, and with the outbreak of war he was assigned to the notorious *Reserve-Polizei-Bataillon 101*, with which he remained for more than two years. The operational history of this battalion is well

⁹² BArch, VBS (R19)/ZB 1081 A.04. Personnel file; ivi, R9361/III/530376. SS-Officer's file; ivi, R9361/III/72371. RuSHA Akte; ivi, B563/ZK-H 792/282 Hennecke, Hans; StANu, Rep. 502 VI, H 94. KV-Anklage interrogations, Hennecke, Hans; Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Wiesbaden, 520/11, 13135/1. Questionnaire, 1.5.46; ivi, 520/11, 13135/2. Denazification.

⁹³ BArch, RH 7-1337. "Sicherungs-Division 286. Verleihungsliste Nr.118 für das KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.", 1.11.41; ivi, RH 7-2418. "Der Kommandierende General der Sicherungstruppen und Befehlshaber im Heeres-Gebiet Mitte. Verleihungsliste Nr.67 für EK II.Kl.", 5.42.

⁹⁴ Ivi, R9361/III/530376. Notice of service, 30.8.43. This was the same unit with which he had operated in the Soviet Union from the summer of 1941 onward; following the general reorganization of police formations in July 1942, *Polizei-Bataillon 317* was redesignated *II./Polizei-Regiment 7*.

⁹⁵ Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 3206. Personnel file; ivi, R9361/III/555912. SS-Officer's file; ivi, B563/ZK-S 1531/677 Schwarz, Bruno; ivi, RH 7-1720. "Der Kommandierende General der Sicherungstruppen und Befehlshaber im Heeresgebiet Mitte. Verleihungsliste Nr.924 für KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.", 4.43; Landesarchiv NRW, Abt. Rheinland, NW 1090/34 Schwarz, Bruno. Questionnaire, 15.1.49.

⁹⁶ BArch, R70-Italien/36, ff.25-26. "5./Pol.-Rgt. Alpenvorland. Vorschlagsliste Nr.1a für die Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.", 27.11.44, fto. Schwarz; ivi, ZA 11/330 AA 032058. Form of personal particulars, 27.5.45.

⁹⁷ Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 3995. Personnel file; ivi, R9361/III/564633. SS-Officer's file; ivi, R9361/III/229877. RuSHA Akte; Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 331-1 II Polizeibehörde II, Nr. 646. Karteikarte Wolgast, Walter.

documented⁹⁸; it suffices to recall that during the period in which Wolgast served in the unit, it participated in the conquest of Poland, then operated in the Warthegau in the context of population transfers and deportations, and was later tasked with guard duties in the Litzmannstadt ghetto. After returning to Hamburg in May 1941, the men of the battalion also took part in three deportation operations targeting the Jews of the Hanseatic city. In 1942 Wolgast was transferred to *Reserve-Polizei-Bataillon 104*, before being selected for an officer career in 1943. Arriving in Bozen in November, he was a newly commissioned second lieutenant intended to command a platoon. He could certainly claim experience of foreign deployment, but always in subordinate roles, far removed from that of company commander – a function he would nevertheless be called upon to fulfill within a few months.

Platoon Commanders, Adjutants, and Orderly Officers

The picture becomes even more differentiated when attention shifts to adjutants and platoon commanders holding officer rank, most of whom came from the *Gendarmerie*. Here too one finds a substantial nucleus of men with experience in training roles, and some could also point to operational service. Nevertheless, the overall profile that emerges is that of officials who had worked primarily in routine institutional duties within the Reich or in annexed territories such as the Warthegau or the Reichsgau Danzig und Westpreußen, and who were essentially expected to “cut their teeth” under field conditions. A clear example in this respect is *Bezirks-Leutnant der Gendarmerie* Fritz Broszeit, whose background included significant experience in training but not in operational service⁹⁹. Assigned as a platoon commander in *5./SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen*, he distinguished himself to the point of serving as acting company commander. Yet captain Schröder himself emphasized that for Broszeit «the sphere of leading men» remained «uncharted territory»¹⁰⁰. The same applied to *Bezirks-Leutnant der Gendarmerie* Michael Halbedel, likewise a platoon commander¹⁰¹. Although he had gained experience as a ski instructor, his only prior operational background lay within the *Feldgendarmerie*, and even there he had held no command responsibilities. For him too, the learning curve in positions of authority effectively began in Italy. There he appears to have performed well enough to be sent back to the Reich in August 1944 to attend a course for career officers – an examination he ultimately did not pass.

In the absence of the personnel files of several of these subordinate officials, which could not be located or no longer exist, even a cursory glance at their decorations reveals that, by the fourth year of the war, some possessed a decidedly modest wartime record – especially when one considers the relative generosity with which at least the *Kriegsverdienstkreuz II. Klasse mit Schwertern* was typically awarded. *Oberleutnant der Gendarmerie* Franz Ulrich, adjutant to the commander of *III. Bataillon*, for example, could claim only a single war merit decoration, and not one earned in combat¹⁰². A similar pattern appears in the case of *Bezirks-Leutnant der Gendarmerie* Michael Waller, who served as a platoon commander first in *II.* and then in *I. Bataillon*¹⁰³, as well as *Bezirks-Leutnant der Gendarmerie* Wilhelm Hesse, also a platoon commander and later placed in command of a company of the *Corpo di Sicurezza Trentino*. Hesse could certainly wear the ribbon of an Iron Cross Second Class earned during the Great War, yet in the current conflict he had received only a merit decoration without swords – again not for actions under enemy fire – during his service with *Gendarmerie-Abteilung Strelno (Kreis Mogilno)* in the Reichs-

⁹⁸ See in particular C. Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion and the Final Solution in Poland*, Penguin Books, London 2001.

⁹⁹ Landesarchiv NRW, Abt. Rheinland, NW 1033/11104 Broszeit, Fritz. Questionnaire, 9.9.48.

¹⁰⁰ BArch, R70-Italien/35, ff.124-125. “II./SS-Pol.-Rgt. Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr. 1 für die Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.”, 20.8.44, signed Schröder.

¹⁰¹ Staatsarchiv Augsburg, Polizei Schwaben Personalakten, Nr. 3463. Personnel file of the *Bayerische Landpolizei*; ivi, Spruchkammerakten Füßen, Nr.1050. Denazification.

¹⁰² BArch, R70-Italien/35, ff.131-132. “III./SS-Pol.-Rgt. Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr. 4 zur Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.”, 38.8.44, signed Richter.

¹⁰³ Ivi, R70-Italien/35, f.11. “II./Pol.-Rgt. Bozen. Vorschlag zur Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.”, 18.2.44, signed Schröder.

gau Wartheland¹⁰⁴. As for the orderly officer of *II. Bataillon, Bezirks-Leutnant der Gendarmerie* Wilhelm Heinzmann, according to Schröder himself – who would later praise him on several occasions – he saw combat for the first time only in July 1944¹⁰⁵. Equally significant, in closing a circle that could easily be widened further, is the case of *Bezirks-Leutnant der Gendarmerie* Karl Reinhard, initially orderly officer of *III. Bataillon*, later in command of a platoon and subsequently also acting commander of *7. Kompanie*, who arrived in Italy without any decorations at all¹⁰⁶. According to their superiors, most of these men would later distinguish themselves in operations during the Italian campaign, essentially learning on the job in the field. The starting conditions, however, were unmistakable: cadres had to be found at all costs, regardless of their prior background.

Put differently, at this level of the regimental hierarchy, profiles such as that of *Oberleutnant der Gendarmerie* Anton Zachbauer, adjutant in *II. Bataillon*, represented an exception¹⁰⁷. Born in 1907, he had entered the police in 1928 and had already distinguished himself as a young NCO for his abilities. Transferring from the *Schutzpolizei* to the *Gendarmerie* in 1938, his peacetime and early wartime service included important assignments as an instructor, first at the police school in Frankfurt and later at the *Gendarmerie* school in Bad Ems, where he served between August 1940 and September 1941. In the words of the commandant of the institution, he was an «exemplary instructor with good teaching abilities»¹⁰⁸, an evaluation which led to his recommendation for officer training. After being directly commissioned as a first lieutenant in December 1941 through an accelerated course, in May 1942 he was assigned to a newly formed operational unit, *Gendarmerie-Zug (motorisiert) 34*, whose training he supervised in preparation for deployment to the East. Arriving in the Soviet Union in September, he operated for several months in the Caucasus, distinguishing himself in the eyes of his immediate commander, who emphasized not only his «exceptional tactical and military qualities»¹⁰⁹, but also entrusted him with sensitive duties such as overseeing a key line of communication during the retreat of German forces from the area. In Italy he likewise stood out in Schröder's estimation, who described him as a «capable, versatile officer [...] courageous and daring in operations against the bands»¹¹⁰. In the spring of 1944 he also completed a company commanders' course, but upon returning to the regiment he continued to serve in his role as adjutant, at least until the final phase of the war, as he ended the conflict at the head of *11. Kompanie*¹¹¹ – a transfer that most likely saved his life, given the fate of the majority of the officers of *II. Bataillon*.

Shifting the focus to the personnel of the economic-administrative services – essential to the formation and functioning of the unit – it becomes clear that most of the officials initially sent from Berlin did not meet general von Kamptz's expectations. He therefore quickly requested their replacement, as a large proportion of them had «no idea of their duties»¹¹². Here too, the profile of *Polizei-Sekretär* Bruno Reissig – who was quickly dispatched from Berlin following the BdO's strong complaints, along with the aforementioned Baumgärtner and Schwäkendiek – represented more an exception than the rule¹¹³. Assigned to *III. Bataillon*, he was an official who not only had nearly twenty years of experience in that

¹⁰⁴ Ivi, f.9. "II./Pol.-Rgt. Bozen. Vorschlag zur Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.", 18.2.44, signed Schröder; ivi, B563/ZK-H 1029/104 Hesse, Wilhelm.

¹⁰⁵ Ivi, R70-Italien/35, ff.100-101. "II./SS-Pol.-Rgt. Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr.4 zur Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.", 6.8.44, signed Schröder. From the conquest of Poland onward, he was assigned to the Rybnik district, an area directly annexed to the Reich. References to his service prior to his deployment in Italy can be found in Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, MInn, Nr. 99801. Widow's pension application.

¹⁰⁶ BArch, R70-Italien/35, f.8. "II./Pol.-Rgt. Bozen. Vorschlag zur Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.", 18.2.44, signed Schröder.

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 4117. Personnel file; BLHA, 161 NS-Archiv, ZB 0881 A.1. Personnel file, vol.A; ivi, ZB 0881 A.2. Personnel file, vol.B.

¹⁰⁸ Ivi, ZB 0881 A.1, f.53. "Der Kommandeur der Gendarmerieschule in Bad Ems. Beurteilung", 5.12.41, signed Bardua.

¹⁰⁹ Ivi, f.58. "Führer der Gendarmeriezüge (mot.). Beurteilung", 14.5.43, signed Marx.

¹¹⁰ Ivi, f.60. "II./SS-Pol.Rgt. Bozen. Beurteilungsnotiz", 8.7.44, signed Schröder.

¹¹¹ BArch, B563/ZA 11/405 AA070467. Form of personal particulars, 23.6.45.

¹¹² Ivi, R19/136, f.51. Copy, 27.10.43.

¹¹³ StAL, Polizeipräsidium Leipzig, Nr.PP-PA 519. Personnel file.

field, but had also performed such duties within *Polizei-Bataillon 306* between May 1942 and February of the following year, during a particularly harsh operational cycle on the Eastern Front marked by anti-partisan repression and frontline deployment, which led to the virtual removal of the battalion from the order of battle of the *Ordnungspolizei*.

Overall, moving down the chain of command reveals a picture of specific skills that was far from solid, reflecting a crisis of leadership cadres that gripped the Orpo at that stage, further aggravated by the new hemorrhage in men and matériel represented by the occupation of Italy. A closer look at these profiles makes it possible to grasp more clearly the extent to which *Polizei-Regiment Bozen* was formed at a moment of genuine crisis in leadership personnel. From Berlin's perspective, it is evident that many of the men sent to Bozen at that juncture were expected to "cut their teeth" as occupation troops – especially since no one could foresee the scale that the Italian Resistance would eventually assume.

Political trajectories, continuities, and ruptures

A comprehensive look at the officers presented thus far also makes it possible to assess the individual political trajectories observable within the *Ordnungspolizei*, an institution characterized by a broad range of backgrounds and a high degree of continuity of service between the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich¹¹⁴. If we consider, for example, the profiles of the battalion commanders, they fully reflect the "stratification" of experiences, political affiliations, and contexts of socialization within the Orpo officer corps. Dobek undoubtedly represented an element of Nazification introduced into that group of officials, much like the many "old fighters of the Ostmark" to whom the Orpo offered significant opportunities for career advancement and social mobility, whereas Grimm was the product of a uniformed career that began in the aftermath of the so-called *Machtergreifung* and unfolded entirely within a police force subject to an increasingly pronounced process of Nazification, from which he nevertheless appears to have maintained a minimal distance, joining the NSDAP only in 1937 and refraining from entering the *Allgemeine-SS* despite formally possessing all the necessary requirements. Captain Richter, who, as noted, held interim command of *III. Bataillon* for a considerable period, never took out party membership and did not join the *Allgemeine-SS* either. Kretschmer and Schröder, on the other hand, displayed different backgrounds: the former belonged to the *Frontkämpfergeneration*, had passed through a *Freikorps*, and had already been active in antisemitic movements such as the *Deutscher Schutz- und Trutzbund* during the Weimar period, yet remained outside Himmler's order despite meeting the formal requirements for entry; the latter was a career officer formed within a democratic republic who, like many of his colleagues, fully embraced National Socialism, finding in the "fight against the bands" the most effective way to contribute to Nazi terror. One might describe him as a National Socialist in every respect, particularly in light of the proposal to employ him actively in *weltanschauliche Schulung*.

If we turn to the situation within the *Stab*, the contrasting backgrounds and party affiliations of Menschik and Dollhäubl – both nonetheless united by solid professional competence – make clear how varied the political landscape could be within the Orpo officer corps, and within *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* in particular. Küntzler is another telling example of an Austrian "militant Nazi" who operated illegally from within state institutions, much like Dobek. Krombach, by contrast, never joined either the party or the SS, while Brecht and Ulbrich took out NSDAP membership only in 1937 and never entered the *Allgemeine-SS*. Baumgärtner even had a past as a member of the SPD, which he evidently sought to "purge" in 1934 by joining the SA, at a time when NSDAP admissions were closed. His earlier political affiliations undoubtedly slowed his career progression relative to his seniority, yet this does not appear to

¹¹⁴ See for instance H. Diercks, *Die Hamburger Ordnungs- und Schutzpolizei 1933 bis 1945*, in: *Polizei, Verfolgung und Gesellschaft im Nationalsozialismus. Beiträge zur Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung in Norddeutschland, Heft 15*, (edited by) KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme, Edition Temmen, Bremen 2013, pp. 26-28.

have made him unwelcome to his direct superiors. Protected by von Kamptz and appreciated and praised by Menschik, he would end his career as head of supply services for the entire *Operationszone Alpenvorland* under the direct authority of *SS- und Polizeiführer* Brunner, who even attempted to secure his promotion at the end of the war¹¹⁵. Knaack, for his part, had entered the police through the *SA-Feldjägerkorps* and would also join the *Allgemeine-SS*; however, only in January 1945, under documented pressure recorded in his personnel file, he finally decided to leave the Evangelical Church¹¹⁶.

Looking at other profiles within the regiment, similar tendencies toward alignment and the characteristic ambiguities of the National Socialist police also emerge. Zachbauer followed a markedly slow path of formal Nazification, even though outwardly he represented a perfect example of the fusion between SS and police: he joined the NSDAP only in May 1940 and entered the *Allgemeine-SS* in December of the following year, at the end of his officer training course, certainly not a coincidence. His gradual alignment was most likely driven above all by his desire to facilitate career advancement and to present himself as a fully conforming and trustworthy official. Even in his case, however, it took three years and a reminder from Berlin to complete his integration into Himmler's order through his formal departure from the Church¹¹⁷. The already mentioned Reissig likewise joined the party only in 1940, not without difficulty; indeed, after the so-called *Machtergreifung*, investigations had been opened against him because, according to complaints from some comrades, he had attempted to «instruct them politically on how to achieve “unity of the Marxist front – the merger of SPD and KPD”»¹¹⁸.

Finally, it is worth observing the overall situation among the company commanders, who – with the exception of Richter – formed a particularly Nazified group. Within this circle, the rate of membership in the *Allgemeine-SS* was higher than the regimental average, standing at around 60%. Among them, however, there were no “old fighters of the movement” comparable to Dobek or Küntzler; only one had joined the party as early as 1935, while the majority obtained NSDAP membership *en bloc* in 1937, at the first available opportunity (aside from specific individual cases). Membership in the *Allgemeine-SS* should therefore be read, on the one hand, as the direct result of lowered admission standards – introduced in particular to allow an ever-growing number of policemen to enter – and, on the other, in light of the possible career opportunities such a step offered, enabling these men to present themselves as officials fully integrated into the police force envisioned by Himmler, fused into a single body with his SS.

NCOs and enlisted leaders

Not surprisingly, an even more diversified picture emerges when the focus of analysis shifts to NCOs and enlisted leaders, who in many cases were called upon to command platoons and, more generally, were entrusted with leadership at squad level. The initial core of cadres selected for *Polizei-Regiment Bozen* came predominantly from the *Galizische SS-Freiwilligen Regimenter 4* and *5*, two regiments formed in July 1943 with Ukrainian recruits from the Lemberg district¹¹⁹. In turn, the German personnel for both units had been drawn respectively from the already mentioned *Polizei-Ausbildungs-Regiment Oranienburg*, a training formation, from *III./SS-Polizei-Regiment 8*, a battalion virtually wiped out from the Orpo order of battle during frontline fighting in January 1943 and in the process of being dissolved and from *Polizei-Schützen-Regiment 32*, formed in April and only recently operational. These were therefore highly diverse backgrounds, yet linked by a common thread, most notably a generalized experience in training recruits within newly formed units or training formations.

¹¹⁵ BAArch, R70-Italien/102, f.95. “Der SS- und Polizeiführer Bozen. Beförderungsvorschlag”, 8.5.45, signed Brunner.

¹¹⁶ Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 1153 A.11. Personnel file.

¹¹⁷ Ivi, VBS 1069 (R19)/ZB 4117. Personnel file.

¹¹⁸ StAL, Polizeipräsidium Leipzig, Nr.PP-PA 519, f.64. Report, 13.5.33.

¹¹⁹ BAArch, R19/326, ff. 44-49. Order for the establishment of both regiments, 20.7.1943.

In terms of age, a corpus of around eighty cadres from the Reich yields an average age of roughly thirty-four at the end of 1943, entirely in line with the men they would lead, as will be discussed in greater detail below. As for wartime and repressive experience, whereas in the already mentioned *SS-Polizei-Regiment 15* one can observe the substantial presence of veterans of various campaigns at this level, in the case of the South Tyrolean unit the picture that emerges from cross-referencing multiple sources confirms what has already been noted above. Experienced and decorated NCOs and enlisted leaders appear to have been more the exception than the rule. This emerges especially from decoration proposals, which often show that the individuals concerned possessed no previous awards for valor, leading to conclusions similar to those already drawn previously. An analysis of a sample of over fifty decoration proposals, cross-referenced with a substantial body of denazification files¹²⁰, reveals the following: more than 44% of NCOs and enlisted leaders had no wartime decorations whatsoever, not even those most generously awarded. The finding is also borne out by photographic evidence from the regiment's first months of existence, where ribbons and decorations appear to be the exception rather than the rule. Overall, only about 30% of the sample could claim operational cycles in occupied territories, from Serbia to Poland, with roughly half of these on the Eastern Front.

By contrast, an analysis of identification tags within *SS-Polizei-Regiment 15* shows that 79.5% of NCOs and enlisted leaders had come from other operational units before being assigned to the new regiment. In the South Tyrolean formation, this figure was only just above 53.5%, a striking difference¹²¹. This constitutes yet another clear indicator of the difficulties encountered in finding suitable and experienced personnel even at the lower levels of the hierarchy. Further evidence of this far from ideal situation can be found in an order issued from Berlin on 30 October 1943: it provided for the transfer of fifty NCOs from the Netherlands in exchange for an equal number from the regiment «who cannot be employed as such»¹²², that is, one fifth of those initially sent to Bozen. Moreover, the *BdO Italien* was instructed to send successive groups of twenty NCOs from the regiment to *Polizei-Waffenschule II* in Laon for additional training. In short, during the formation phase, numerical requirements had clearly taken precedence over combat effectiveness, an aspect that emerges from a wide array of sources.

As the records make clear, from an operational standpoint the majority of squad and platoon leaders were expected to acquire field experience in Italy, much like the men they commanded, drawing on the background and experience of a minority who had already been through war. Among these was *Obewachtmeister der Schutzpolizei der Reserve* Hofmann, who had a long service record in the Protectorate, in Poland, and finally in the central sector of the Eastern Front. *Zugwachtmeister der Schutzpolizei* A.M. was another decorated *Ostkämpfer*, who in the new Italian theater would «make use of the experience gained during service in the East» to lead his men «to success in every operation»¹²³, in the words of his company commander. Sergeant R.P., for his part, “could boast” almost a year of frontline combat in the Leningrad sector, while his counterpart J.K. had accumulated anti-partisan experience in Poland, the Soviet Union, Lower Styria, and Serbia¹²⁴. *Wachtmeister der Schutzpolizei* J.H. of the *11. Kompanie* had served in Lower Styria and Serbia between April 1942 and January 1943 with *9./Polizei-Regiment 5*, eventually joining *Polizei-Regiment Bozen* via *Galizisches SS-Freiwilligen Regiment 5*¹²⁵. Among the few NCOs

¹²⁰ Data are drawn from different archives and holdings. See BArch, R70-Italien; ACS, Uffici, b. 10; StaM, Spruchkammern; Landesarchiv NRW, Abt. Rheinland, holdings: NW 1000-EÜ; NW 1005-G41A; NW 1039-F; NW 1039-K; NW 1039-O; NW 1049; NW 1089; NW 1013-II/P.

¹²¹ Database. Identity discs were at times replaced when personnel were reassigned to a new unit; however, this practice was not standard.

¹²² BArch, R19/332, f.54. “Der Chef der Ordnungspolizei. Betr.: Austausch vom Unterführern beim Pol.-Regiment Bozen [...]”, 30.10.43, signed Rogalski.

¹²³ Ivi, R70-Italien/35, ff.228-229. “7./SS-Pol.-Rgt. Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr.4 für die Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.”, 9.12.44, signed Morgenthal.

¹²⁴ Ivi, f.15. “Polizei Regiment Bozen. Vorschlag zur Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.”, 19.2.44, signed Menschik; ivi, R70-Italien/28, ff.150-151. “III./SS-Pol.-Rgt. Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr.9 für die Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.”, 9.12.44, signed Grimm.

¹²⁵ Private archive. Polizei-Dienstpass and Soldbuch of J.H.

of South Tyrolean origin was *Zugwachtmeister der Schutzpolizei* Gottfried Nollett, who had emigrated following his option and joined the Munich police, where in the autumn of 1940 he had been assigned to *Polizei-Bataillon 253*, subsequently serving in Norway¹²⁶.

Overall, specialists in repression with experience in other occupation contexts were certainly not lacking, and they were distributed fairly evenly among the three battalions and the *Stab*. In absolute terms, however, they do not appear to have weighed as decisively as one might expect, especially considering that this was a newly formed unit in which the men – many of whom had already served under arms – had to be retrained according to German tactical principles in order to face the asymmetric warfare with which they would sooner or later be confronted.

5. SOUTH TYROLEAN RECRUITS

Age structure

As for the South Tyroleans who formed the core of the unit from the outset, an examination of the available data shows that the backbone of the regiment consisted of men born between 1901 and 1915. In terms of recorded losses, the year group most heavily affected was that of 1905 (approximately 8.8%), closely followed by 1912 (approximately 8.5%)¹²⁷. Although in its original structure the regiment was composed of relatively older recruits, at least by military standards, it must also be noted that with the introduction of the recruitment decrees issued by *Gauleiter* Hofer, the unit was partially rejuvenated, eventually incorporating very young recruits, especially from the late summer and autumn of 1944 onward. A telling example is the list of residents of the municipality of Villnöss called up for service in the unit in August 1944: of the thirteen conscripts, the oldest belonged to the 1919 class, while all the others had been born in the 1920s, with the two youngest born as late as 1927¹²⁸. A similar pattern appears among those called up from Eppan in the same month, two thirds of whom belonged to the 1923-25 year groups¹²⁹. The regiment thus brought together the generation of fathers and that of their sons fighting side by side, a rather unusual situation, though not entirely anomalous within the Orpo, which sought to secure recruits by any possible means. In the Italian context as well, the picture reflects the general situation. For instance, in April 1944 the command of *III./SS-Polizei-Regiment 12*, stationed in Verona, noted that the average age of the policemen under its command was around thirty-eight¹³⁰, whereas a cross-check of a large sample of names from *I./SS-Polizei-Regiment 20*, also deployed in Italy, yields an average age of thirty¹³¹. Two *Schutzpolizei* units examined in the same wartime phase could thus display markedly different age profiles; if we turn to the *Gendarmerie*, yet another picture emerges, with a considerable proportion of personnel also belonging to the *Frontkämpfergeneration*.

All things considered, *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* occupied a position of complete normality within the Orpo in this regard. The data compiled by Steffen Prauser on the dead and wounded of via Rasella are fully confirmed by an analysis of overall losses, which indicates an average age among the South Tyroleans of approximately thirty-five and a half at the end of 1944, even when compared with a much broader sample¹³². It must be noted, however, that almost 72% of all recorded losses occurred before the end of August 1944, that is, before the incorporation of the younger recruits mentioned above. A

¹²⁶ Database.

¹²⁷ Ibidem.

¹²⁸ Gemeinde Villnöss, archive, Kat. 8 1944. List of enlisted men, 11.8.44.

¹²⁹ Gemeinde Eppan, archive, Kat. 8 1944. List of enlisted men, 11.8.44.

¹³⁰ IFSML, holding III./SS-Pol.Rgt.12, f.5107. Monthly report, 9.4.44.

¹³¹ Database.

¹³² S. Prauser, *Mord in Rom? Der Anschlag in der Via Rasella und die deutsche Vergeltung in den Fosse Ardeatine im März 1944*, "Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte", n. 2 (2002), p. 281; Database.

slight downward shift becomes visible when one turns to sources that cover a longer time span than the casualty lists, such as lists of decorated soldiers and medal recommendations or applications for military allowances submitted on behalf of conscripts. With regard to the South Tyroleans, decoration proposals and award lists show an average age of 34.7 at the end of 1944¹³³, while allowance requests submitted to the office of the *Oberster Kommissar* reveal the following: conscripts from Leifers had an average age of 34.2, those from Sarnthein 35.1, and those from Bruneck 35.7, yielding an overall average of exactly 35 years at the turn of 1944/45¹³⁴. There was therefore a modest but clear rejuvenation, which, given the already substantial numbers under arms since October 1943, must not have been insignificant.

From a generational perspective, this was thus a unit composed of members of the *Kriegsjugendgeneration* or younger cohorts, who had experienced ruptures and regime changes tied to the peculiar history of South Tyrol. Born as Habsburg subjects, largely the sons of men who had served in the *Kaiserliche und Königliche Armee*, they had become Italian citizens as a result of the decisions taken at Saint-Germain. German-speaking, culturally Tyrolean, deeply Catholic, and closely tied to their homeland, they found themselves reluctantly carrying the identity card of the Kingdom of Italy. Fascism, for its part, had pursued a harsh policy toward the so-called “allogeni” (non-Italian ethnic group), culminating in the Italo-German agreements of 1939. The National Socialists – Hitler foremost among them since the days of “Mein Kampf” – who had “sacrificed” the South Tyroleans for the sake of the alliance with Mussolini, reached an agreement at that moment with the Italians over the fate of the German-speaking population of South Tyrol and other German-speaking enclaves in Italy. Thus began the tragedy of the Options, under which South Tyroleans were called upon to choose between retaining Italian citizenship and complete assimilation, or acquiring German citizenship, with the consequent liquidation of their property and transfer to the Reich. The results were close to a plebiscite for the latter option, yet transfers soon came to a halt because of the war, although the obligation to serve in the German armed forces remained for those who had opted.

Military background in the Regio Esercito

At this stage, it is necessary to examine the military background of the recruits who formed the backbone of the regiment. As Italian citizens they had been subject to conscription and could be recalled in wartime. Given that the Fascist *Ventennio* was marked by a high level of conflict, from the reconquest of Libya in the early 1920s to the East African campaigns of the 1930s, it is essential to examine the experience these men had acquired within the Italian armed forces. Did the occupiers inherit a core of men accustomed to military service, with training superior to that of their German counterparts who had never served? Had they already accumulated significant wartime experience before joining the Orpo? Considering the colonial and violent nature of Fascist wars, had they undergone brutalizing experiences that might have influenced their conduct in repression?

While German police sources are largely silent on the South Tyroleans’ military past, Italian documentation provides useful answers. For this purpose, the available service records of fallen and missing men from the regiment were examined, forming a neutral sample covering the unit in its majority component. These valuable sources offer not only military information related to their service within the Italian armed forces, but also sociological data, including education, professions, and occasionally political orientations. Ninety service records of South Tyroleans born between 1901 and 1919 were located at the Archivio di Stato of Bozen and were later analysed¹³⁵.

¹³³ BArch, R70-Italien/18. Lists of decorated officers and men and those recommended for decoration.

¹³⁴ Gemeinde Leifers, Archive. Allowance requests; Gemeinde Sarnthein, Archive. Allowance requests; Stadtarchiv Bruneck, Kat. 8. Allowance requests.

¹³⁵ The service records are preserved at the Archivio di Stato Bolzano (AS-BZ), holding Distretto militare.

A preliminary observation is that nearly 8% of this group had been exempted from military service by the Italian authorities for various reasons, including chronic health issues, an indication of the limited scruples with which the occupiers later conscripted as many men as possible. Among the rest, most South Tyroleans had performed regular conscription service from 1922 onward, for an average duration of between one and a half and two years. In terms of branches, 40% had served in the infantry and almost 28% in artillery units. Only about 14% had belonged to elite or more specialized formations such as the *Bersaglieri*, *Granatieri*, *Alpini*, or cavalry. The remainder had served in medical or supply units. Their military service thus appears entirely typical and most did not rise above the rank of private. Only two of the fallen had left the Italian army as sergeants, though both were subsequently classified as corporals by the Germans. The only markedly different case is that of E.O. from Tramin, who had been a reserve lieutenant in the *Regio Esercito* and was enlisted as a sergeant major, eventually acting as a platoon commander within the *8./SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen*¹³⁶.

A key issue concerns previous wartime or brutalizing colonial experience. Empirical examination shows that veterans of military campaigns constituted less than 9% of the sample. A quarter of these had served in Libya, while the rest had taken part in the Ethiopian campaign. The men of *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* were therefore not a group of seasoned war veterans with counterinsurgency experience. Those exempted from Italian service were numerically comparable to the veterans of African campaigns, while the bulk of recruits had completed conscription many years – sometimes decades – earlier. Excluding the exempted, exactly half of the sample had served in the 1920s, more than 36.5% of them in the first half of the decade. To this must be added the younger recruits incorporated later, as well as those who had avoided conscription in 1939 thanks to the Option.

A regiment composed solely of politically reliable optants?

Regarding the Options, the data from service records are unfortunately incomplete, as they were not always updated. In the sample examined, almost 60% appear to have opted for German citizenship in 1939 without subsequently emigrating. At the same time, it should be noted that only in a single case has it been possible to identify an optant for Italian citizenship still under arms in September 1943. Other sources, however, help refine the picture. Among prisoners of war from the municipality of Kaltern, for instance, of 34 belonging to *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen*, only one had opted for Italian citizenship. Yet these dynamics were not determined solely by the proportions of optants in individual localities. In the same list from Kaltern, 42 prisoners from *SS-Polizei-Regiment Schlanders* included more than 19% who had opted for Italy¹³⁷. In nearby Eppan, a similar list shows several former members of *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen*, all optants for the Reich; in the same town, however, the situation was quite different within *SS-Polizei-Regiment Alpenvorland*, where exactly half of the prisoners had opted for Italy¹³⁸. Although examples could be multiplied, the overall picture is clear. We are far from figures that would allow us to argue that the “Alpenvorland” and “Schlanders” regiments were composed predominantly of *Dableiber*¹³⁹, yet the data relating to *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* clearly point toward a unit composed almost exclusively of optants for the Reich.

In the author's view, this situation had nothing to do with presumed political motivations that would have led to the near-exclusive incorporation of men who, at least on paper, were ideologically reliable. The regiment did include recruits from the SOD and local NSDAP organizations, such as L.U., who

¹³⁶ ACS, Uffici, b.10, f.62. “8./SS-Pol.-Rgt. Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr.4 für die Verleihung des KVK.II.Kl.m.Schw.”, 31.3.45, signed Frieser.

¹³⁷ Gemeinde Kaltern, Archive, Kat. 8 1945. List of prisoners, n.d.

¹³⁸ Gemeinde Eppan, Archive, Kat. 8 1945. List of prisoners, 5.7.45.

¹³⁹ M. Wedekind, *Nationalsozialistische Besatzungs- und Annexionspolitik in Norditalien 1943 bis 1945. Die Operationszone Alpenvorland und Adriatisches Küstenland*, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, München 2003, p. 329.

between April and July 1943 had “distinguished himself” through espionage activities on behalf of local Nazis¹⁴⁰, or his peer A.W., whose political preparation was emphasized¹⁴¹. Postwar police records from the *Questura* of Bozen also reveal numerous former members of the unit who were kept under special surveillance as potential “subversives”. This was the case, for example, of S.B., who in 1935 had been sent into *confino* (internal exile) for insulting the *Alpini* corps and the army; pardoned after one year, he subsequently opted for citizenship of the Reich, but, as police officials themselves noted, he had not voluntarily enlisted in the Orpo, and nothing concrete emerged against him¹⁴². Motivated by «Austrian sentiments», after the war he continued to «manifest and enact them publicly», yet did not constitute a «concrete danger», owing both to his elementary education and to the complete lack of «organizational ability» attributed to him. His file further specified that his «anti-Italian» sentiments were driven by his aversion toward «our work of penetration in Alto Adige»¹⁴³. E.A., for his part, continued after the war to display hostility toward Italy and enthusiasm for «everything that is [...] German»¹⁴⁴. According to a *Carabinieri* report from Bozen, which emphasized his service in the 6. *Kompanie*, «which has sown so much mourning in the province of Belluno», he hated «Italians to death» and had been an «active propagandist in favor of Germany before and after the occupation»¹⁴⁵. At the same time, his file stressed that such sentiments were common among many German-speaking South Tyroleans and that nothing concrete emerged against him; given his lack of organizational capacity, it was even proposed that he be removed from the list of subversives. A somewhat different case is that of E.B., who as a member of the SOD proved to be among the elements «most fiercely hostile toward the Italian population», also taking part in «round-ups in the mountains for the capture of Italian soldiers» after the armistice¹⁴⁶. In his case, removal from Glurns was recommended because of the strong political influence he exercised locally.

Although these glimpses from the files of alleged “subversives” undoubtedly broaden the analytical spectrum and allow us to approach the “political frame of reference” of part of the regiment’s rank and file, such sources must be handled with caution. They reflect evaluations only partially rooted in concerns of public order and security and respond above all to a specific political agenda, namely the struggle against South Tyrolean irredentism in republican Italy. Moreover, in analyzing a regiment of this kind, it is essential to adopt a broad perspective and to regard cases such as those presented as exceptional, since quantitatively they do not constitute a representative sample.

Overall, returning to the broader argument, the reason why the regiment consisted almost exclusively of optants lay in the specific time window in which *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* was formed, not in any process of political selection. In October 1943, *Gauleiter* Hofer had not yet issued any recruitment decree; it appears clear, therefore, that the only individuals whom the German authorities considered available were those who had opted for German citizenship and were consequently obliged to serve in the armed forces of the Reich. These were men belonging to age groups that had already been fighting for years on various fronts, yet had until then managed to avoid service. As a precaution, a form of oxymoronic “coerced voluntarism” was adopted, which nevertheless drew exclusively from a specific segment of South Tyrolean society. This is a significant point, highlighting on the one hand the limited war enthusiasm of these men – far removed from the volunteer waves of the early war years¹⁴⁷ – and on the other the hope many of them had nurtured of avoiding the conflict through agricultural leave and similar stratagems, which with the creation of the *Operationszone Alpenvorland* would no longer prove effective.

¹⁴⁰ BArch, R70-Italien/28, f.211. “5./Pol.-Rgt. Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr. 1”, 17.6.44, signed Wachtarz.

¹⁴¹ Ivi, R70-Italien/35, ff.147-148. “III./SS-Pol.-Rgt. Bozen. Vorschlagsliste Nr.5 für die Verleihung des EK II.Kl”, 4.9.44, signed Richter.

¹⁴² AS-BZ, *Questura*, Gabinetto, A-8, b.4, f.1.

¹⁴³ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁴ Ivi, b.1, f.16.

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁶ Ivi, b.5, f.3.

¹⁴⁷ This phenomenon has been brilliantly analysed with a focus on the South Tyrolean Waffen-SS by Casagrande. See T. Casagrande, *Waffen-SS*, cit., pp.21-89.

With regard to the level of education and the occupations pursued by the South Tyrolean recruits, the data contained in the service records allow for a fairly comprehensive profile. More than 93% of them had received basic elementary schooling, with over 63% not continuing their studies beyond the fifth grade. The remainder had attended secondary or technical schools, while the sources also contain occasional vague references to only «limited» or merely «adequate» schooling. Turning to the range of occupations, captain Brecht himself described them good-naturedly after the war as «country people»¹⁴⁸. This remark accurately reflects the background of the South Tyroleans incorporated into the unit, as the notes in the service records likewise show that over 61% were employed in agriculture. Approximately 25% of the sample worked in the artisan sector, while a smaller number were engaged in small trade.

In this respect, despite necessary regional and generational distinctions, it is useful to compare this profile with that reconstructed for other Orpo units, as both common patterns and distinctive features emerge. As a matter of fact, the sample analyzed here does not differ greatly from the picture drawn by Christopher Browning for *Reserve-Polizei-Bataillon 101*, at least from a social perspective: «The men [...] were from the lower order of German society. They had experienced neither social nor geographical mobility. Very few were economically independent»¹⁴⁹. According to Browning's analysis, 63% of the reservists in that unit belonged to the working class. Educational standards were somewhat higher than among the South Tyroleans, yet still low by German standards. The issue of geographical mobility likewise finds clear parallels, both in this specific case and in that of other South Tyrolean police regiments. Indeed, while it is true that the recruits of *Polizei-Regiment Bozen* had been experienced a form of mobility in the form of military service in Italy or abroad, it is also true that it had represented a forced spell, characterised by specific socialisation processes.

A similar social composition emerges also in the so-called «elite battalions» of the *Ordnungspolizei* formed in 1940. As Ian Rich has shown in his study on *Polizei-Bataillone 304* and *314*, the majority of the ranks in those units were composed of men from the «working class» who had not studied beyond the *Volksschule*¹⁵⁰. Unlike the South Tyroleans, these men were volunteers offered career opportunities in the police and thus prospects for social advancement; in generational terms, however, they belonged to the same cohorts and were significantly younger than the reservists analyzed by Browning, while originating from the same social strata.

The South Tyrolean recruits thus shared with other *Ordnungspolizei* formations a background rooted in lower social origins and limited educational attainment. Yet their political and social environment differed markedly. German industrial workers were integrated into the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft* and mobilized from within it, whereas South Tyrolean farm laborers and peasants originated in a borderland society marked by national conflict, economic marginality, and coercive incorporation. In this sense, *Polizei-Regiment Bozen* was socially typical of the *Ordnungspolizei* while remaining politically and contextually distinctive.

Overall, the regiment thus contained a microcosm that in many ways represented South Tyrolean society of the time, united by a strong rural background, deep and committed Catholicism, and the option for citizenship of the Reich. At the same time, this brief comparison with the social composition of *Reserve-Polizei-Bataillon 101* and *Polizei-Bataillone 304* and *314* allows for broader comparative reflections, placing *Polizei-Regiment Bozen* within a framework of relative normality inside the Orpo from a social perspective as well. The German counterpart was drawn largely from the working class – the lowest social

¹⁴⁸ ASCD, holding Commissione parlamentare, doc.nr. 53/2, ff.2852-2855. «LKA NW. Dezernat 15. Zeugenschaftliche Vernehmung», 4.1.66, signed Brecht.

¹⁴⁹ C. Browning, *Ordinary*, cit., p. 48.

¹⁵⁰ I. Rich, *Holocaust Perpetrators of the German Police Battalions. The Mass Murder of Jewish Civilians, 1940-1942*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2018, pp. 29-30.

stratum of German society – much like the South Tyrolean agricultural laborers, who were often landless farmhands and representatives of a rural underclass.

Excursus: Dr. Paul Knapp, profile of a South Tyrolean National Socialist

An emblematic case that stands apart from the mass of recruits in terms of social status and ideological involvement is that of the Bozen urologist Dr. Paul Knapp, attached to *III. Bataillon* as a physician from the outset¹⁵¹. He was not only among the most fanatical representatives of South Tyrolean National Socialism, but also a close collaborator of *Völkgruppenführer* Peter Hofer, the leader of the South Tyrolean National Socialists and first Commissar-Prefect of Bozen after the establishment of the *Operationszone Alpenvorland*.

After the end of the conflict, the acting police chief of Bozen, who was gathering evidence against him, described Knapp as an «extreme pangermanist and sworn enemy of Italy» as well as a «militant Nazi and fierce enemy of the Jews»¹⁵². These assessments accurately reflected his activities in the 1930s and 1940s and, above all, his conduct during the German occupation of South Tyrol. For the public security official, Knapp was «to be considered the most politically dangerous element in the entire region»¹⁵³ still alive, involved in a range of crimes spanning from military espionage to anti-Jewish persecution.

After 8 September, having been assigned to the SOD in positions of responsibility, the physician exploited the situation both to settle old personal scores and to give free rein to his anti-Semitic and anti-Italian impulses. He was involved in the arrest of Senator Ettore Tolomei and of several South Tyroleans who had not opted for German citizenship and were accused of collaborating with the Fascist administration. At the same time, he conducted a manhunt against individual members of the Jewish community, as in the case of the Carpi family, whose members later perished in extermination camps¹⁵⁴. Austrian authorities likewise gathered numerous reports against Knapp after the war, which align with the findings of Italian investigators, portraying him as an uncompromising National Socialist. As battalion physician, among other duties responsible for supervising medical examinations of conscripts, he was nicknamed «kv-Maschine», in reference to his practice of declaring everyone – regardless of physical or psychological condition – *kriegsverwendungsfähig*, that is, fit for military service, targeting in particular South Tyroleans who had not opted for German citizenship.

Within the ranks of the regiment, Paul Knapp thus stood out in a distinctly negative sense for his pronounced National Socialist profile, which aligned him far more closely with his compatriots active during the 30s in the *Völkischer Kampfring Südtirols* and later in the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Optanten* than with the South Tyrolean recruits incorporated into *Polizei-Regiment Bozen*.

6. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The collective biography of the men of *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* does more than provide coordinates regarding the personnel incorporated into the unit, an essential element, especially when approaching crimes committed against civilians and partisans through the analytical prism of the *neuere Täterforschung*. It also allows us to engage, on multiple levels, with the *Ordnungspolizei* as a whole during this phase of the war, which simultaneously represented the apex of repression against various resistance movements. Quantitative analyses have made it possible not only to delineate the centrality of the South Tyroleans

¹⁵¹ The information is drawn from the extensive case file relating to the trial held in absentia before the Bozen Court of Assizes in the 1950s, preserved in AS-BZ, Corte d'Assise Bz. 1939–1954, f. Pichler Giovanni ed altri.

¹⁵² Ivi. Report of the *Questura* of Bozen, 28.5.46.

¹⁵³ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁴ S. Mayr e J. Innerhofer, *Quando la patria uccide. Storie ritrovate di famiglie ebraiche in Alto Adige*, Raetia, Bozen, pp. 392-397.

as an indispensable “human reservoir”, but also to assess the overall impact of *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* within the broader framework of repression in Italy. Certainly, distinctions must be drawn among the various battalions, yet the figures are quite eloquent in this regard.

As far as personnel is concerned, although the regiment displayed distinctive features – primarily due to the moment of crisis in which it was formed – the profile of its cadres also allows us to approach the Orpo officer corps as a whole. As we have seen, different currents coexisted within it, with sharply contrasting backgrounds. There were not only generational fractures – representatives of the *Front-* and *Kriegsjugendgeneration*, and even younger officials – which clearly influenced processes of political and police socialization, but also highly diverse experiential backgrounds and “packages” of police, repressive, and military competences. What united them like a *fil rouge* was nonetheless a fundamental factor: the willingness and readiness to operate in the service of the National Socialist police, contributing to the crushing of all forms of resistance, first at home and then in occupied territories.

A reconstruction of the level of Nazification – at least on a formal and outward level, it must be emphasized – initially suggests a clear picture of a group that had adhered compactly to National Socialism and, to a not insignificant extent, also to Himmler’s order. Closer examination of timing and circumstances, however, introduces more nuanced shades of gray, calling for caution when dealing with this particular group of state servants, highly adept at adapting and reinventing themselves. The case of colonel Menschik has already been mentioned in this regard, an “officer for all seasons”, but one may also recall the trajectories of Broszeit and Halbedel, both officials who entered the police in the early 1920s and retired in the postwar period, or captain Reinhard Wachtarz, commander of the 5. *Kompanie*, who began his career in the uniform of the SA and would retire in the 1970s after holding important posts in the Bavarian border police¹⁵⁵. The nature of the source base makes it more difficult to approach the group of NCOs and enlisted leaders – figures that were central to German military doctrine, including in the context of repression. Yet comparison with *SS-Polizei-Regiment 15* only reinforces, and indeed amplifies, the observations made for much of the officer corps, at least with regard to their “repressive expertise”.

As for the South Tyrolean recruits, the principal bonds within this group were their predominantly rural, and to some extent artisan, social background; a level of education that generally did not extend beyond elementary school; strong Catholicism; a shared military background acquired within the Italian armed forces and, not least, their option for citizenship of the Reich. This last aspect, however, was not the result of political calculations or of an intention to incorporate primarily “politically reliable optants”, but rather, once again, of specific contingencies. The unit was formed before any recruitment decree was issued by *Gauleiter* Franz Hofer; it therefore appears clear that the Nazi police leadership simply laid hands on men who were theoretically at their disposal, since they were subject to German military conscription by virtue of their Option. Once the necessary political preconditions were in place – namely, a decision-maker in the person of the *Gauleiter* Hofer willing to assume responsibility – any such distinctions fell away, as the numbers incorporated into the other regiments clearly show. Empirical analysis has also highlighted the relatively low proportion of veterans of the Fascist wars, who constituted a decidedly minor component, though the weight of prior military service in the Italian armed forces cannot be minimized.

Overall, *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* displayed both distinctive characteristics and features common to other Orpo units during this phase of the war. Its effectiveness in repression must be attributed, on the one hand, to the undeniable wartime expertise of a minority of its officers and NCOs and, on the other, to the specific training competences of many among them. Not least, although it often dated back more than a decade before their enlistment, prior service in the Italian armed forces provided South Tyrolean recruits with a valuable foundation, probably shaping a *forma mentis* receptive to the military world and

¹⁵⁵ See E. Di Fonzo, *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen*, cit., p. 193; M. Schreiner-Božič, *Dienst zwischen Bewachungsaufgaben, Partisanenbekämpfung und Massenmord. Münchner Ordnungspolizei im auswärtigen Einsatz*, in: *Die Münchner Polizei und der Nationalsozialismus*, J. Schröder (edited by), Klartext Verlag, Essen 2013, p. 137.

its rules. At the same time, the very nature of these battalions' deployment offered the men the opportunity to learn repressive practice in the field, in what amounted to an open-air school of *Bandenkampf*. This is illustrated by the differing experiences of the first two battalions compared with the third, which never had time to acclimatize to that type of warfare in a low-intensity operational context, but after the collapse of Rome was immediately sent to Piedmont at a time of acute crisis for the occupying forces. Beyond the differing operational trajectories and the specific contribution of individual components of *SS-Polizei-Regiment Bozen* to the "fight against the bands", the regiment highlights the undeniable capacity of the Orpo to create efficient units from scratch, mobilizing whatever could be mobilized, extracting the maximum from available resources, and shaping them to its own ends, thereby contributing decisively to Nazi terror even where the initial conditions were far from favorable.

ABSTRACT

Il presente contributo ricostruisce struttura e personale dell'*SS-Polizei Regiment Bozen*, un reparto quanto mai dibattuto in ambito storiografico e memoriale, ma mai posto al centro di analisi approfondite atte ad indagarne tali aspetti nevralgici, fondamentali anche per comprenderne l'impatto negli schemi repressivi nazionalsocialisti, nonché i crimini commessi. Basandosi su una vasta ed eterogenea gamma di fonti principalmente inedite, nonché con il sussidio di banche dati sviluppate dall'autore, esso propone un approccio prosopografico di ampio respiro, che permette sia di approcciare il personale quadro tedesco, corpo ufficiali *in primis*, sia i ranghi sudtirolesi. Oltre agli schizzi biografici, che soprattutto nel caso degli ufficiali mirano da una parte a soppesarne la qualità combattiva e, dall'altra, a fornire coordinate di orientamento su carriere tipo in seno alla *Ordnungspolizei*, caratterizzate da continuità, adesione al nazionalsocialismo e opportunismo, l'analisi si serve anche di strumenti analitici di marca più spiccatamente quantitativa. Da una parte, infatti, il ruolo dei sudtirolesi in seno alla macchina repressiva della *Ordnungspolizei* viene incastonato nell'esperienza bellica complessiva della popolazione altoatesina arruolata nelle forze armate tedesche, dall'altra l'analisi delle perdite subite dal reggimento permette di soppesare il peso delle sue componenti nel generale schema repressivo nazionalsocialista. Infine, un focus particolare è devoluto ai profili delle reclute sudtirolesi, di cui viene ricostruito sia il background militare maturato nei ranghi del Regio Esercito, sia un profilo sociale, posto anche in relazione al quadro complessivo riscontrabile in seno alla *Ordnungspolizei* nel suo complesso.